



# ***PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE***

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## **INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF RURAL FIRE SERVICES IN QUEENSLAND**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**TUESDAY, 24 AUGUST 2010**

**Rockhampton**

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Committee met at 11.30 am

**MULHOLLAND, Mr Jamie, First Officer, Adelaide Park Rural Fire Brigade**

**SLOPER, Mr Bruce, Chair, Adelaide Park Rural Fire Brigade**

**COOK, Mr Peter, Secretary, Bondoola Rural Fire Brigade**

**VEACH, Mr Douglas, First Officer, Bondoola Rural Fire Brigade**

**LUND, Mr Brian, Secretary/Third Officer, Calioran Rural Fire Brigade**

**SCOTT, Mrs Janet, Secretary/Treasurer, Cooberrie Rural Fire Brigade**

**SCOTT, Mr Waine, First Officer, Cooberrie Rural Fire Brigade**

**DUNPHY, Mr Neale, Group Administrator, Fitzroy Rural Fire Brigade Group**

**FLINTHAM, Mr George, Deputy Group Officer, Fitzroy Rural Fire Brigade Group**

**KELLY, Mr Darrell, Group Officer, Fitzroy Rural Fire Brigade Group**

**DASH, Mr Gary, Group Leader, Keppel Sands Rural Fire Brigade Group**

**SCOTT, Mr Michael, Private capacity**

**CHAIR:** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I declare this session of the public hearings of the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee's inquiry into the management of rural fire services in Queensland now open. My name is Wayne Wendt and I am the chair of the committee. The other members of the committee here today are Mr Ian Rickuss MP, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Crandon MP, the member for Coomera; Ms Di Farmer MP, the member for Bulimba; Ms Mary-Anne O'Neill MP, the member for Kallangur; and Mrs Christine Smith MP, the member for Burleigh.

This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and is subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

Could witnesses please be mindful that when they wish to make a statement they speak into the microphone. Could I also request that mobile phones be switched off or put in silent mode.

You have previously been provided with a copy of the instructions for witnesses, so we will take those as read. Hansard will record the proceedings and you will be provided with the transcript.

We are running this hearing as a round table forum to facilitate discussion. However, for reasons of privilege, only members of the committee can put questions to witnesses. If you wish to raise issues for discussion, I want to stress that you must direct your comments through me as the chair.

I also remind all those participating in the hearing today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate in the proceedings. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Before we start, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper. I know that we have quite a few of them right here. We will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. I really do appreciate so many people turning up today. It is fabulous to see you all here. We were in Cairns yesterday and had two similar sessions there which were quite successful. I think the committee has learned quite a lot. Would each agency like to make an opening statement? You will have plenty of time to talk as we are going through, but if you have something particular you would like to say at the start then please do so. Bruce, are you happy?

**Mr Sloper:** I am not happy, no.

**CHAIR:** You will certainly have an opportunity to speak as we go on. In that case, I will hand over to Ian Rickuss to ask the first question.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Thanks, ladies and gentlemen, for turning up today. It is great to see so many people here. My first question is to the Fitzroy Rural Fire Brigade Group. I will address this question to you, Darrell. Could you please explain the structure of the groups and brigades in the local area to the committee?

**Mr Kelly:** The Fitzroy Rural Fire Brigade Group functions out of Gracemere. That is our head office. We carry out the supervision and organisation of some 18 brigades within the boundaries of the old Fitzroy shire council. We run a very successful ship. We seem to be able to resolve a lot of problems that arise from time to time. Between me and my two deputies here we seem to keep things rolling along a very smooth plain.

**Mr RICKUSS:** That is good. How is funding allocated within the structure?

**Mr Kelly:** At this point in time we are being issued \$1,000 per year from government sources. That has been sufficient for us to function. With that \$1,000 we usually implement training days, which we find very helpful to the rank-and-file men on the fire ground. So, to this point, that \$1,000 has been sufficient for us to function.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you get levies from the Rockhampton Regional Council?

**Mr Kelly:** No.

**Mr Dunphy:** No. Every brigade in the group can get a fire levy if they wish. But as a group we are not entitled to any fire levies. We get the \$1,000 handout, and if we need more we have to raise money. If we get a big fire season, we hope for a few donations so that we can keep functioning.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do any of the brigades draw on the levy system?

**Mr Dunphy:** Yes.

**Mr Kelly:** Most of them.

**CHAIR:** How many brigades have you got under your control?

**Mr Kelly:** Eighteen. I would say that probably 15 of those 18 function through levies.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Last year you had a fairly big fire season.

**Mr Kelly:** We had probably one of the worst fire seasons that I can remember.

**Mr RICKUSS:** This year looks like it might be better. There is a bit of green around the place.

**Mr Kelly:** The fact that we got 60 millimetres of rain in August is a big plus, because that is going to reduce the hazard considerably.

**Mr RICKUSS:** It has not built up a big load.

**Mr Kelly:** We have a huge build-up of fire hazard out there.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you think the actual brigade group itself needs more funding or you can get away with what you are doing now?

**Mr Kelly:** As you would have read in our submission, we feel that a command vehicle would be an absolute necessity, because we found in our experiences last year that there were a number of times when we did not have a vehicle to transport crews around, to have one fellow running around organising all the brigades and appliances on the fire ground. I reckon it is one of the most essential things.

**Mr RICKUSS:** In my area they have a vehicle that they use at fires which is set up with all the radios and that sort of thing. Is that what you are talking about?

**Mr Flintham:** Yes.

**Mr Dunphy:** Something like that.

**Mr RICKUSS:** It is a big van.

**Mr Kelly:** We never had that last year.

**Mr RICKUSS:** That would have been handy.

**Mr Kelly:** Transporting strike crews in and out of the fire was done almost entirely by private vehicles. If we had had a separate vehicle, it would have been a big advantage.

**CHAIR:** What type of vehicle are you talking about—a LandCruiser Troop Carrier?

**Mr Kelly:** No, not a heavy vehicle—a lighter four-wheel drive.

**Mr Dunphy:** A dual cab four-wheel drive—something that can transport five or six men. They can go out and pick up a crew, bring them back and go back out with another crew straight behind them. In the country we were in last year up on Mount Morgan, we had fire breaks 10-foot wide. That is all we had. We were running fire trucks down steep mountains with a 10-foot fire break. You could not pass. There were no turnarounds. You had to go right through. Crews were coming in and some would have to walk half a kilometre to get to a truck because they could not get their truck through. Private vehicles would not go any further.

**Mr Kelly:** The other reason for having a command vehicle would be that fellas were on the fire ground all night and then they had to turn around and drive their vehicles home, and some of them lived 40 or 50 kilometres away. If a command vehicle were in service with a driver, he would put the crews on the ground and remove them at his discretion, and he would be fresh all the while. It would take a lot of the risk, so far as safety goes, out of the situation.

**CHAIR:** So how many groups are there within the state?

**Mr Dunphy:** There are four groups in the Rockhampton area, 138 brigades and roughly 4,000 members, run by the office in Rockhampton.

**CHAIR:** If a vehicle is required for your group, does that mean that a vehicle is required for every group?

**Mr Kelly:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** That is what I was thinking. That is why I asked the question. I was trying to work out what the situation is.

**Mr Veach:** Can I just clear up one point. You spoke about a vehicle with the communications et cetera.

**Mr RICKUSS:** This is a different vehicle.

**Mr Veach:** This is a different vehicle that these people are talking about. Also, as I see it, the deputy controller would be able to physically use this vehicle to go out on to the fire ground and inspect the areas where the crews were going to be sent prior to them going to feed solid information back to the controller about whether it is possible for the units to traverse those areas. Also, by doing that, when you then instruct your crews to go, you know that they know where to go, even if you have to lead them out yourself and show them. That was a big thing that was missing during the major fires on Mount Morgan, Mount Archer and in the other areas that we had to go to.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I will direct a question to you, Gary, along the same lines. How are you funding your group?

**Mr Dash:** The group runs with the same issue. The brigades in the group receive a council levy. It is levied individually in each area. So it is on a needs basis. The way it works now is that you have a public meeting every year. You put your case forward. Usually, if you do not want to raise the levy, that is fine. But if you do, you put your case forward and you have a show of hands as to whether everyone is happy with the raising of the levy. We are very happy to keep it that way.

**Mr RICKUSS:** As a group, you can get by with your \$1,000?

**Mr Dash:** Yes. As you say, we can get by with fundraising and so forth. But it would be nicer to have a couple of thousand dollars. We have a big exercise coming up in the Keppel group. The only way we can really fund it is that we are tied in with the izone and probably QFRS will fund the majority of it. We are hoping they will pay for the food and so forth, because it is going to entail something like 22 trucks. To run something like that, the groups just do not have the funds.

**Mr Dunphy:** We do not have the funding.

**Mr Dash:** It is a criteria set by the Rural Fire Service that we run two major two-day exercises a year. We do fundraising. We have donations. Our group probably has a little more than Fitzroy, but we are negotiating for a communications vehicle and Dick is going to fund it. But we need a contingency fund to maintain it because we have been told that it is not part of the Rural Fire Service. It is a group asset and we are responsible for it.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I think that is the way it works.

**Mr Cook:** I was the administration officer for the Keppel group for the previous 12 months. As Gary has just said, we have not used that funding of \$1,000 a year since 2008, I think. I have just applied for a top-up of that. So we are getting \$931.34. I think this will be the first funding that we have had in about three years for that. The need has not been great. As Gary said also, we are applying for the communications vehicle but that has been going on since January. We have just about given up at this stage, because the negotiations have gone on and on and nothing is happening. They had one lined up which was coming from Townsville or Cairns Airport.

**Mr Dash:** Cairns Airport through Airservices.

**Mr Cook:** At a price of about \$17,000. The money has been lined up through the RFBAQ and Dick Irwin. Again, nothing has happened. It has stalled. This is what puts most of the people off any of these sorts of ventures, because nothing happens. Even though we try to get it going, we get nowhere with it.

**CHAIR:** Can you explain that a bit further? Have you been given any reason that is the case?

**Mr Cook:** I was only the admin officer.

**Mr Dash:** No, we have not.

**Mr Cook:** These people have been talking.

**Mr Dash:** One of the reasons I got was that they had had a CEO change with Airservices and he is wanting to know why the truck has been sold. But that is all we have been told.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So it is Airservices that is holding it up at Cairns?

**Mr Dash:** So we have been told.

**CHAIR:** Who is responsible? Is it Gary?

**Mr Cook:** Gary is now, because I am no longer in that position of admin officer.

**CHAIR:** When the meeting is concluded, would you mind having a chat to Deb and me about what we can do to see where that is at?

**Mr RICKUSS:** I think we have a pretty good understanding of where you are coming from.

**CHAIR:** I acknowledge Paul Hoolihan, the member for Keppel, who has just come in. Paul was keen to attend the Rockhampton hearing. Thanks, Paul, for the invitation. We are very happy to be here.

**Ms O'NEILL:** My question is to the Fitzroy group. What is the role of fire wardens in your area?

**Mr Kelly:** We cover a fairly extensive area of land. I know of two brigades within our boundary that operate with two fire wardens. These fellows are usually people who are residents of the area. That have a very good local understanding of land for which they are wardens, and we find it works very well. I would not like to see the fire warden position change to any other people other than locals who live in the particular area. In my experience—I have been doing this for a lot of years—it is very good. It is very satisfactory.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Are they actually in any of the brigades or ex-members?

**Mr Kelly:** Yes. They are both active members in my brigade.

**Mr Dunphy:** It is the same with my brigade. They are both active members. We would not have it any other way.

**Mr Kelly:** We have one young fellow who took the role on two years ago which is good because he will keep it going. The other fellow is a bit old, but we will find a replacement for him, too. Other brigades might have different views, but the system is satisfactory.

**Ms O'NEILL:** I will ask the other brigades in a minute if they have anything to add. One of the suggestions that we received was that fire wardens should be able to identify hazards and commence action to eliminate them. Do you think fire wardens should do that?

**Mr Dunphy:** In my opinion, it should not be up to the fire warden to do that job. That is the job of your officers in your brigade. If they know of a house that has long grass right up to the verandas, like wheat grass on Mount Morgan last year, it should be up to the brigade to go around and tell those people, 'Clean up your yard. We'll give you a hand to burn.' It should not be up to the fire warden. The fire warden's job is only to issue the permits and make sure that the permit conditions are being followed. That is my opinion.

**Mr Dash:** I do not agree with that. You are making policemen out of volunteers, and I do not think that is right. They have to live in the area and if they run around picking on people they are not going to be well taken. I think there should be a reporting system whereby, if you have a house in your area that you feel is dangerous, you should be able to go to your AD and say, 'This guy is going to be in trouble if it burns. I'm not prepared to send people in there because they would risk life and limb. Do something about it.'

**CHAIR:** Is that because they are small communities that you are involved in?

**Mr Dash:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** I understand exactly where you are coming from.

**Mr Flintham:** We have had a couple of houses like that within my local brigade area. When we have been to the office we have ended up having to go to the local council. It must be their responsibility.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Does anybody else want to comment on the role of the fire warden?

**Mr Sloper:** Yes. The fire warden needs to be a senior member of the community who has lived there a long time and who has the trust and the respect of the community as well. I agree wholeheartedly with Gary. We do not want to turn either the volunteer firefighters or the fire warden into policemen. A reporting system would be much better so that they could either get the town brigade or somebody on the government payroll to knock on their door, send them a letter or something like that. We have to maintain the authority, if you like, of the fire warden. I think it would diminish very quickly if he started to do a policing role.

**Mr Veach:** While we are talking about fire wardens, I do agree with material that I have read that they intend to remove the position of fire warden from the clerk of the courts and police officers or whoever in smaller areas. These people have no idea of fire management but they can override a rejected permit that was rejected by a local fire warden. These people should not be allowed to continue to have this authority to issue permits.

**CHAIR:** Doug, you just mentioned that you read this somewhere. Does anyone know where that was said?

**Mr Veach:** That is the structure that we have now.

**CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr W Scott:** It was in the last bulletin, Doug.

**Mr Veach:** Yes.

**Mr W Scott:** It was in the last *Rural Fires Bulletin*.

**Mr Veach:** It is a very strong point that should be acted on immediately.

**CHAIR:** You are suggesting that clerks of the court and those police officers who are not really across those issues should have those responsibilities taken away from them?

**Mr Veach:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** And that is what you are saying?

**Mr W Scott:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** It was in your latest bulletin. I must admit that I am unaware of that.

**Mr W Scott:** The *Rural Fires Bulletin*.

**CHAIR:** I have not seen that. Was that a suggestion?

**Mr Veach:** It was a point that they were going to look into. It was not there in black and white.

**CHAIR:** I was not aware of it. That is what I am trying to understand.

**Mr Veach:** The authority that was vested in them would revert to the area director within whatever fire region you were in.

**CHAIR:** I have just asked our research staff. We have 65 or so submissions and no-one has mentioned that. That is a good point to bring up today. We will look into that.

**Mr W Scott:** That only came out in the July bulletin. So that was after submissions were taken.

**CHAIR:** It is a good idea. Those are things that can be taken on board.

**Mr W Scott:** In relation to who should be a fire warden, I believe—not that I disagree with Bruce—that you do not necessarily need a senior member. You need a member of your brigade area that gets on very well with the whole community and someone who actually knows the whole area. If he or she has the ability to speak to people, that is more beneficial than acting like a policeman. Our fire warden is 40, but he has grown up in the area. He has lived in the same place his whole life. He knows everyone and people know him and they are prepared to work with him. Unless you have a fire warden that people are prepared to work with in your community, you will end up with people saying, 'I'm not going to worry about getting a permit. I'll just go and light the fire.' Our brigade area did have that problem about 10 years ago.

**CHAIR:** The issue of permits was raised yesterday in both meetings. There was some concern that some people will not seek permits and will continue to light fires. Do you believe there is enough support and teeth for QFRS and the Rural Fire Service to make sure that people do seek permits? Is there something we can do?

**Mr Dunphy:** I have been helping the officer in the Banana shire. A lot of brigades have not got fire wardens because they are petrified. If something goes wrong, they are liable. If a fire jumped a break and burnt a house down, the old warden could cop it. These blokes are staying, 'Stuff it. We don't want to be fire wardens.' In our submission we put in that an application for a permit to light a fire has to become mandatory. A lot of wardens are enforcing it now. I do not know whether that has been made law, but that is the first thing you should make law. That simplifies it for a fire warden. The fire warden just looks at the application: 'Yes, we've rung our neighbours. We've put a three-metre fire break in.' It is more or less a statutory declaration. If that fire jumps the fire break and the local brigade goes out and has a look and he has only made a slash break two shovels wide, it is not the fire warden's problem. It is the landowner's problem because he has not fulfilled the conditions of his permit.

**CHAIR:** So are you saying that there are vacancies for fire wardens?

**Mr Dunphy:** A lot of brigades do not have fire wardens at the moment.

**CHAIR:** How do people obtain permits in that case?

**Mr Dunphy:** They ring the area office and an area officer will issue that permit.

**CHAIR:** There is a new law, put out only last week, that permits will be required for almost all fires lit in Queensland under a new fire danger period to be introduced from the end of this month.

**Mr Dunphy:** That is the actual permit but not the application. Some wardens enforce it and some wardens do not. I think it should be taken out of the warden's hands. It should be enforced that you have to put in an application before a permit is issued. In relation to permits being required for all fires in a declared fire season, that is the greatest idea I have heard for a long time. A lot of fires got away last year from households burning rubbish.

**CHAIR:** That was not necessarily the view we had yesterday.

**Mr W Scott:** With that new law that has come in, we know about it but the general public do not. Unless QFRS are prepared to do a big advertising campaign and let the public know about it, we are still going to have all of these illegal fires because people are going to light their incinerator during that fire danger period and they will be breaking the law.

**CHAIR:** Unless they have some sausages on top.

**Mr W Scott:** Up until now they could do that. For a fire under two metres they did not need a permit. Bringing this in at the end of August without letting the public know within a reasonable amount of time is going to cause all sorts of problems.

**CHAIR:** But it is a good idea.

**Mr W Scott:** It is a great idea. I agree with it.

**CHAIR:** It is how we get the message out.

**Mr W Scott:** The message should have got out there two months ago.

**Mr Cook:** Just on that issue of publicity, I have seen one notice on television on the news where John Fisher, the regional manager, mentioned the new regulations. There has been one article in the *Rural Weekly*, which is a supplement to the *Morning Bulletin* here in Rocky. But that is it. If they are going to implement this, there must be much more publicity. They need some heavy publicity in the three newspapers. We have put it into the newsletter that we circulate to our own people. I know that other brigades have done that as well. There must be a lot more publicity done.

**Mr Flintham:** We send a newsletter out to the 400 ratepayers/residents in our Bouldercombe district. So they all know.

**Mr Sloper:** I would just like to say something on the issue of fire wardens and their legal liability support. I know they work for QFRS. I think one of the reasons we do not get a lot of hands going up volunteering for the jobs is that at some of the training events I have been at there have actually been fairly terse comments made about legal liability and their responsibilities. There never seems to be much support from the department to say that, if a decision or a mistake is made or there is some legal problem, they are going to back the fire warden up.

**CHAIR:** That should be fairly easy to obtain. We will take that on board. Thanks for that. We will make some inquiries in that regard. Does anybody have any comments on fire wardens before we move on to another question? We can always come back to that as we go through.

**Ms FARMER:** One of the issues that has been raised quite a lot is about urban encroachment and what effect that has on rural fire services. I would be interested in comments from each of the rural fire brigades on how that affects your area.

**Mr W Scott:** Our brigade has boundaries on the northern side of Yeppoon. With Yeppoon slowly growing north, it took about two years for me to get rid of the suburb of Pacific Heights.

**Ms FARMER:** Out of your response area?

**Mr W Scott:** Yes, out of my response area. When they finally did shift the boundary, that area had a brand-new Catholic primary school and I still kept the primary school, when they could have shifted the line another 200 metres.

**CHAIR:** When you say that it took two years, are you saying that is too long or too short?

**Mr W Scott:** Too long. Once Rockhampton Regional Council made the application for this area to become a housing estate, QFRS should have put the line on the map.

**CHAIR:** Before there were houses built there?

**Mr W Scott:** Once the houses started being built. I had \$1.5 million to \$2 million houses in this area that we were responsible for. They said, 'But if there is one of those in a fire, the urbans will still turn out.' But those people were paying a \$25 a year levy to our brigade and not paying an urban fire levy for that two-year period.

**Ms FARMER:** Do you have any sort of process where you regularly review what your boundaries are? Do you actually proactively apply for it?

**Mr W Scott:** We have actually convinced the rural office that we need a boundary change. Our brigade area actually includes all of Iwasaki's property—26,000 acres of it. The boundary between our neighbouring brigade and us went straight across it. Because we are actually dealing with Japanese, that created problems. It took me about two years to convince the rural office that it would be a great idea to shift the boundary and put all of Iwasaki in one brigade area. Whether we had it or the neighbouring brigade had it, it did not matter. It probably took 2½ years from when the two brigades signed to agree to shift the boundary for it to actually leave the Rocky district office to go to Brisbane. We had drawn the line on the map. We had signed off on this but there was a brick wall in the Rocky office and it could not get past that.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Where is your nearest auxiliary brigade to your area?

**Mr W Scott:** Yeppoon is actually a permanent station from eight to four, Monday to Friday and the rest of the time it is auxiliary.

**Mr RICKUSS:** How far is that?

**Mr W Scott:** From our fire shed to the Yeppoon fire station is about 16 kilometres.

**Mr RICKUSS:** There is the criteria of 14-minute response times. That is the criteria they are using in the south-east at the moment.

**Mr W Scott:** I think up here the auxiliaries have to live within a six-minute—

**Mr RICKUSS:** No, not the auxiliary itself. The response time for the auxiliary red truck has to be less than 14 minutes.

**Mr Mulholland:** We actually border on the Cooberrie. One of the big problems in terms of the response times for the red trucks is access. We are in an izone situation on the western side of Yeppoon. We are getting more and more encroachment as well. The number of unsealed roads that we have is huge. To be honest, we have had four-wheel drive yellow trucks bogged on them. I do not know what would happen if you sent out an urban truck. That is something that you could probably look at. When a brigade that is around the izone area applies for funding, they should look at the circumstances within that area. Down south, a lot of the roads are maintained a lot better than ours up here, to be honest.

**Mr RICKUSS:** We actually have the problem of gazetted roads that are unmade roads.

**Mr Mulholland:** What we have up here as well are a lot of previously approved subdivisions that may have been in place for 20 or 30 years that are now being acted upon. There is just no infrastructure there at all. They are going to put one access road in and then split blocks off it. We have to try to maintain that area.

**Ms FARMER:** Have you changed your boundaries recently, Jamie?

**Mr Mulholland:** Not that I am aware of.

**Mr Sloper:** As far as boundaries go, there have been new main roads go through our area and there is a logical argument to change boundaries. I believe that half of the problem in this area is the blockages when we come up with ideas or plans. It just does not seem to get through whether it be the Rocky office or further south. Everything is taking far too long. Later we will address in more detail some of the more detailed problems with our brigade. It is a very slow process. If a road goes through and it is more in our area than it is in the area of the people from the brigade on the other side of the highway, it makes sense to draw a line around it and put it in our brigade. But it just does not happen, as others are saying.

**Mr W Scott:** Four or five years ago, we actually had a fairly large grass fire on Iwasaki's property. Due to Firecom thinking that our response time would be longer—because, hang on, we are all at work so we have to leave work—they actually sent an urban appliance from Yeppoon to the grass fire. They beat us there by about 10 to 15 minutes because we all had to get home from work and turn out. Five minutes after we got there they actually had a call for a house fire in Yeppoon. The only appliance available for that house fire was stuck at the grass fire. They ended up having to bring trucks down from Rocky to the house fire. The house was totally lost. If they had been in Yeppoon, they would have been three minutes from that house. The truck was 40 minutes from the house because it had to come from Rocky. At that stage there was only one urban appliance in Yeppoon. Should they pull it out of the urban area and send it to a rural area?

**CHAIR:** You said at that stage there was one. How many are there now?

**Mr W Scott:** There are two now. But there are still only enough permanent staff to man one. The second truck is only there if they need it and then they call in auxiliaries during the day to man it.

**Ms FARMER:** Can I just get some comments about the urban encroachment issue from the Boondoola people?

**Mr Veach:** Our brigade area does not actually have this problem but I have encountered it at major fires in all areas. The people who live on the fringes are probably the least educated fire-safe people around. They love their five- or six-foot picket fences and the palms, but the fronds and everything else go over the fence. I cannot tell you the number of times we have gone out and they have lost their back fences. Urbans cannot help them. Urbans cannot get in there with their red trucks to do it. It is too late by the time we get there.

**CHAIR:** When you say urbans cannot get in there, what do you mean?

**Mr Veach:** They cannot get in there because there are no formed roads. They back onto the bush. It is unbelievable to see the rubbish people will accumulate on the izone route.

**Ms FARMER:** What about for Calioran?

**Mr Lund:** We do not have that problem, fortunately. We are far enough away from the town.

**CHAIR:** What is your main clientele?

**Mr Lund:** Nearly all large rural grazing blocks. It is a bit similar to Neale's. We have some small acreages—20-acre blocks and one-acre blocks. Basically, those people are members of the brigade. The properties are very well kept and they are fire conscious. We probably only have about three places that Rockhampton



you could actually consider to be a fire hazard of any kind. That would only be minor. We do our prescribed burns every year and take out the road verges and things like that. Anything we consider a hazard we take out as early as possibly.

**Mr Dash:** I am from The Caves brigade. We have got a township, fuel depot, saw mill and acreage blocks of five acres, 10 acres and 100 acres and we run into the same trouble all the time. It is incredible that people will not clean up and dump it out the back. You are in trouble straightaway. Some of the people are good and some not so good.

We have a problem whereby you have a large road and a 10-acre block and someone with a 100-acre block behind them who will not maintain any sort of break. There is one block out at The Caves that has not burnt for 30 years and it backs onto about 50 houses. We have been at the guy trying to get him to clean it up, but he will not do it. That is a real worry to us. We burn the road in front because it fronts the Bruce Highway. We burn the road so it is not so easy to light. Situations like that can become fairly sticky.

**Ms FARMER:** Michael, did you want to comment on that issue?

**Mr M Scott:** We are an area where there is urban encroachment. There are little farms that are settled by people who do not work in the area. We have a lot of people who work in the mining industry. We end up with maybe a wife and children at a house and they have done nothing to their own facilities at all. We find that the urban trucks are a long time coming. We have a lot of trouble getting people to man our trucks.

**Ms FARMER:** Where are you, Michael?

**Mr M Scott:** At Tamby, down near Emu Park. Because a lot of our people do not work in the area, we have a lot of problem with manning our trucks. Because Emu Park is only an auxiliary urban fire station, they are anything up to 20 or 30 minutes away from us. We do have a problem with encroachment now. Our biggest problem is to educate the people who are developing in this area.

**Ms FARMER:** We came across that yesterday.

**CHAIR:** Is that the Tamby Rural Fire Brigade? How do you get funds? Do you get them from the council as well?

**Mr M Scott:** We get a levy.

**Mrs Scott:** With the boundaries and the way they are structured, we have a good one in our area, which is Cooberrie. As Waine said, we take in all of Iwasaki. The resort buildings are not our responsibility; they are urban's responsibility. We have, I suppose you call it, a small village going up which is called Bangalee. Bangalee is made up of two streets. Starting from the beachfront, you have a road then you have more houses then you have another road. The urban area in that is the beachfront. If you are going down the street, they look after the houses on the beach. The other side of the road—where the greater majority of houses are—comes under the rural fire brigade.

**CHAIR:** Did I hear you say it is just starting up?

**Mr W Scott:** It has been there for years. I raised the question and they said that is where the line is.

**Mrs Scott:** They have said to us that that is where the line is.

**Mr W Scott:** Why not shift the line and give all the houses to the urbans?

**Mrs Scott:** They are paying \$25 to Cooberrie Rural Fire Brigade for a rural service. The urbans have to drive past the rural area to get the little urban area on the beachfront, and they are paying urban prices.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Brian, have you got yellow trucks or slip-ons?

**Mr Lund:** No, just two trailers and some of our personal gear.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So it is virtually primary producer gear?

**Mr Lund:** Yes.

**Mr Kelly:** Getting to back to the issue, we have a large area out here called Alton Downs. It has some 3,000 residents, and I would not know how many 40-acre blocks there are. We have Gracemere, Mount Morgan, Bouldercombe and Bajool. The divisions are spread pretty wide. One of the biggest problems with rural encroachment is at Mount Morgan. Last year we were called up there numerous times. The substation at Mount Morgan was manned by urban men who were on shiftwork. Our greatest problem was to find out what happened the day before, where we were to go that night and what instructions we were to follow. Nine out of 10 times we were given no instructions because nobody knew.

**CHAIR:** I do not understand. Is this the big fire situation you are talking about?

**Mr Kelly:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** You were going up there every day?

**Mr Kelly:** Most of us went every second night over six weeks. We went all night. We would get up there and ask the urban fellow in charge what had happened and where we were going that night. I would say that he did not have a clue. That is not good enough.

**Mr Veach:** It is true.

**Mr Kelly:** We had properties of our own that we were trying to manage. It was not good enough.

**Mr Lund:** That has been a problem between the urban and rural brigades and it is getting worse as time goes on. That was the problem 20 years ago to some degree. As time has progressed it has got worse. I really do not believe that you should put someone in an area who is in charge who has no idea about the area whatsoever. That is what essentially happens now. The urban crews will come out, establish an incident control point and take over. But they do not know the area. How do they know that if you go in this gate here you have access to 10,000 acres but if you go in that gate you will only go 200 yards and not go anywhere else?

**CHAIR:** What you are saying makes sense to me. They should be seeking advice from you guys. Are you saying they do not?

**Mr Lund:** Sometimes they do. The good ones do.

**Mr Mulholland:** I have not met one of them yet.

**Mr W Scott:** I will give an example of that. Last year some of us actually spent a lot of time at the Mount Morgan fires and the fires down Keppel Sands. For the Mount Archer fire we were staged at station 34, which is North Rocky Fire Station. One evening the incident controller who was actually at that stage from Mackay called our brigade and our truck so we went over. He gave me a street address and I said, 'I think you are wrong. I think you need to check your information.' He said, 'I'm right. I am the incident controller.' I said, 'I can't see how there is a grass fire at that street address because that is in Park Avenue. Go and check.' He stood there and argued with me. He said he was right and I was wrong. I said that I would go to that address. An ambulance guy said, 'Hang on, I think you are right. We will check.' The incident controller had the street address wrong. The point is that if I had just accepted what he was telling me I would have gone on a merry drive to the other side of Rocky for what? We were needed over at Lakes Creek. Again, he knew nothing of the area but he was the incident controller so he knows all.

**Mr Mulholland:** We had a very similar thing last year with the Cawarral fires up at New Zealand Gully. Gary Dash was IC at the time. There were trucks ready to burn that gully out that night when it was safe.

**CHAIR:** Yellow trucks?

**Mr Mulholland:** All yellow trucks. Whoever was in control in Rocky put it on hold. We had 14 crewed trucks sitting there ready to go and a plan in place. We had all of the most experienced firefighters that that area could muster. There were houses in there that were deemed unprotectable that got protected further down the track. That night I actually did my pills and went back to the control centre to try to sort this out. If you have 14 trucks you are looking at at least 40 people. They are volunteers. That was to be a dusk-to-dawn burn. These people were sitting there spinning their wheels doing nothing. No matter what we said, no-one would listen.

**CHAIR:** Can you tell us why?

**Mr Mulholland:** We do not know. They just sat on their hands. They would not do anything. By the time I went back and had a far bit to say, it was too late to light. We had lost our chance to light. There was a heavy dew point. Everything was in place. It had been planned for days to do that burn and then someone sitting up in the Rocky office decided—

**Mr RICKUSS:** There were houses along there?

**Mr Mulholland:** There was a line of houses right up through that gully. It had not burned for years.

**Mr RICKUSS:** You were trying to burn down a gully to slow the burn down?

**Mr Mulholland:** We were actually trying to burn out from around the houses.

**CHAIR:** Could they have known something that you did not know?

**Mr Mulholland:** No.

**Mr W Scott:** To back Jamie up, the New Zealand Gully part of that burn was my problem to plan. The assistant commissioner from Cairns who was relieving here did not like my written plan because I expected to burn seven houses down. He actually came down and looked at it.

**CHAIR:** Your plan included that you wanted to burn seven houses down?

**Mr W Scott:** We would lose seven houses.

**CHAIR:** If you did not burn.

**Mr W Scott:** If we did burn or we did not burn. That is how bad they were.

**Mr Mulholland:** That was another case where people have not been proactive. You could not fit a ride-on mower down beside some of the houses. They had 10-foot-high guinea grass.

**Mr W Scott:** Where we started the burn the next day, there was a house on the side of a hill. You could just walk between the house and the eight-foot-high guinea grass. When we lit that grass it took three seconds to hit the top of the hill. The whole hill just exploded. That only reason the house was saved was that it went so fast. No-one in the air-conditioned control room up in Rocky bothered to come out and see what we were actually doing.

**CHAIR:** So did we lose any houses?

**Mr W Scott:** No.

**Mr Dash:** I was the controller on site on scene. We had done the plan. This area scares everybody. There are hills and national park. National parks traditionally do not look after their area. There are lots of hills, lots of houses in the valley and lots of tall grass everywhere. People are not cleaning up. I actually took photos of two of the houses. One was the one Wayne was talking about. The other had fuel drums up against the side of the house because they had no power. The grass was growing up against the fuel drums and the little generator they had.

It was a case of lighting in there and then it is going to run up a valley—straight up a very steep hill. We got the doze break in and got it all set up. Once we lit a match we had to keep going. So we got permission, we lit the match and everything started to roll. Then we got a radio call to stop the burn. I said, 'You might as well try to stop the tide; it is on. Why do you want to stop it?' They said, 'Because we were going to run a break right across Yeppoon Road.' They said, 'The urbans want to burn back from Yeppoon Road and they are not ready yet.' I said, 'Well, tell them to pull their pants on because it is coming. There is nothing we can do about it.'

We had to endanger people trying to slow that fire down while the urbans got set up on Yeppoon Road. A day later we just started the burn from Yeppoon Road because the urbans were slapping the dog. They did not really want to do it anyway.

**Mr Veach:** The urbans did not do a thing that night.

**CHAIR:** We will move on now. We will come back to that. There are other questions in terms of your relationships with the full timers. We were talking about the encroachment of rural into residential areas.

**Mrs SMITH:** I have a question to the Keppel group. It has been suggested to us that compulsory training would see you lose up to 50 per cent of your volunteers. Do you think that would be the case? Do you see a role for compulsory training?

**Mr Dash:** It is virtually compulsory now. You cannot bring someone onto the fire ground unless they have done FMS. It is basically compulsory now. I do not know of any active member of the rural brigades who does not want training. We are a brigade on the Bruce Highway with a railway line between the Bruce Highway and us. Because we have a water tanker, we quite often get utilised by the urban tankers up the road. Because we are some 20 minutes north of Rockhampton, we can be the first on scene. If a fire starts from a car accident, we are first on the scene. We have been begging for three years for first-response road accident rescue training. We do not want to help anybody, but what do you when you come to a scene? What is the first thing you have to do? We cannot get that training. We have been promised it but we cannot get it.

**CHAIR:** Why is that, do you know?

**Mr Dash:** No idea.

**CHAIR:** You have been given no answer—that you are not up to it or they do not believe you are necessary?

**Mr Dash:** They do not tell you. They say it is in the pipeline.

**Mr W Scott:** I fully believe that people need training to the extent that I am a volunteer trainer. If the Fire and Rescue Service do training, they expect us to give up Friday night, all day Saturday and all day Sunday. I have actually started doing FMS with smaller groups in the Keppel group. I may do the same thing over five or six nights. Most volunteers—and the ones I have seen so far—are quite happy to give two or three hours once a week rather than give up a whole weekend. We do have families. There are not many families like ours where my wife is the secretary/treasurer, my daughter is a volunteer and my other daughter was a volunteer until she left home. Our whole family were fire members. We were doing our bit for the community, not doing it because we like chasing fires.

That is why I have become a volunteer trainer. I give up my time to do it. You do not get paid for it. I want to try to make it easier for these guys and ladies to actually get the training that I believe they need. I do not think you can expect a volunteer to give up a whole weekend or a whole week. Quite a few of us have done 40-hour AIIMS. For me to do the 40-hour AIIMS I had to forgo a week's pay. I am a schoolteacher and I had to have a week off work to do that training. I cannot expect my boss to pay me and not be at work to go and do training.

**Mr Mulholland:** One other thing to mention with regard to the training is that you also have a group of volunteers who get trained in FMS. We work out in a rural setting where you are going to get trees and things fall over the road and yet we have to pay out of our own pocket or the brigade's budget to get a chainsaw ticket. Yet for other emergency services it seems to be funded for them, as far as we can tell. For us to actually use a chainsaw legally on the fire ground we have to either personally pay or it has to come out of our brigade's budget. It is about \$300 per person to get it done. That is only level 1 which lets you cut on the ground without felling a tree.

**CHAIR:** In relation to that, how many people here have chainsaws in their brigades?

**Mr Mulholland:** Everyone.

**Mr Cook:** With regard to training, I have a list of staff in our regional office. We have an area director who is acting, we have an area training and support officer, we have a brigade training and support officer and we have another brigade training and support officer. Three out of six positions are in fact training and Rockhampton

support positions. I would like to know what we are getting for those people's salaries. This year we have had one FMS course run through the regional office—through one of these people here—and that is it. As the brigade secretary, I know all the courses that are being advertised. I would really like to know which ones are coming up.

**CHAIR:** These are QFRS positions?

**Mr Cook:** Yes, these are in the area office. In terms of chainsaw courses, when they had the parliamentary sitting in Emu Park we made a submission. We were talking to Neil Roberts about these positions. One of the things we mentioned was the chainsaw course. The reply that came back, which must have come through the regional office here—probably from John Fisher, because there was no-one else in the regional office who could answer these things; the area director has been changed so many times in the last eight months that we really do not know what is happening—was that there are chainsaw courses which are conducted for the department through the Emerald pastoral college and these are advertised. I would like to see where they were advertised. In the eight years that I have been in our brigade I think I can recall one chainsaw course being advertised at Emerald. We are getting more out of our acting volunteer position with Wayne Scott as trainer than we are from the regional office and yet half the regional office is supposedly there for training and support.

**CHAIR:** Are those positions you mentioned a moment ago exclusively rural?

**Mr Cook:** This is the rural office in Rocky. The rural operations office they call it.

**Mr W Scott:** If we go back to pre-2007, in Queensland we had a regional manager for the northern region and a regional manager for the southern region. That was two regional managers in Queensland. After 2007 the rurals wanted to come into line with the urbans, so all of a sudden it turned into seven regions. So we ended up with seven regional managers where we had two. In Rocky we had an area director, a training officer and half-time administration person. Now we have got the regional manager, an area director, the ATSO, two BTSOs and three administration staff. We are now actually getting less than we were pre-2007.

**CHAIR:** I would like to take a copy of that list you have there. So if QFRS were here and I asked them, 'How many positions are there in the Rockhampton district?' and they told me what is on that list and then I asked them, 'How many courses do you run and where have they been?' it would be of interest?

**Mr Veach:** It would be to us.

**Mr Cook:** That list is from their web page.

**Mr W Scott:** Some people here could probably correct me if I am wrong, but towards the end of last year we were told that if you want to be a first officer you have to do first officer training. I have questioned several times when they are going to do this first officer training. The reply is, 'We're still trying to develop it.' We were told last year that we had to do it, but they still have not yet developed it. If I went back through all the bulletins over the last 10 years, you could see that we were going to get this and we were going to get that. But we know for a fact that it is all a pie-in-the-sky dream from Kedron. We were all going to get TAK PACs in every appliance. This was about four years ago. We still do not have them. Instead, they produce this little A5 red folder and they call that our TAK PAC. But that was not what they originally said we were going to get.

**CHAIR:** Could you explain what a TAK PAC is?

**Mr W Scott:** We use a T-card. When an appliance turns up to a fire, if it is a rural appliance you have a yellow card where you put the appliance name and every crew member's name and it goes onto an incident board. On a big incident you use a huge incident board because you have lots of T-cards. It has paper in it and notes so that when you are trying to run a fire it is a process in running that fire. If you have two or three appliances, yes, you can remember. But once you get to five—because your span of control is five—you lose it.

**CHAIR:** They promised you a—

**Mr W Scott:** The original one they promised was a proper full-size TAK PAC—this is going back five years ago—but now we end up with this little A5 red ringbinder.

**CHAIR:** So it is not as efficient. Is that what is being used all around Queensland?

**Mr Dash:** We do not know.

**Mr W Scott:** We would not have a clue. Gary is north of Rocky. I am north of Yeppoon. We need someone on the southern side of Yeppoon. We can all run a full incident. We all need a full-size TAK PAC so that if there is an incident one of us is going to be there and we can set it up and not try to do it on the back of a cigarette packet.

**CHAIR:** How do you spell it?

**Mr W Scott:** T-A-K P-A-C.

**CHAIR:** We have not heard that comment raised yet.

**Mr CRANDON:** Is everybody in agreement that there is no training?

**Mr Dunphy:** I know where they are coming from, but they only have three training staff here in Rockhampton and they have 138 brigades and they have some more down Taroom way. The office has not got enough staff to implement all of this training and everything else they have to enforce. Last year the Fitzroy group had three FMS courses and one crew leader course and we had 30 attend that.

**CHAIR:** That is the first course you have to do.

**Mr Dunphy:** Yes, FMS1.

**Mr Mulholland:** That is classic training.

**Mr Dunphy:** What we do now is that, instead of individual brigades trying to get a training day in—a lot of brigades already have a lot of blokes trained up and they may have only one, two or three blokes in that brigade to be trained—we try to do it as a group. We bring in all of our brigades so they get training in the one place. That seems to work in the office all right. It might be different for the Keppel group; I do not know. We try to run it as a group training activity so we can bring in more people. Otherwise they might come out to do the training and you have 15 people lined up to get trained that day but you end up with four.

**CHAIR:** This is FMS?

**Mr Dunphy:** Yes, FMS.

**CHAIR:** Are they pretty good at doing FMS training?

**Mr Mulholland:** Yes.

**Mr CRANDON:** Can we give Gary a go? You guys are saying there is nothing; you guys are saying there is something.

**Mr Dash:** If Waine was not doing FMS, it would not be done in our group. Part of the bottleneck that the office likes to create is that you have your written side of FMS. Waine can do that. There would be first officers in every brigade. At the moment Waine has to do the written and then they have to be approved on the fire ground. That takes two days or three days. What I suggested a while back was to get the paperwork done and then you are assessed by the first officer of that brigade as to whether you can actually light a drip torch, use a radio, drive a truck, do as you are told. That is basically what FMS is: it is the basic flat rate. You just have to be able to use the basic material. I think that could save a lot of problems with the time that people have with the FMS. It is a three-day course, Waine, isn't it?

**Mr W Scott:** Yes.

**Mr Dash:** If they can qualify for the practical through their first officer, that would save them a day.

**Mr W Scott:** To back up what Gary said, I have done all the theory with seven members of a brigade in the Keppel group. I cannot do the practical side until they can find somewhere where the brigade can actually do a controlled burn. I have done five nights with them so far. They have done the theory side of it. I am just sitting on that paperwork now until we can go out and say, 'Yes, this is how you light it using a fire lighter. This is how you use a rake hoe. This is how you use a radio in fire situations.'

**Mr CRANDON:** Whose responsibility is it to find this area to do the controlled burn, in your view?

**Mr W Scott:** Their brigade. It is seven members from the brigade. The brigade is now waiting until the weather is right.

**Mr CRANDON:** But that is out of anybody else's control?

**CHAIR:** I am trying to understand that, too. What is wrong with that?

**Mr W Scott:** They have to make sure that all of their members are available and I am available, because I am a volunteer.

**CHAIR:** I am still not picking up the point.

**Mr W Scott:** If their first officer could do it, he could probably do two today at this fire and do another two or three another day. But because I have to do it, he has to make sure those seven people—

**CHAIR:** So seven people is too many? Is that what you are saying?

**Mr W Scott:** He has to get his seven people there all at the same time and they all work. One is a Rocky regional councillor.

**CHAIR:** Jamie?

**Mr Mulholland:** What Waine is trying to say is that it is hard to coordinate seven people to get there at one time and only have Waine able to do it. If any of the other first officers, even in neighbouring brigades, could go and assist, you are going to make it a lot easier for people to qualify. They still have to do the same training but you are going to spread the load.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Quite often it could be a small burn that a couple of blokes turn up to.

**Mr Mulholland:** A lot of time you are governed by the appliances that that brigade has as well. They may only have what they call a 41, which is a little four-wheel drive unit that takes only two or three people. You do not really want seven people wandering around fighting over something.

**Mr CRANDON:** The committee is interested in understanding what prompts people to volunteer to join rural fire brigades. Where do the volunteers come from? Why do they join? Why do they leave? We will start at one end perhaps. Everyone will have a view on this.

**Mr Veach:** People who join brigades do it because they are community minded and they wish to help their community. In the first instance, that is the reason they join. I have not run across anyone who joins because they enjoy having fire chasing them down a paddock. There is a camaraderie amongst rural fire members. They have a common interest. First, they want to have their own property safe and then they want to have their neighbour's property safe. One could say that in doing it for yourself you do it for others. In relation to turnover, there are just so many choices in this world now of different organisations or things that you want to do. It is hard to hold on to young people. You get them from 16 through to 18 or maybe 21. Then all of a sudden, 'I can drive. I can drink. I'm not going to come and chase fires no more.' But with the older people you have them forever.

**Mr CRANDON:** Do you get any help from the Department of Community Safety in recruiting people? Do you get any support there?

**Mr Veach:** Yes, on a limited basis. It is pure lip-service. Your best recruitment comes from your community and the community spirit that is within the area that you are in. The biggest fear about losing the recruitment base within brigade areas is divorcing the community from having input into their perceptions of what they require of a rural fire brigade. Bundling all the funds into one big heap and then somebody dishing it out without any community input into what they are willing to pay or whatever, I do not believe that is a direction to go in. Leave things the way they are. If it's not broke, why fix it?

**Mr CRANDON:** We are getting back to the question of volunteers, recruitment of volunteers and whether there is any support.

**Mr Dash:** I think the same as Doug. It is about community. It is about people with a common interest. We all live on five acres. If a fire comes through and it starts at your place, I would rather stop it there than wait for it to get to my place. The other thing is that, when you join a group, when it is run correctly you get camaraderie. Our brigade spends a lot of time having barbecues and so forth, getting all the families, women and kids involved. Friendships develop and that helps with the camaraderie. That is self-evolving in that people talk about it and say, 'It is great fun. The fire brigade is really good. We always have a nice night and have a burger and the kids play.' That is self-evolving. So if it is run right, you do not have much trouble enlisting people.

We utilise quite a few people from town. I think we have six members from town, four of whom are at QR. That is great because QR pays them. I own my own business and I am around a lot of the time. If we have a fire during the day, I just get on the phone to them and I have four people straightaway. That is a big help because your first response is a good one. You can win or lose a fire within the first 20 minutes. While you are responding, you have other people coming in, loading up and heading out. So it is a lot better. I think it is about having a sense of community and then once you get it rolling everyone becomes friends and it is really good. It is a good thing to get into.

**Mr CRANDON:** Does anybody have problems recruiting? Is anybody struggling for recruits?

**Mr Sloper:** I have one comment on this issue of recruitment. I think we would get a lot more recruits if there was some form of remuneration for employers releasing volunteers. At the moment it all goes back to the small business or the small business person to attend a fire in working hours. It is with the goodwill of the employer or that businessperson whether you can get away or not. Even if it were only for key personnel to get some form of remuneration for their salary or to give something back to the business, I think you would get a lot better response.

**Mr RICKUSS:** How many road accidents do you blokes attend?

**Mr Dash:** I could not put it in figures but it would be quite a bit.

**Mr Kelly:** We do not attend a great lot of road accidents, although the Capricorn Highway runs through our group area and there are a fair few accidents.

**Mr W Scott:** Probably three or four in the last 25 years. In relation to recruitment, at the moment Jeff Lane is our acting area training and support officer. Kilcoy State High School—I am a high school teacher—this year has developed through QFRS a cert II course in community safety firefighting. So at the moment Jeff and I are working to have that same course introduced at St Brendan's next year. The way I look at it is that it is a way of getting 16-year-olds involved before, as Doug said, they turn 18 and get a driver's licence. We can tie them down early. Again, that is all still very much in the planning stage as to how we are going to do it at St Brendan's next year.

**Mr Mulholland:** St Brendan's is a good example where a lot of kids come in from western communities and northern communities and even Islander communities and they will get that basic training that they can take home, and they might be able to show dad a thing or two when something happens on the farm.

In terms of recruitment, we have a lot of self-employed people in our brigade. Personally, last year with the fires around Rocky I lost probably four weeks of work at my cost. So if some sort of remuneration could be looked at, that would be good. It might be something that you can take on board. It is not so that people can say, 'Cool, I have no work on. Let's go and fight a fire.' But it would ease the load and that will help keep people.

**Mr Cook:** A lot of people have spoken about the recruiting side of things. We maintain fairly regular recruitment at the moment. Getting out into the community doing some of the community burns, or burns on people's property, is a good chance to talk to them and to get them involved in the brigade activities. Why do we lose them? We lose them partly through the inefficiency of administration. They ask, 'How do I become a member?' First, you have fill out the criminal history check and get that sent away. Did it come back? We do not know. The person does not know. Sometimes it does not come back. You ask what has happened to it and it has been lost in the system. So they have to try again and send off another one. If you are lucky it comes back within six weeks. Then you send that off to the regional office to have their membership approved. We never hear back on what happens with that.

If the people do their training—if they complete the FMS course—they get a certificate for that. Largely those certificates have been coming through fairly promptly now which is great, because one of the things that keeps our volunteers is the little rewards along the way: 'Here's the certificate for the course you did. Congratulations.' When someone comes up to you and says, 'You know that first aid course we did 18 months ago? I haven't got a certificate for that yet,' and you say, 'No. It's caught up in the system somewhere. They are still chasing that,' they get this idea that there is a very inefficient system somewhere behind it all, instead of going to do the course, getting the certificate and knowing that it is all on the go.

**Mr W Scott:** I convinced my son-in-law at the beginning of the year to join our brigade. I did the training with him one-on-one which was very exciting. Then at the end of May I ordered his PPE. I cannot take him out to do practical training or to go to a fire until he has PPE. As of today, I am still waiting for that PPE to turn up. At the end of May I ordered contents to replace the first aid kits which are out of date. I am still waiting for them to turn up. I asked Jeff Lane on the phone on Saturday night when he rang about this training we are doing. He said, 'That is only three months.' He said, 'I've been waiting for a hat since January.' If I put a requisition order in, personally I think three months is a little long to have to wait.

**Mr Sloper:** I think you would get to the bottom of a lot of the problems in that it is all generated through the relationships, in my view, between the rural fire brigade structure and the QFRS structure and the communication between the two. From our brigade's point of view, two years ago, unbeknown to our community—no communication from QFRS—they were closing our rural brigade down. We heard about it on the vine. We called two public meetings. We got new committees and everything like that. From two years ago, we now have 20 trained young volunteers.

**CHAIR:** It was closing down because of lack of interest? Is that why?

**Mr Mulholland:** It was due to a lack of numbers.

**Mr Sloper:** It was a lack of numbers but they did not communicate with the ratepayers or the community at all. Since then we have got it up and running. I think we have a perfect model now, to be quite honest, because we are using the skills of the older people or the skills available—I will not mention ages—within the community. Some are operational and some are administrative. We have separated the two and it is working very well. Jamie and the second officer are doing an excellent job in recruiting, training and all of that sort of thing. We are getting on with it.

I am sure others have a view on this, but the problem as I see it—and it has always been the problem; I will be blunt—is the Rocky office. Whether they are being directed from down south, who knows? But there are either not enough people in the Rocky office or they are not stable enough in their employment in the Rocky office. They are incompetent because you get different answers from different people and you do not get correspondence. Despite how many times you ask, 'Could you please send it to the post-office box of the secretary?' it will go to one of the members or important correspondence will be hand-delivered—in our case last year—to a member of the brigade rather than go through the proper channels. Honestly, in my view, that is where the blockages are. The Rocky office should be a lot more efficient than it is. The directions might be coming from down south but, wherever they are coming from, it is inefficient.

**CHAIR:** Jamie, do you have something quick?

**Mr Mulholland:** There was a group of people who did crew leader training last year. I think there were nearly 20. Part of that crew leader training course was that everyone who completed that course was to be provided with a yellow Kevlar helmet. You have different coloured helmets on the fire ground. We finished that course in September or October. I do not think anyone has seen a helmet. That is part of the support network that you are asking about in terms of how you can keep people going.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I am leading on to something here. A number of submissions noted that the list of subsidised equipment has been reduced dramatically over the past few years. Do you think the subsidised equipment that you are getting is appropriate and have they taken some off the list?

**Mr Dash:** They have taken quite a few off the list—with no communication, either. You look at it and think, 'What has happened to the book? There is nothing in it.' You ring them up and they say, 'Yes, they took it off.' As an aside about communication, one thing that they did which was really serious was that they turned off the main VHF channel about a month and a half ago. All the hand-helds are VHF. There is a VHF in every truck and there is a UHF as well, and most have a VHF station. We still have not been told.

**CHAIR:** They turned off what? Can't you still talk to each other from one radio to another?

**Mr Dash:** The VHF channel. We can talk on the fire ground, but we cannot reach Firecom on VHF. They turned it off a month and a half ago and we still have not been told.

**Mr W Scott:** Gary said he has not been told. The letter came this morning to say that the VHF repeaters have been turned off. Because I did not go to work this morning to come here, I rang Firecom because they turned off the Mount Archer repeater, they turned off the Mount Morgan repeater but there is also a repeater on Mount Barmoya near Yeppoon which is still working.

**CHAIR:** Why does it say they have been turned off?

**Mr W Scott:** It just says because they do not need it anymore.

**CHAIR:** There must be a reason. They must think there is another way of doing it—a better way.

**Mr Dash:** There is UHF.

**Mr Veach:** There is UHF, but we used to always have VHF as a backup.

**Mr Dash:** Because radios are like gold as far as they are concerned, you scab the VHF out of a ute or something like that and you set that up as your base station. You will find that the majority, in the Keppel group anyway, have a VHF for a base station in the shed, which is where you run your fire from if you have a fire.

**Mr Veach:** And communicate with Firecom.

**Mr Dash:** And communicate with Firecom. They shut that down a month ago—

**Mr W Scott:** End of July the letter says.

**Mr Dash:**—and never told us. That is our main communications.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Back to my question again about the subsidised equipment—

**Mr Dunphy:** I will give one word for it—lousy. The brigades are struggling to even keep going. A new list will come out and you might want some new gear and you try to find it. You ring the office and they say, 'It is not on the list. Go and buy it from the commercial market.' A lot of the subsidised equipment is 50 per cent or less. That keeps most brigades running. When we have to turn around and buy something commercially, it is out of this world.

**CHAIR:** What is not there, Neale?

**Mr Dunphy:** Do you want the list?

**CHAIR:** I thought you might say something obvious.

**Mr Dunphy:** From two years ago, the list would be more than halved. These are knick-knacks that you need. They are just too hard to source or they do not bother. The worst part about it is that they do not tell you anything until you send in the requisition order with the numbers on it and they write back: 'Not available. Find it commercially.'

**CHAIR:** Okay. We have to move on.

**Mr Mulholland:** You should think yourself lucky that you got a letter back saying that it is not available. When we went through our transitional stage, for want of a better word, we did a bulk FMS training and it took us nearly 12 months to fill our first order of PPE. We had firefighters turning up to the fire ground at Cawonga who were being issued with PPE when they got there so that they could man our trucks.

**CHAIR:** What was the reasoning behind that?

**Mr Mulholland:** It is not supplied. I do not know what the reason is.

**CHAIR:** So it was on the book.

**Mr Mulholland:** It was on the book. Everything was there; it just did not turn up. We are still waiting on parts of that very first order.

**CHAIR:** Anybody else?

**Mr W Scott:** I think I was one of the first people, even in the room here, to actually do a crew leader course. I got a letter last year from Steve Rothwell, the commissioner, thanking me for doing the crew leader course. I did it about seven years ago. I almost wrote a letter back to say, 'I think you're a bit late.' I am still waiting on my yellow helmet. It makes you think, 'What are they looking at?' They are so far out of touch.

**CHAIR:** I have got the general gist. I think we all have. We have to close at 1 pm, which is only a few minutes away. I would like to talk to you about that letter. That letter does explain that there are UHF channels available.

**Mr Mulholland:** We also have UHF radios that we do not have in our truck on order for more than 12 months.

**CHAIR:** I just want to take that on board. Are there any final comments? I am going to start at the end here. Please make them short and precise because I have to finish at 1 pm. That is how it works because I have another one to start.



**Mr Veach:** With the loss of the VHF radio system to communicate with Firecom, we have lost backup communications from the fire ground. If you mention it, they say, 'But haven't you got a mobile phone? Use that.' You do not run an incident from a mobile phone. There are areas where UHF works really well and there are also areas where it does not. To be left on the fire ground with only one main communications is not enough.

**CHAIR:** If you are going to tell us anything today, what is it?

**Mr Dash:** The whole problem with the office, from what I can see, is revenge.

**CHAIR:** In what respect? Can you explain that?

**Mr Dash:** We need more time—lack of communication, the wrong communication and no communication. You said you got a letter back. The Keppel group does not get letters; they just ignore us. I became group leader two years ago. As group leader, you would expect to have some communication with the office—none, zilch, zero. I am supposed to have a VHF and UHF hand-held and I am supposed to have an attack pack—nothing.

**CHAIR:** I have got the idea. Brian?

**Mr Lund:** My issue is radios. They are right in what they say: you need those two channels.

**CHAIR:** Is this your big issue? This is it for the day.

**Mr Lund:** Radios are a major issue. But the greatest problem of all is that they do not wake up about their antennas. That is what gets your signal out. They have antennas incorrectly mounted on vehicles and they do not get the signal out at all. Where I live, I can sit and listen to Waine as clear as a bell, but he can have another vehicle beside him and you just cannot hear them. Antennas are critical. They mount them in the wrong spots. They do not work.

**CHAIR:** Point taken. We have noted that. Darrell, what do you want to leave us with today?

**Mr Kelly:** One of the lessons learned from the fires last year is that there has to be far greater interaction between us rural fellows and the urban fellows. What happened last year should never happen again. Too many problems arose and they could have been avoided.

**Mr Mulholland:** I agree with that. The instant you turn up in a yellow truck, you are dismissed by anyone in a red truck as being a fool, as being some little labourer that has turned up. All of your experience means nothing. The way that we fight fire is not the way that they do, which is by emptying swimming pools onto fires. If we can redirect the fire and steer it away from something, we do it. We could have done that quite a few times, with very minimal impact and with a lot less impact on the housing and manpower, if other people in administration and on the fire ground in a red truck would listen.

**CHAIR:** That is about respect and communication. Bruce, do you want to say something?

**Mr Sloper:** The Auditor-General's report of 2008 made some critical comments about financial accountability of brigades, forward planning and strategic planning structures and things like that. I honestly believe that they are more directed at the QFRS than at the brigades. The brigades have a quite clear constitution and they are audited. There are financial records and there are operational and forward plans put into the QFRS office. You never hear anything back from them to say that the accounts are fine or that the operational plans are fine. I honestly believe that the problem, again, is more upstairs than with us. We have enough skills in the community for operators, good command structures and good committee governance as well.

**CHAIR:** Michael?

**Mr M Scott:** I think a lot of the problem is a management issue. We have to look at this from management right down to the brigades in terms of communication. They should also look at the integration of experienced people into the management side of things.

**CHAIR:** Peter?

**Mr Cook:** Again, coming out of the Auditor-General's report, we had a lot of strife about 18 months ago when they tried to change the financial structure. There has been little said about that at this stage. Auditing within our own brigade is a major expense. Fortunately it is donated, but it would account for one-fifth of our budget. I believe that QFRS should be able to appoint an auditor from within the department that can audit our books. They were worried about accountability. If the auditor from QFRS was coming through, they would very easily accept all of the figures that they need to put into their system. They complain about the fact that they do not know how many hundreds of thousands of dollars are sitting around in brigade accounts when that information has been sent in through annual returns. So the whole system possibly needs upgrading so that they can get this information electronically very quickly and easily.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Peter. Waine?

**Mr W Scott:** Two years ago our brigade was classed by the regional manager and the area director as being fraudulent. They came to our fire shed. Some of our members put up questions. The regional manager turned around and said, 'I'm not talking to you blokes in a shed about that.' That was the end of the conversation. They took our previous five years of paperwork to have it re-audited because we had done something horrible. It was the way he went about it. He could have said it very nicely, but he

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obviously did not. After it was re-audited six months later—we lost six months levy and then the next 12 months levy; so our brigade went for 18 months without a cent from the government due to this carry-on—it was found that our audit was spot on and our budget and our planning were spot on as well. But no-one from QFRS could come and say, 'You've done a good job. We've made a mistake.'

**Mr Sloper:** Mr Chairman, can I make just one point?

**CHAIR:** This will have to do it.

**Mr Sloper:** It is about centralising levy collections. We were talking about volunteers and community structures earlier on. If revenue is centralised and then redistributed back to the brigades, it will seriously affect the volunteer forces and community attitudes towards rural brigades.

**CHAIR:** If anyone wants to write to us again with anything further—if something came up that you thought we had not heard or you want to extrapolate—please send us something. Otherwise, the time allocated for this session has expired. If members have any additional questions, we will write to you. We thank you for your attendance today. The committee really appreciates your assistance. We will now adjourn for lunch.

**Proceedings suspended from 1.05 pm to 1.32 pm**

**HOGARTH, Miss Danielle, Regional Manager, AgForce Central Queensland**

**FISHER, Mr John, Regional Manager, Rural Operations, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service**

**GALLANT, Mr Neil Ronald, Assistant Commissioner, Central Region, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service**

**ABBOTTS, Mr Greg, Operations Manager, Technical, Parks, Sport and Recreation, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**CUTLER, Mrs Alicia, Strategic Manager, Finance, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**LUDWIG, Councillor Bill, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**MATHER, Councillor Glenda, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**O'BRIEN, Councillor Sandra, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**RUTHERFORD, Councillor Cherie, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**SVENDSEN, Councillor Brett, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**SWADLING, Councillor Rose, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**WILLIAMS, Councillor Tony, Rockhampton Regional Council**

**IRWIN, Mr Dick, Chief Executive Officer, Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland Inc.**

**ROGERS, Mr Maxwell John, State President, Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland Inc.**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. I declare this session of the public hearings of the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee's inquiry into the management of rural fire services in Queensland officially open. My name is Wayne Wendt and I am the chair of the committee. The other members of the committee here today are: Mr Ian Rickuss MP, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Crandon MP, the member for Coomera; Ms Di Farmer MP, the member for Bulimba; Ms Mary-Anne O'Neill MP, the member for Kallangur; and Mrs Christine Smith MP, the member for Burleigh. With us is our research director, Deb Jeffrey.

This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and is subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence.

Could witnesses please be mindful that when they wish to make a statement they speak into the microphone. Could I also request that mobile phones be turned off. If you do need to take any calls could you take them outside this room. You have previously been provided with a copy of the instructions for witnesses, so we will take those as read. Hansard will record the proceedings and you will be provided with the transcript.

We are running this hearing as a round table format to facilitate discussion. However, for reasons of privilege, only members of the committee can put questions to witnesses. If you wish to raise issues for discussion, I want to stress that you must direct your comments through me as the chair.

I also remind all those participating in the hearing today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate in the proceedings. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Before we start, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper, and we will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. Would any of you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** Thank you for the opportunity to do that. We are certainly happy to provide information from the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. It is certainly appropriate that the committee hears from the central region. Last year we did experience probably the largest bushfire situation that Queensland has faced. Certainly a lot of lessons were learned from the working together of the urban and the Rural Fire Service. Certainly a lot of information has come to light from that. Hopefully the committee can benefit from that.

**CHAIR:** We will proceed with questioning. I ask Mr Rickuss to commence questioning.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for turning up today. It is important. As you probably realise, the rural fire brigades are the largest volunteer group in Queensland with well over 20,000 members. It is certainly great to have them functioning well and without too much angst. There are several different brigade classifications in your area. What are the main classifications?

**Mr Fisher:** I manage the central region, which takes in Rockhampton, Emerald, Barcaldine and Mackay. The predominant number of brigades are represented in the primary producer classification generally, because of the agricultural nature of Central Queensland. In terms of activity, our main level of activity probably is represented by our izone and village brigade. We have about 350 brigades across Central Queensland. Probably around 75 per cent of those would be primary producer brigades. That recognises the fact that we manage over 420,000 square kilometres. For that area the predominant land use is agricultural. Our izone rural brigades and village brigades are predominantly on the coastal strip between Proserpine and Agnes Water and 1770.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Can you give us a brief outline of the differences between the brigades? I do not have any village brigades in my area; I have rural brigades.

**Mr Fisher:** A village brigade is a brigade that might have a small cluster of dwellings in a small rural township. Obviously it is towns large enough to have an auxiliary brigade. It might have a town centre, a shop, a small service station, a town hall and that sort of thing. Generally they have a fairly small population—that is, a population of less than 1,000 people in the general area. From our view, they have a significant bushfire risk to distributed structures like houses and properties in a local area. Therefore they probably have more of a need to conduct property protection sorts of activities.

**Mr RICKUSS:** They are a yellow truck, are they?

**Mr Fisher:** Yes, all of the brigades that I manage are yellow trucks. They would predominantly be made up of a small village. They would be looking after property protection and predominantly bushfire protection from surrounding land use. But they are integrated fairly closely with the rural land use surrounding them.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Is there anything significant about the central region that differs from other parts of the state? I know that it is a bit drier climate, if my geography serves me correctly.

**Mr Fisher:** We border between the two types of regions, I suppose. We extend to the South Australian border. In terms of the region that I manage, we have the full range. We have areas like Rockhampton, Mackay and Gladstone, where we have very intensive settlement and heavy industry which have a very close relationship with the urban brigades. There are a significant number of urban brigades in the central region. But we also run into the country way out west, where you have primary producer brigades which might be made up of five landholders who have significant holdings whom we support through the provision of slip-on units and PPN training but which are largely self-reliant.

We have the broad range of activities across a very large area. We are probably the third largest region in terms of members. About 20 per cent of the members of rural fire brigades are within the central region. We have about 8½ thousand members here. Therefore, we have a very diverse range of brigade responsibilities. The mining industry, the cattle industry and the coastal development are changing a lot of brigades' profiles in terms of what the community expects of a rural fire service in the central region.

**Ms O'NEILL:** My question is to the Department of Community Safety. The Auditor-General found in his audit that the department does not have a robust and systematic process to identify the nature and level of brigade activity which then does not enable the allocation of resources based on risk and need. How does the department assess the needs of rural fire brigades?

**Mr Fisher:** There are two ways in which we evaluate risk for brigades. One is essentially an exercise in the number of dwellings, the number of people and the number of properties present within the brigade area and then a perception of the risk of bushfires to that community. That is where we come across that concept of primary producer, rural, village and izone brigades. We look particularly at the amount of interaction between a bushfire interface and closely settled communities. We define that as an interface zone. The amount of that that a brigade might have will determine its classification.

We also look at the level of activity with the brigade and the level of risk. That is whether there are a lot of brigades in a particular area to provide support to each other or whether there is a particular type of development or settlement within that area that would pose a greater risk. A good example of that might be isolated coastal villages which might be made up of predominantly retirees—Turkey Beach or somewhere like that. They are fairly isolated and have to be self-reliant but the community itself is perhaps not capable of providing a large brigade workforce. There has to be some sort of evaluation of the reality.

In terms of how we evaluate the activity of the brigade, we substantially rely upon the brigades' first officers providing back to us form 14s, which are reports on attendance at incidents. To date that has been purely a paper based activity. It is a form that they send in. We have modified that to make it available on the net. People can get that off the portal and submit it electronically. I think that is probably a big step forward in the ability to gauge the amount of activity that a brigade actually undertakes and translate that into the level of risk as well.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Is there any other information that they send you, apart from form 14?

**Mr Fisher:** We also ask the brigades to give us an annual operating plan to tell us what they plan to do. That probably relates more to mitigation works—that is, the work that they are doing to reduce risk. That is obviously a very important aspect of the activity of the brigade and gauges the level of support that they might require from the service.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Are you saying that you use that information to assess the need and the risk; is that right?

**Mr Fisher:** We use that, for example, if a brigade were to put forward a business case for a new appliance, a new truck or a new shed. We would reflect upon the amount of activity that they had had in the past three or five years and talk to them about that sort of activity. Traditionally there has been a lack of information coming back to the service from individual brigades, particularly primary producer brigades, about that level of activity. I think that has improved over the last three years, where there has been a greater resource to support brigades. We do not use that exclusively, but it is obviously one of the talking points that we use in discussions.

**CHAIR:** Do you ever get the situation where, due to a lack of numbers—people have moved away or people have got older—you have no-one left to man a volunteer brigade? If so, what happens in that case?

**Mr Fisher:** We do. The changing nature of the demography in Central Queensland—probably all of Australia—is towards a more urbanised society. Central Queensland is very much that way. If you look at work that I have done in the Rockhampton area, you find that there is a very stable primary producer volunteer base. Primary producers tend to be on the land as a family and being part of the brigade is tradition. There tends to be a fairly strong and stable relationship between the brigade numbers and the community. In that case, it is an ageing workforce. The average age for primary producer brigades is probably in the high 50s to early 60s. On the coast we tend to get a higher turnover of numbers. The average age of the membership in a coastal brigade—an izone or a village brigade—is lower, but the turnover of the volunteers is much higher; therefore the training load is much greater.

We often have brigades going through cycles where they might be very active. It is generated by individuals within the brigades. Like any community group, it is individuals in the brigade who take on executive roles who drive the brigade and encourage people to participate. If those people change over and they do not have succession planning, the brigade sometimes falters and brigade numbers drop. It sometimes takes a bit of a wake-up call to the brigade to reinvigorate their membership through the local community.

One of the best things to happen—I say this in a qualified way—is an active fire season. It has generated a lot more interest in local community members to join their local fire brigade. We try to promote that at every opportunity we have. Essentially, recruitment is done at a local brigade level. You are joining a small team of local community members. That interaction is the most important thing.

**CHAIR:** John, do we have any brigades in the immediate vicinity that have gone down in numbers and have closed in the recent past or may close in the future?

**Mr Fisher:** Not closed. We have had a number of brigades that have amalgamated. So we might have two brigades that amalgamate. Targinnie to the north of Gladstone is a good example. We got down to probably five or six members. They had two appliances. We had a number of meetings with those people. With a bit of activity they are back up to about 12 or 15 active firefighters. They have met the minimum standard. All of our brigades now meet the minimum standard. None of our brigades have closed, but some of them have come pretty close to closing.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Does the information sent to you by the brigades include financial information?

**Mr Fisher:** Yes, it does. In the last two or three years the assistant commissioner has asked that each area director and I, the regional manager, ensure that all brigades in the region meet the financial accountability requirements that we have for brigades in managing a budget, in particular where they collect a rural fire levy through their local council. There has been varying degrees of adherence to those rules over time.

We pretty actively pursue brigades to make sure that they understand their legal requirements. They are managing public funds. Some brigades have substantial funds allocated for their operational purposes. That is quite appropriate. Some brigades are holding significant funds for particular projects. Part of that financial information through the area director is to ensure that we are in agreeance over the projects that they are proposing and they are holding funds for and, importantly, that the proposals they have meet the direction of the service and the brigade.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Does the department give feedback to local fire brigades about what use you have made of the information?

**Mr Fisher:** In terms of financial information?

**Ms O'NEILL:** Of financial information or how many turn-outs they have. Do you let them know how important it is because you have done a certain thing with it? Is that feedback given?

**Mr Fisher:** We do. It would normally be if a brigade were to seek a new appliance, for example. I was talking to a brigade downstairs about that. We would encourage the brigade to come and talk to the area director about that proposal and with the area director develop a business case for the assistant Rockhampton

commissioner's consideration. Part of that is a reflection of what activity, what purposes, what direction we see the brigade developing in. It is really at those face-to-face discussions where we would have that sharing of the information.

**Ms FARMER:** My question is to the Department of Community Safety. The Auditor-General found that there were not appropriate systems in place to monitor the condition and safety of equipment used by the rural fire brigade. How do you do that here?

**Mr Fisher:** This is quite correct. The Auditor-General's report highlighted that there was not a systematic process to evaluate the roadworthiness and the safety of equipment that brigades were issued with. The process now is that each brigade must undertake an annual safety inspection of all the appliances they hold. We have included firefighting trailers in that as well. Light and medium appliances and firefighting trailers must undergo a normal road safety inspection. We also do annual inspections of the brigade's station where they hold a station.

**Ms FARMER:** When you say 'we', do you mean the department does?

**Mr Fisher:** Each area director and the team under the area director, the area training support officer and the brigade training support officers do that. That is part of the commissioner's priorities that they actually achieve that each year. That has been formally introduced since the Auditor-General's comment about that lack of systematic analysis of brigades' equipment.

**Ms FARMER:** Are you involved in the allocation of equipment to the various rural fire brigades?

**Mr Fisher:** As the regional manager I manage area directors. The area directors really sign off on the allocation of major equipment. When I say 'major equipment', I am talking about new stations or extensions and medium or light appliances or slip-on units. Generally I would authorise or endorse that recommendation from the area director. Normal equipment such as personal protective equipment, material that be might used on the truck and normal firefighting equipment that comes through our brigade requisitions are really signed off at an area level. They are provided at various levels of subsidy or in some cases free because they are more consumable items. There is no need for me to get involved in that lower level equipment allocation.

**Mr Irwin:** In relation to that concern raised by the Auditor-General, the association back in 2000 brought to the attention of the organisation the need to do this and actually made recommendations—

**Ms FARMER:** Necessity to monitor safety—

**Mr Irwin:** Monitoring vehicles and making sure that they were of a standard as far as safety is concerned. We put forward a recommendation that the department of transport actually do machinery inspections of those vehicles. I am going back as far as 2000 here. The organisation was really reluctant to do that. The reason was that they were very aware that there was a lot of substandard equipment out there. If that happened there would have been a large number of vehicles taken off the road at that point in time.

That is when the veteran replacement program came in. Unfortunately, the organisation did not work closely with the department of transport. The brigades now actually have to fund vehicle inspections whereas it could have been done more cheaply and better through the department of transport. That is something that has been a long-term concern for us. It is an impost on the brigades, not only to find the money to turn around and get a machinery inspection but also to travel very large distances to get it done. The urban service would have a vehicle that moves around the countryside and does all the necessary minor repairs or inspections of appliances. Be mindful that urban appliances do not get off bitumen. The rural appliances are more likely to experience far more stress and things that need much more regular inspection.

**CHAIR:** How much is it for a machinery inspection, on average?

**Mr Irwin:** Anything upwards of \$200.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Is that done at a local service station?

**Mr Irwin:** It is not just an ordinary inspection as such. It is beyond an ordinary machinery inspection. It is far more extensive than that because of the size of the vehicles. They are large trucks. It cannot just be done at a local garage that can inspect a car because we are talking about trucks here. It needs to be done by people who have the equipment to do it. We need to ensure that it meets all the standards. It is also the impost on time—that is, getting people in to those specific areas.

**CHAIR:** So let me get this straight. Do you agree or disagree that there should be machinery inspections?

**Mr Irwin:** We agree really strongly—

**CHAIR:** On a yearly basis?

**Mr Irwin:** On a safety basis—

**CHAIR:** Of all age vehicles? So machinery should be checked every year?

**Mr Irwin:** Yes.

**Mr RICKUSS:** That is not done through the department of transport? They are not like a heavy vehicle as such. There are some garages that can inspect trucks that are up to five tonnes.

**Mr Irwin:** That is right. We are trying to reduce the cost for the brigades.

**Mr RICKUSS:** That is for light patrols and—

**Mr Irwin:** It just seemed logical that the department of transport, being another government department, would work closely with the organisation in that regard.

**Ms FARMER:** I would like to ask the council: does the council get involved in the allocation of equipment, particularly large equipment? Does it get involved in monitoring safety standards?

**Mr Abbotts:** Unfortunately, I will not be able to answer that for you because I am not involved in that side of operations.

**Mrs Cutler:** Not from our perspective. In finance terms, we are simply distributing the funds that are set by the rural fire brigade. We leave it up to them to manage that side of the allocation.

**Mrs SMITH:** My question is directed to Danielle. Is AgForce involved in consultation processes with the Department of Community Safety? If not, would you see that as being useful?

**Miss Hogarth:** Definitely. We have a lot of members who have had problems trying to manage fire on their properties and communicating with everyone involved. If there was more of an understanding on the part of both parties in terms of what they are able to do before anything happened, I think a lot of problems with communication would be eliminated.

**CHAIR:** So it is occurring or it is not occurring?

**Miss Hogarth:** It is.

**Mr CRANDON:** I go back to the Department of Community Safety. The Auditor-General found that there was no systematic process for ensuring that individual brigade issues are understood and considered by the department. How does the department manage this issue locally?

**Mr Fisher:** In terms of the management of brigades, a lot of brigades are encouraged to manage issues locally. As I said, there are 350—

**Mr CRANDON:** The question actually relates to the brigade issues being understood and considered by the department. The Auditor-General specifically said that there is no systematic process for ensuring that individual brigade issues are understood and considered by the department. In other words, they are giving you information. Where does go from there? How are you managing that? How is it getting through to whoever it needs to get to in order to be considered by the department—in other words, to give some value back?

**Mr Fisher:** As part of the enhancement package which occurred back in 2005 there was a significant increase in the number of Queensland Fire and Rescue Service rural operations staff available across the region. In terms of the central region, that included my position as regional manager. It also included a number of brigade training support officers, who are the front-line interaction between brigades and the organisation. As recently as last year there were two additional brigade training support officers placed in the central region—one at Barcaldine and one at Rocky.

That has been the main response to that issue of engaging at a local level with brigades. It is really inappropriate to ask a brigade to submit written accounts or issues to an area office. In an area of this size, we try to establish what we call a patch system of management for the brigade training support officers. They each have a group of brigades to look after. They are essentially the first point of contact between the brigade and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. That training support officer would either try to resolve that local issue with the brigade or take it back to the area director or even me if it becomes a larger issue or if it is a consistent issue across brigades.

That seems to be the most effective way to do that. The challenge with that is the size of the region and the area. As I said, Rocky has over 100 brigades for two brigade training support officers. That is a full-time job. Importantly, primary producer brigades—who largely are, as I said, self-help groups—do not meet on a regular basis. They meet perhaps once or twice a year at best. So the opportunity to engage with them as a group is fairly limited. Other ways of engaging with brigades are through newsletters, training and meetings and also through the group structure. Rocky is fairly lucky in that, except for the Banana shire, we have four groups within the Rockhampton area where the groups provide an operational or perhaps even a coordination role between the brigades and the area office. I think that is an important role for a group of brigades to form a structure to establish some sort of effective communication between the office and the brigades on the ground.

**Mr CRANDON:** Is that wishful thinking? The Auditor-General has specifically said that there is no systematic process in place to handle those issues. We were hearing this today in the earlier session of this hearing. So is that wishful thinking?

**Mr Fisher:** It is probably hopeful in terms of that is the process that we can put in place. With the staffing and the area that we have in central region, it really is not possible for that to be more of an intimate interaction between individual brigades. I think it is the role of the group particularly—it might be a group of 15 or 17 brigades who get together on a monthly basis, and there are a number of groups who do Rockhampton

that fairly actively—to bring coordinated issues or consolidated issues back to the area office or, more importantly, to resolve those issues locally. I tend to go to a number of those group meetings. At those meetings you can answer a lot of questions that brigades might have. They are on the spot and they deal with it very effectively. When you look at the area that we are dealing with across Central Queensland, that is pretty difficult to do, particularly, as I said, when you are dealing with primary producer brigades who themselves may not get together more than once a year.

**Mr RICKUSS:** On that issue about the Auditor-General saying that there was no process, I have a letter here that was handed to us this morning. It is dated 20 August. As at the end of July, the entire QFRS repeater network was disengaged. These blokes were telling us this morning that they did not know about it. You sent a letter out three or four weeks after it was disengaged. This is communication at its worst.

**Mr Fisher:** Let us clarify that. The UHF network, which is the Firecom communication network, has been enhanced over the last four years with additional repeaters and additional rollouts. Part of that was to essentially establish the command network, the command channel, which is UHF. All of our trucks have been fitted with UHF and VHF radios.

**Mr RICKUSS:** This is three or four weeks late.

**Mr Fisher:** What you are pointing to is an action of a program that has been in progress for four years. Taking those VHF radios down to a fire ground communications—dual coverage has been in place for at least two years.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I was told in respect of the dual coverage, 'Use your mobile phones if you haven't got UHF.' That was said to me. The local member of parliament said that that would be totally useless because mobile phones do not work in half the places you go to.

**Mr Fisher:** That has never been a statement from the Rockhampton area.

**Mr RICKUSS:** It is on the record here this morning.

**Mr Fisher:** As you would know, the UHF network and the VHF network do not cover 100 per cent the state of Queensland. There are areas, and significant areas in Central Queensland, out west, where there is no radio coverage whatsoever.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Keep going. I am waiting.

**Mr Fisher:** So there is no communication connection network particularly to primary producer brigades.

**Mr RICKUSS:** There are a lot of areas out there that mobile phones do not cover as well.

**Mr Fisher:** What I am saying is that that is the reality of the situation.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So shutting down the VHF will enhance the coverage, will it?

**Mr Fisher:** No. As I said, the VHF and UHF network has been duplicated over the last two years. The VHF network was used as a second system to communicate with firefighters.

**Mr RICKUSS:** The important fact is why was this sent out so late?

**Mr Fisher:** The area office was not aware that that was going to be switched off at that particular time. That was a decision that unfortunately slipped through the net in terms of that final stage.

**Mr RICKUSS:** It highlights the Auditor-General's point I suppose.

**Mr Irwin:** Communication is an issue. The association is meant to be a nexus between volunteers and the organisation. Unfortunately, it is not used to the extent that it could be and should be. We have 15 elected representatives across the state. You are all aware, being elected members yourself, that that is an important process. It is something that is not utilised. We are often treated like feeding the chooks—a turn of phrase from the days of Joh. That is what happens. That is what causes the frustration within the brigade system and certainly within the association which is meant to represent those volunteers from across the state. There is very, very limited information provided to us and limited opportunity to be asked to be involved. When we are, it is really for very small and minor issues.

There were issues raised here this morning about equipment. The equipment committee was disbanded. That was a perfect opportunity for the volunteers to have major input into the equipment that they are using. I do not know how many years the association has been trying to get that re-established. I think there have been two meetings relative to new appliances but decisions were made before the volunteers attended. Their input was virtually ignored.

So in terms of the communication between brigades, I would say really strongly that the organisation is not communicating to the extent that it needs to and that what the Auditor-General says is very true. There is a no definite process that is being used. The group system is there as one method. Yes, sure, the organisation is run off its feet relative to limited staff. But there still are some very strong processes in place that it could utilise and tends not to.

**CHAIR:** Dick, is that a general comment state-wide?

**Mr Irwin:** Very much so. The association has been limited in its staffing as well. Even though we have 15 representatives, it is a big ask. John spoke about the enormous area that he has to manage. We have three representatives across that same area. It is a big ask. The association in the last 12 months has



put on some more staff so we can get out there. It was really pleasing to hear this morning that what we have been trying to tell the organisation was coming out into the open. We have been trying to tell the organisation this for a long time. We are hearing exactly the same things as we move around the state. It is not confined to one area. Often management will say, 'This is an isolated case.' It is not an isolated case. It is even down through the Gold Coast area where there are some enormous impacts due to urban expansion and the detrimental impact that that has on the brigade itself and the community. The communication is really slack. It is last minute stuff. The fire warden issue is a perfect example, and it was raised here today. Three weeks ago the association was presented with that information that it was going to press without any time for any input at state level.

**CHAIR:** Before I ask for your comment, Neil—and I will ask you—it leads nicely into my next question. You might have noticed that I have been looking through to the department's submission to this committee. In its submission it says that the inquiry should note that it strives for a high level of cohesiveness between permanent urban and volunteer rural entities being developed. Is that what is happening up here, do you believe? Is there a high level of cohesiveness between both red and yellow?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** Absolutely. Certainly during the significant wildfire season that occurred in the central region last year, I think one of the absolute proudest parts for me and highlighted throughout was the on-the-ground cooperation between all levels of the organisation—between the full-time staff, the part-time auxiliary staff and the rural volunteers. They were working together as a single response to the community. We are well aware that community members in times of need do not care what colour the truck is. They care that somebody provides a professional service. My view has always been that 'professional' relates to the standard of service or the standard of performance of an individual rather than whether a person is paid or is a volunteer. Certainly the cooperation and integration of that response was outstanding, in my view. It was not a matter, as it has perhaps been in some past years, of urban is dealing with this part of it and rural with another part of it. Sometimes that was appropriate but at other times it was a combined effort. Also, with other government agencies, particularly parts of DERM, we provided a single coordinated response.

Members of DERM and the rural fire side of things made up part of the incident management team. So it was not an incident management team being run by an urban side directing rural or a secondary team, as you might have in other states, from a different organisation. It was a single coordinated, cohesive response. I am not saying that we got it perfect. There still needs to be work done in that regard. Overall, from my view, that was one of the highlights of that response.

**CHAIR:** On that issue of cohesiveness, could you outline for this committee what strategies are currently being employed to develop this cohesiveness? What strategies do you or John have in place?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** I suppose that really comes down from the very top, from the commissioner who, as part of his priorities that we need to report on, requires combined exercises to occur between urban and rural. He specifies a number of those to occur and we need to report on those.

**CHAIR:** That is happening, is it?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** Yes, it is. That sets a formal requirement. Obviously there is a lot of additional activity that occurs that is not part of that particular structure. But the joint exercises, the joint hazard reduction activities, that occur I believe build that understanding and relationships that are so important in an operational sense. Whilst there is a formal command structure and rank structure and so forth, nothing beats actually knowing the people that you are dealing with and knowing the people from a local area that have local knowledge, as the rural brigades do, and making use of that and, likewise, the rural staff knowing the capability and respecting the capability. It is a mutual respect situation.

I am not pretending that it is absolutely 100 per cent perfect everywhere. We have taken enormous strides forward from perhaps where the organisation was five to 10 years ago. We continue to promote that from the top. An example is that during the wildfire season here last year, as I was travelling around looking at issues, John and I made a point of wherever possible travelling together so that front-line staff would see that from the top level of management within the region it was a joint situation. So I think that was a strong visual reminder to everybody that from the top we are expecting to operate together and are expecting and seeing staff at the front line operating together as well.

**CHAIR:** How would your men and ladies in the rurals react to that question? How do you believe they feel about whether there is a cohesive unit here?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** I would think that probably 95 per cent would say it is. I would say that there are certain individuals, probably from both sides, that still have some archaic view that urbans have a particular skill set and rurals have a particular skill set and that the twain do not meet. Probably 20 years ago that might have been an organisational view, 10 years ago it might have been a brigade view but now I think it is down to the odd individual. You always get a variety of viewpoints, but I think that is very much a local viewpoint. I think there are some within the Rural Fire Service who might still think that the urban fire service looks down upon them. Perhaps sometimes they like that underdog view; I do not know. I do not hear that going around the urban fire stations. I do not hear people saying, 'The Rural Fire Service is no good at this or no good at that.' I hear mutual respect. I hear, particularly since last year, the probably enhanced view that urban fire service personnel have of the volunteers, given that the volunteers—as the name suggests—gave up not just hours of a day but weeks at a time to respond. A  
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number of those who were here this morning are those same people who gave up weeks and weeks at a time to devote to the safety of the community. Nothing builds that respect for people more than seeing that and also seeing their skill level. I think that has taken enormous strides in recent years.

**CHAIR:** I am going to ask the same question of you, John. What is your view on the cohesiveness of the two?

**Mr Fisher:** I fully endorse what Neil said. I think the central region demonstrates the capacity of both services, the urban and rural services, to be one at a time of crisis. I think that respect that was generated during the Rocky fires or turnouts et cetera has greatly advanced our ability to cooperate and act together and be more effective about that. I think a lot of that has come about because probably in the last three to five years—since the enhancement package—all of our brigades pretty much universally wear personal protective equipment. Therefore, they are wearing yellow gear. They are wearing helmets and gloves. So when they go out they are prepared to do the job. Five years ago that was not the case. People were turning out in felt hats and dungarees, or whatever it might be, which did not portray the perception that they knew what they were doing. They are the same people, but I think the general perception of the rural brigades by the urban brigades is that they have incredibly great skills and are incredibly devoted and the respect is vice versa. That interaction has been fantastic. In the central region, for example, we have a number of heavy appliances—zone tankers we call them. Under Neil's direction, they are regional resources and can be used and turned out by rural and urban. There is no argument about that. That is just a philosophy that the central region has. We are one service. We do what needs to be done and we use the resources we have to do it effectively.

**CHAIR:** Neil mentioned that he travels around to the urban stations and has seen a marked increase in how the urbans view the rurals. You obviously travel around the rurals. Do you believe that they have an enhanced view in relation to the urbans?

**Mr Fisher:** I think that is right. I think there are individuals who may not share that view but they are becoming fewer. As Neil said, I have been with Neil at three o'clock in the morning at Mount Morgan talking to individual brigades—some of the people who were here this morning. They were on the same line. They were on the same truck. You really found it difficult to tell them apart because they were doing the same job. The general feeling is that we cooperate, we assist, we support each other.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I would like to note for the record that there was a large sigh and a lot of head waving when you started to answer that question, Neil. There was a lot of disagreement in this room with what you were saying, even from the councillors by the sound of it. The committee has had a number of submissions discussing communication issues with government agencies. Could you advise the committee how the department communicates its policies and procedures directly to the rural fire brigades?

**Mr Fisher:** That is done through the area structure. Was the committee referring to agencies or to brigades particularly?

**Mr RICKUSS:** To brigades.

**Mr Fisher:** Okay. Essentially we have a number of formal documents. The rural fire brigades manual has been revamped and issued to all brigades as a policy document. The organisation is able to provide all volunteers with access to the volunteer portal as an electronic means of gathering up-to-date and current documents on policies and procedures. As I said, the enhancement package has provided a support structure within Queensland that did not exist probably three years ago. My position and, as I said, a number of other support positions did not exist three years ago, and the transition from what used to be a management structure for rural fire brigades has now accelerated quite significantly. A lot of the policy stuff has now been written in the last three years. It did not exist before then. The rollout of that information has been fairly constant and probably accelerating over the last 12 months as we have found our straps with a lot of that information.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you feel that this is putting more pressure on the volunteer rural fire brigades? Some of them feel that they are getting a lot of pressure put on them from the full-time employees of the Rural Fire Service to do some of this stuff that they feel probably should be picked up by some of your employees.

**Mr Fisher:** If I had more employees, I would be only too happy to pick that up. The point is that a lot of the work that we are asking brigades to undertake now—whether it be training, whether it be reporting, whether it be documentation et cetera—is driven by the reality that rural fire brigades are working in the workplace. They are bound by the same provisions that you at parliament and me in the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service are bound by—in terms of privacy legislation, equity legislation, workplace health and safety responsibilities, reporting requirements for the expenditure of public funds—that probably has not been explicit in the last 10, 20 or 30 years of the brigades being in place. The public expectation of a community body is now much greater than it ever used to be. Whether you are a child-care centre or a PCYC, it may make no real difference. We are all bound by the same provisions. That reporting can only be done by the brigade structure.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Have you got a 'what if' scenario in your processes to make this simpler for the rural fire brigades? The portal is an example. Are you looking all the time to try to make it simpler for the volunteers?

**Mr Fisher:** Absolutely. Just issuing a document with a policy on it is one thing, but I do not think that is necessarily an effective way to improve people's understanding of the issues. The central region and Rockhampton area particularly has run over the last 12 months targeted training programs for a day or two days for brigade secretaries, brigade chairmen, brigade treasurers to allow them to come up to speed with the policies but also to provide tools that allow them to do that work, whether it be financial reporting or minutes reporting, in a simple and consistent manner. We have drawn from individual brigades. The first officer, secretary and treasurer of Turkey Beach, Graham Luck, has a financial background. He has provided a lot of that stuff that has worked for him. It has worked for other brigades in the Miriam Vale group. We have then translated that and given it to other brigades across the region. I think that has been very productive. The feedback I have got is that it has been great to see that level of practical support—not just the policy but the practical interpretation of the policy.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Would you like to comment on that, Dick?

**Mr Irwin:** There is a lot more pressure being placed on volunteers, certainly more than ever before. But, as John has said, with additional staff, the BTSO which has been brought in—and I must support the organisation in this regard—has helped to take pressure off some of the things that the volunteers were expected to do. There is still a long way to go relative to administrative functions and training for the organisations. There is a higher expectation, although I believe that, up until this point, the majority of brigades have handled that situation very well as far as accountability is concerned.

The organisation needs to understand, especially when it comes to financial matters, that most brigades have to face their community every day. So that is where their accountability is. Going right back to 1997-98 when the PAC made some recommendations on the collection and distribution of levies, there were some very strong processes put in place. If there was a failing within that system, the failing was from the fire service for not supporting the brigades in ensuring that they did submit budgets and put in reasonable levies for it. I certainly support the efforts that have been made by the organisation to provide more staff to alleviate some of those pressures, but there is a long way to go yet in that regard. There needs to be more funding made available to support that area.

**Ms O'NEILL:** I note the assistant commissioner's response to the question earlier about the high level of cohesiveness, but a number of submissions we have received identified conflict between urban brigades and rural brigades in terms of both funding and call-outs at interface zones, particularly in izeone areas. Is this an issue in your local area? Can you comment on that?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** I think there are some I suppose administrative differences. Certainly there is by the nature of the organisations where you have two people doing the same job—one on a full-time wage and the other giving up their time and perhaps their own business hours to do it on a volunteer basis. This occurs when we have a deployment that either goes to another location or within our own region of a task force or a strike team, where you have the same team being made up of people who are being paid and those who have volunteered their time. That variation is a symptom of how the structure is, but it is a point of concern where that exists.

I think the who-is-in-charge type issues are clearly defined within the operations doctrine. Whilst there might be some misunderstandings of that still within parts of the organisation, certainly it is clear in my mind how that side of it works. But I am not pretending that it is a perfect world. You may still have some grey areas that are not quite clear to the people on the ground—for example, what type of incident or where a particular boundary line is. These do not come to my mind. I cannot think of a specific example, but I am not saying that it has never, ever happened within the region.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Is there any form of reimbursement available to assist rural fire brigades when they are called out along with urban brigades?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** John may be able to talk more from the rural side of that, but certainly from within the urban side of it particular individuals are not reimbursed for time lost from their particular employer. That is really up to the employer as to whether they allow some of the volunteers to respond. We have the same issue with our auxiliary brigades, where members have full-time jobs and may have to leave their employer. Again, it is up to the employer as to how they manage that reimbursement, stop their wages or whatever for that period of time.

When rural brigades and rural trucks respond into an urban area, and that occurs around the izeone areas and fringes particularly during the wildfire season—it is not a regular occurrence, but last year it happened quite frequently—where possible, we try to make sure that the brigade itself is not out of pocket either from any repairs or servicing that the vehicle may have experienced during that time. We do not routinely service or repair rural vehicles but we did during the bushfire season last year. Our workshops here were operating 24-hour servicing to keep the trucks on the road, I suppose, rather than providing routine type maintenance. But there is no formal reimbursement of individuals, no.

**Ms O'NEILL:** What about when an urban appliance is called by a rural fire brigade, say, to act as a standby unit or to protect houses in the event of a wildfire? Who covers that cost?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** The urban fire service covers that cost. There is no sending of a bill to the local rural brigade or anything like that. It is part of the responsibility of the urban fire service. We respond out of our urban levied area very frequently. Most often it would be to a road crash type situation—and that unfortunately happens on a daily basis—or to structure fires or structures under threat. There is no billing of the local brigade.

**Ms O'NEILL:** How does the department determine when rural fire brigade assistance is required on a fire?

**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** That is an operational decision made by the incident controller. The incident controller—whether it be an urban or a rural person—determines what resources they need. They simply request resources of whatever type or make. It does not matter what they are. There are no boundaries even between urban stations and rural stations. You simply request the resources that the incident controller believes are needed to bring that incident under control. The full resources of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service—and that includes urban and rural operations—are available to the incident controller.

**Mr Irwin:** That is something that is becoming more of a concern due to urban expansion or the changes in the interface area. Firecom, which is the central communications area, has been instructed to access the nearest appliance. It may be urban and rural. Often what appears to be happening is that an urban appliance may be activated well in advance. It may be in that urban interface area. It is often the case when a fire extends further into a rural area that they do not call the appliance most suitable to the fire or incident. Instead of a rural brigade being involved in a roadside fire that may last 20 minutes, they may be involved for day due to that situation. That is increasing. It is something that has been raised with the organisation in an attempt to address the issue.

**Ms FARMER:** I would like to talk a bit more about the relationship between local agencies and the rural fire brigade. I would like to ask each of the other agencies here—the Department of Community Safety has had an opportunity to talk about it—to comment about that relationship here. How do local agencies work with rural fire brigades to get the best outcomes? We have talked a little about the very big year you had last year—and they were obviously extraordinary circumstances. I am probably more interested in generally how things work.

**Miss Hogarth:** We have received lots of feedback from our producers saying that there are lots of communication problems between producers trying to fight fires on their country and the organisations that are involved coming to assist them. From the producer point of view it is not a good relationship whatsoever.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Would that be the case with DERM, too? Where they butt up to national parks and forestry blocks, would the same thing happen?

**Miss Hogarth:** In terms of them burning off and controlling the fuel, it does come into it in that circumstance, yes.

**Ms FARMER:** Are you talking about communication issues? Do you believe that that is the guts of the problem?

**Miss Hogarth:** And being able to work with them when they are under threat of the fire coming through their land—what they are able to do and how they are told what they can and cannot do.

**Ms FARMER:** What do you believe would be a good way to address that?

**Miss Hogarth:** The producers know their country a lot better than anyone. I know in some fire situations it worked really well because the producer who owned most of the land knew which way things went, where there were firebreaks, where there were watering points and where everybody in the community could get more water for their tankers on the back. They were able to save country because the producer knew the country better than anybody else. The fire organisation that was there was very willing to cooperate and do whatever. That was a positive situation. In most cases the producers have found them very hard to deal with.

**Ms FARMER:** Dick or Max, would you like to comment on that?

**Mr Irwin:** That is certainly the case where there are joint agencies, especially in rural areas. There is a pure lack of understanding of the different situations. Our urban counterparts deal mainly in structural fire or road accident rescue. They often do not associate grass or pasture as a livelihood. It is often treated with a whole lot of disregard.

For many years the association has endeavoured to get the organisation to get away from thinking that the risk is not just to an actual structure but to the asset as well. I believe that this is where most of the difficulty comes in. Most rural brigade people certainly do understand, but sometimes they do not. They will fall foul of the landholder. That pasture is the person's livelihood. To burn out a section of ground unnecessarily is just like letting a house burn in a town. If you have the ability to stop that, you should.

My experience in the past is that is generally the case. When I have been asked to go interstate to fight fires, all the landholders say, 'Don't worry about my house; protect my crops.' That is where most of the misunderstanding comes from. They do not always deal properly with the property manager or the landowner. The fire service tends to come in, because they believe they are the fire experts, and say, 'We will put a firebreak in here or a control line in there,' without talking to the landholder who knows that that particular method may be quite successful but somewhere else it may be quite disastrous.

**Ms FARMER:** So it is a communication issue?

**Mr Irwin:** It is a total communication issue. This association and the volunteers themselves have been saying for such a long time that local knowledge is so important. Yet in the bottom paragraph on the first page of one of the Victorian papers when the findings on the Victorian fires came out said that it is the Rockhampton

first thing that is said after an incident but it is the first thing that is forgotten when a fire starts. They forget about that local knowledge. They do not talk to the local landholder about how fire is going to behave on their specific property. What is the asset that needs protecting? They tend to walk in and take over.

I guess that is where a lot of the concerns that were raised here earlier this morning come in—about the ill-feeling between urban and rural when it comes to working on ground. There is a complete lack of understanding of fire behaviour within urban, and probably so there should be. It is a whole different firefighting structure.

I have long discussions with Lee Johnson about this issue. He has said that we do the same training. But that is where it starts and finishes. They might go through the FN 1 process, but continual rural firefighting in the grassland does not happen for the urban firefighters. If they do that, it is really very small or in a wildfire situation. There is a lack of understanding. That is a process that has to be addressed very strongly; otherwise these issues will continue to arise.

**Ms FARMER:** There is a range of representation here from the council. I wonder if there is any comment from the council.

**Councillor Svendsen:** I had an issue to bring up regarding communication. I am the councillor for division 2 in Rockhampton Regional Council. I have an issue regarding the dismissal communication between the department and rural fire brigades. This is not regarding a fire but the funding of a volunteer fire unit.

I am member of the Keppel Sands fire group and also their councillor. At budget time last year we were informed that we were not to be funded by the department. Unfortunately, no-one from the department actually came to see us; it was done via an email. The membership really did not get told until after the council budget had been brought down. We could not address that issue back to the department.

The reason they gave us for this was an interesting reason, because we had been communicating with the department for some time about building a new shed for our two units. During the fires last year they fought constantly for eight weeks defending Rockhampton. Then we went to Mount Morgan. The fire started in the Keppel Sands area. So we fought for pretty much eight weeks.

The only reason they gave us in an email was that we had too much money in the bank. We had been saving and doing chook raffles for some years to get the funding together to put a submission to the state to build a new shed. Keppel Sands is a little township of 300 people on the Capricorn Coast. It is isolated from the urban trucks because a major creek runs through the middle. For that township, the only rural fire brigade is our rural fire brigade. Even though we are not supposed to fight urban fires, the people of the township know that we have this fire unit there.

The department said that it was not going to fund us. The reason it gave was that we had too much money in the bank. We are absolutely broke now. We fought those fires for eight weeks. When I say 'broke', I should say that we have probably \$7,000 but if we have another fire next week we would blow that pretty quickly. I must give credit to the department in one aspect: it did fix the truck after it was severely damaged in the first fire.

I was so disappointed by this that I was on the front page of newspapers giving it a blast. If you ask my fellow councillors, I think it was justified. The communication is dismissal. That is not when it comes to the on-the-ground fighting of fires but the administration. That is all I would like to say.

**Ms FARMER:** Would anyone else from the council like to comment on this?

**Councillor Swadling:** I am deputy chair for the disaster management committee. There have been a lot of lessons learned. It is not about blame or shame. The path forward is very important. We have never been in a situation of facing fires of that magnitude. There has been a lot of willingness to commit to a path forward. We may not have been happy at the time, but both Neil and John have certainly gone out of their way to ensure that the path forward is much smoother. The relationships have to improve. We certainly faced our first fires that have ever threatened our regional community in good manner.

There are a lot of lessons to be learned. I think the time is ripe for people to air their grievances. The path has to be smooth to go forward to ensure that those inequities are addressed and the financial position of each and every unit is supported. I think that is vitally important to all regions and all communities.

We have all learned a lot out of the Victorian fires. We certainly do not want to see that occur here. This is the path forward. Unfortunately, we were late because the council meeting ran late. We have to go back. I think it is important that we put that case forward so you understand that the relationships will improve because there is a willingness to commit.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you have a disaster management committee which the council, the urbans, the rurals and the DERM people sit on?

**Councillor Swadling:** We certainly do. The path forward is good. The willingness to commit has been greatly improved and enhanced since last year. The path forward is the most important thing.

**CHAIR:** Are you particularly aware, then, of some of the dissatisfaction amongst some of the rural units in relation to how things operate? I am just trying to understand.

**Councillor Swadling:** It is a different process for us. This is an amalgamated council. There were different rules and different groups. This was the first time as a regional council that we have had to work through the relationships. I can say that they have vastly improved. But I do believe that people have to have the opportunity to air their grievances so they can move forward. We need to ensure that their needs are being met, whether it be in terms of machines, finances or whatever. We need to address the training aspects. Each community knows its community very well. I commend everyone who played their role in that. I was the person sitting in the chair at that time. I can tell you that I was thankful to the people who were out there looking after our community.

**Ms FARMER:** The communication issues seem to be the main ones raised today. What are the practical ways you see those communication issues being addressed in this path forward? What are some of the things that are being put in place to address this?

**Councillor Swadling:** We are about to have another meeting. There have been structured meetings and there are paths forward. John and Neil have been fully aware of them. They have worked closely with us to ensure that the units are kept fully informed. That is an important mandate.

**Councillor O'Brien:** I live in the bush. I live in a rural area. I go around to the rural fire brigade meetings. Communication has been a big problem.

**CHAIR:** When you say 'in the bush', where are you talking about?

**Councillor O'Brien:** I live halfway between Rockhampton and Gladstone. Upper Ulam and Gracemere are in my area. I will not speak for any other area but my own. Communication has been a big problem. Getting equipment like new radios has been a problem. I know that one brigade has had a request in for two years to get new radios. When the fires were here there were simple things that went wrong, like the batteries in the radios went flat. They never had any radios. They might have had them in the truck but they could not use them because the batteries were flat. If you have to condense it into one area, it is certainly communication.

**CHAIR:** We are hearing that.

**Councillor Ludwig:** When I was mayor of Livingstone prior to amalgamation, as chair of the counterdisaster committee, one of the things we used to do was have joint meeting with the SES, the rural fire brigades and the state agencies. Back then there were significant issues raised by the rural fire brigades. That was an opportunity to air those issues.

**CHAIR:** How long ago are we talking about?

**Councillor Ludwig:** We first started doing things in 2002 or 2003.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Who was the lead agency?

**Councillor Ludwig:** Council. Frank Pagano said that in a perfect world his department would be coordinating such meetings but they do not.

**CHAIR:** Frank from QFRS?

**Councillor Ludwig:** He was EMQ back then. I do not know where the deck chairs have moved now. You asked a question about the systematic process, the feedback and the loop. That is something that you really do need to work on if you are going to get real outcomes. I attended a fire meeting last night to get the Woodbury brigade back on track. At every meeting I went to there was a QFRS representative or two. They are certainly giving that level of support but the system needs to be enhanced. The feedback loops, the agendas and where you bring those people together strategically I think are the key issues.

Once volunteers start to feel disfranchised, unloved or unsupported, it grows. I know that 18 months ago there was a revolt from all the brigades here with some dictates about changing the whole system with no communication. Our council supported the brigades. I believe that things have moved forward from there.

There are two issues that I would like to bring up that came up last night. The manual has come out, but when somebody at the AGM asked if they could view the constitution they were told that the constitution that is provided in manual has been ruled illegal. So effectively there is no constitution. The auditor's report for their books actually highlighted that under the current structure the volunteers are liable. Nobody had an answer for them last night as how they fit under the structure as an association. I would like to see that clarified urgently. What is wrong with the constitution? It is no good to tell them that their constitution is illegal and not have something in place.

**CHAIR:** I am not sure if that is entirely true. After the meeting, could I see you?

**Councillor Ludwig:** I have to go back to the council meeting as well. The new person in charge of that patch said, 'Unfortunately, we have just been told that the constitution does not stand up.' There was no clear direction as to how they as an organisation stood with liability protection. That is of huge concern to me as a community representative.

**CHAIR:** We will certainly come back to you. We have the option to write to you to ask any further questions. We will probably investigate that.

**Councillor Williams:** I represent division 8, which takes in the Koongal area in North Rockhampton which was subject to the bushfire experience last year. That was the major fire front in October last year. My property and Greg's are in that same location. From the community's perspective, I would just like to congratulate both the urban and the rural firefighters. Those people really do not see the day-to-day Rockhampton

operations but they have seen the cooperation that occurred on that weekend. The community did appreciate it. They were talking to me. If we did not have those services there would be loss of life and a loss of properties.

The community would like to see everyone working together. If there is some way that we can overcome that in the future, it would be much appreciated. One thing I would recommend is getting some workshops going for people in urban areas regarding fire prevention and fire reduction around their properties. That would probably go a long way towards minimising the risk in the future. I would like to see that occur.

**Councillor Swadling:** We are fortunate that we do have the dedicated personnel to step forward—men and women. They are at the coalface. They know their communities and know them well. Their relationships are important. It is people in our community that concerns us. We know that there are some people who become disenchanted over a period of time but there is a willingness. If people take this today as it has been told and look forward to where we can go in the future, I think that is the most important thing.

Some significant issues have been raised over time. I feel confident that if these things are channelled in the right direction then nothing is so bad that you cannot achieve it. It is the path forward that is important. It has to be acted upon. It is no good unless it is taken on board and dealt with. Anyone who has put forward a suggestion is on the path forward, provided they are being heard and addressed. People do the service and they expect the same service back. On behalf of my community, thank you very much.

**Councillor O'Brien:** During the fires, ordinary people did extraordinary things. It was amazing. They left their homes, they left their business, they left their families for weeks. It was incredible when you consider the tragedy that we could have had. These special people went out there with no thought for themselves. They are ordinary people who did extraordinary things. They all deserve medals.

**Councillor Mather:** I personally believe that the Queensland fire service officers and the rural brigade volunteers are sincere in their commitment to protecting persons and property. There is definitely a communication gap, as we have heard. I think there is a lack of understanding. It is not a derogatory comment; it is something that the state needs to understand. 'Understand' is the word. They know, they read and they say that something has to be applied, but they do not understand. There are different ways of fighting fires. There are different circumstances. There are different ways that fire attacks. There is a lack of understanding that the crop is as important as the house in a lot of cases.

I represent the area from north of Rockhampton right through beyond Ogmoo back to Shoalwater Bay and down to Byfield. It is a big area. I have been around since 1988. I have had to respond to some angst from the rural people. Not only are there not enough resources when they need them; you have to pluck them out of whatever they are doing and throw them into a situation and everybody else takes their turn at home.

There was a situation where funding to head office was going to occur without any consultation. They were to raise money through the council or through chook raffles and it was to go to head office, and then they would need to make an application for funding for what they needed. Volunteers do not work like that. If they work for something, that is their cash. They want control of that; they need control of that. That is where the state should slip in and support them where they need the resources to do their job. If they do not have the resources to do their job, we are not going to have volunteers and there will be holes in the ground everywhere where these people provide service. The principle of taking their money and putting it into head office—into consolidated revenue—and then giving them back the crumbs when the department feels they need it is not the way to do business with volunteers. You will not have any volunteers. We have proved that.

I have seen over the years that the state puts out legislation saying, 'You are going to do this.' But it never says, 'We will work with you to show you how you are going to do it.' The state is at fault in that regard. That is only the chook raffle side of it.

In more recent times they have been told that their book work is not in order. These people are not academics; they are volunteers. They are at the coalface. This is where the Queensland fire service could say, 'Okay, you guys. You are really not measuring up in terms of the audit reports or your responsibilities so we are going to have a workshop. We are going to show you how to do it.' That is what you should be doing.

These people had to go without their funding. Keppel Sands had to go without their funding. These blokes are out there flogging their guts out to get money. We have to raise those funds on their behalf. They have to go back to their people and say, 'We are going to charge you not \$30 this year but \$50 this year.' They have to justify to their people. For them to say, 'Council is not going to give it to us because the rural fire brigade will not let it go,' that is an embarrassment. I am not surprised if they walk away.

A 20-year-old vehicle up my way was going to be withdrawn a little while back because it was too old. That was the only vehicle that held the capacity of water to fight the fires in the bush. If they were given a little vehicle with a little tank, they would need to run to the nearest waterholes but there aren't any waterholes. They need a tanker with the water capacity to fight fires 50 kilometres from a water supply.

**Mr RICKUSS:** What had it done—30,000 miles?

**Councillor Mather:** I do not know the kilometres, but it was not replaced with a like vehicle. They need a vehicle with a bigger tank to service the rural areas isolated from water. There was a drought. There was no water. The nearest waterhole was probably the standby at The Caves, which is 100 kilometres south. They need a tanker that will service the area. They certainly should have a backup but they need a like vehicle to replace it.

The council, the Queensland fire service and the rural fires—we need all of them. We need this partnership. I would hope that you recommend that we have compulsory joint meetings for a period of time until this communication is consolidated and the understanding is tangible. These people need to know that you understand their needs and the Queensland fire service understands their needs and demonstrate that they understand. I am sure they can understand because they are sincere.

They have been living in one world and the volunteers have been living in another. We have to make them realise that we are in this together. It has been demonstrated. I would hope that you recommend compulsory meetings with the three parties. The follow-through is the most important. That seems to be forgotten in many aspects of administration. If anything falls off the wagon, you go back to square one. I am very passionate, but I like my blokes and girls up there. I want to make sure they have the tools and understanding they need to do the job on our behalf. I am pleased you are here today.

**CHAIR:** I will ask each of the groups if they would like to make a closing statement. John or Neil, do you want to make a closing statement?

**Mr Fisher:** Yes. A lot of the systems that have been put in place over the last three years have been to bring the Rural Fire Service in Queensland into line with systems that are consistent with those in other states in the country. I think there has been a process of change which is challenging to a number of brigades. I am confident that the brigades are capable of recognising those issues. There is obviously a challenge for the organisation to facilitate that.

We have heard today from Rockhampton Regional Council about one particular issue. I would encourage the committee to perhaps ask the Gladstone Regional Council about how they administer funds for rural fire brigades. They utilise the local area finance committee. It is only 50 kilometres down the road. A lot of the issues you have heard here today do not occur in the Gladstone Regional Council because of a formal process through a local area finance committee. It does not apply levies; it applies it through consolidated revenue.

So the processes are in place. Through the consolidation of councils in the last two years, Rocky has had significant issues because of the disparate ways in which funds were administered. That has been a painful process. The organisation is on a very steep learning curve in terms of the change in rural fire brigades. Rural fire brigades are on a very steep learning curve in terms of their responsibilities under the legislation.

The expectations of the community have changed very dramatically in the last few years because of the perceptions that the urban and rural communities have about the role of rural fire brigades particularly and the expectations they have of us. A good example of that is that three years ago we probably spent less than \$5,000 on the use of aircraft in fighting fires. Last year we spent almost a million dollars. With the fundamental change in the technology, the way that we fight fires now is not the way we used to fight fires 10 years ago or even five years ago. Local knowledge and local interaction with new technology and new ways of doing things is a steep learning curve for all of us.

As Councillor Swadling commented, the way forward is the process that we need to commit to. The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service and 95 per cent of the rural brigades are committed to that way forward. That was enhanced by last year's fire emergency in Rocky.

**Mrs Cutler:** The comment with regard to how Gladstone works through finances was interesting. We can follow that up here. I am not sure whether that is one way that we can improve things. Just in Rocky there are 76 rural fire brigades and the administration of that is painful to say the least.

Another issue that I am not sure this committee can take away concerns the new privacy laws. Since the new privacy laws came in on 1 July, we have come across the problem where rural fire brigades are requesting information from the council such as the names and addresses of people within their local area so they can contact them. We are unable to supply that at this point in time under the new privacy laws.

**CHAIR:** It is like a mailing list?

**Mrs Cutler:** Exactly. We are unable to provide that information. I have not found a way around that to get that information to the rural fire brigades.

**CHAIR:** Can I get you to touch base with us after this meeting and we will make some inquiries in that respect?

**Mr Abbotts:** The only comment I would like to add to the councillors' comments and Alicia's comments is that we are currently undertaking a fire management strategy for council. Out of that we will recommend a few policy changes. I guess one of the biggest issues that we are finding, particularly with some of the terrain we are covering now, is that a lot of it is inaccessible terrain and a lot of it is privately owned land. There are a lot of competing interests. The difficulty we are going to have is making those competing interests align—what the property owner wants, what the council wants, what the fire services want and so forth. That is going to be a very big challenge for us.



**Assistant Commissioner Gallant:** I have a couple of very quick points. I will clarify because not everyone might be clear on how the administrative structure differs from the operational structure with the Rural Fire Service. I do not have any part to play and the urban fire service does not have any part to play in the administration of the Rural Fire Service, in the funding arrangements and so forth. John is the highest person within the region for administrative issues.

For operational issues, that is where my position comes in. Whenever an incident is deemed to be at level 2 or above—that is, bigger than just the local brigade attending or a couple of trucks at a grass fire—that falls under my responsibility. The commissioner can also, as he did last year, under a standing order for a particular period of time designate a regional fire commander. He did that for the duration of the wildfire situation in Rockhampton last year. In that respect, all operational incidents are my responsibility. I have full control and responsibility for all resources to bring to bear on a particular issue. So there is a different structure for administration and operations.

John Fisher does not report to me; he reports to Assistant Commissioner Steve Rothwell, who is in charge of the rural fire side of the organisation. That comes together, then, at the commissioner level. I want to make everyone aware of the administration structure and the operational structure and where my responsibilities come in.

I am forced to make a comment on the issue of local knowledge and so forth. From an operational perspective, it is very well understood that nobody knows the local area like the local people, whether they be the landholder or the local rural brigade. Certainly, if the local landholder is available they will be the first person that operationally we will talk to about fire on their property and what their particular issues are. I suppose on the flip side of that, sometimes the local property owner is not aware of the overall big picture of a fire that is impacting on many different locations. If it is just on that person's property, they probably understand only too well the impact. Sometimes communication is needed to explain to the local property holder what the big picture is and why perhaps certain actions are being taken. That is a communication issue.

I will quickly address the issue of structural communication. The deputy chair mentioned the VHF network. Certainly within this region—and I can only speak for this region over the last five years—the attention given to and the improvement in the structure of communications in this region has been second to none. With John, I have devoted a lot of energy to improving the network that covers this region. Part of that has been brought about by the need to improve communications for operational safety in wildfire situations. Part of it has been brought about by the explosion of the mining industry over the last five years in the Central Highlands. I come from this area. In my youth you were lucky to see a cattle truck every hour; now there would be thousands of mine vehicles travelling those roads. We have to provide coverage to that network.

Part of that is changing that network. I fully acknowledge that communication about the communications has not been ideal. I have to defend John in this regard. That was isolated, in this particular instance that you refer to, to the Rural Fire Service. Even within the senior officers of the urban fire service—and I have to put my hand up for that one—that change and the dates when it occurred were not well communicated. We have not got it perfect at this point in time.

I think the relationship with other agencies still requires some work. With the Rockhampton Regional Council, we are certainly putting in place some formal processes to improve that. I think Rose mentioned a few of those. We need to build on that with other local authorities as well, particularly now that there have been a lot of merged local authorities. There are new people within that structure. That is a work in progress. I do not pretend that that is a totally perfect situation at this point in time. Other than that, I am happy to close my comments.

**CHAIR:** Max and Dick, do you have something that you want to tell us?

**Mr Irwin:** One of the major factors that came out of the incidents across the state—there were debriefs held—was that a lot of the volunteers felt that, quite frankly, it was a whitewash. I think what would eliminate those volunteer comments is if the findings of those debriefs were fed back to the brigades, not only at a local level but also at a state level. It is a communication issue again. There is not a continuum of communication.

**CHAIR:** I am not aware of those. Can you talk to us about that later? We might make some further inquiries in that regard.

**Mr Irwin:** There needs to be a continuance of the respect of the skill sets necessary, and online management of fires must be carried out by people with bushfire management skills and local knowledge. The other parts of the organisation are there to provide support, as is expected. It was interesting to hear Neil's comments that they are actually in charge of anything over incident level 2. I have had this discussion before with Lee. They would not ask me to come in and manage a fire in Brisbane. Equally, the management of bushfires needs to be done by people who have the skill sets to do that. The support mechanism is essential from QFRS, but there needs to be a strong understanding.

There are other processes in place but, again, they are not really being listened to. I have been involved with the fire organisation for a long time. Even back in the 2000 fires we had these same debriefs. The same things come out every time—that is, the lack of communication, the lack of respect of local Rockhampton

knowledge and so on. The levy system is a communication issue. They are not dealing with the local people. They are trying to impose things. If they were explained or communicated better, things would probably flow a lot better.

**Miss Hogarth:** I think it has all been said.

**CHAIR:** The time for this forum has well and truly gone. Thank you for your time today. We have found it extremely helpful and extremely useful. We will be in Emerald tomorrow. We have two meetings there. We will then have a very large meeting in Brisbane. Thank you very much. We appreciate your time.

**Committee adjourned at 3.13 pm**