



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

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Mrs C.A. Smith MP

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

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**WEDNESDAY, 25 AUGUST 2010**

**Emerald**

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Committee met at 9.08 am

**FLANIGAN, Mr Michael John, Private capacity**

**LEWIS, Mr Larry Francis, Inspector, Area Director, Rural Operations, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Department of Community Safety**

**MARSHALL, Mayor Cedric John, President, Central Queensland Local Government Association**

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

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

**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 the 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 turned off or switched to 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 all for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper. We will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. I also apologise for our late arrival. There were issues with taxis and the ABC Radio also wanted to have a quick chat. The rural media have been very supportive of this committee. We have had quite a bit of interest. I think that is fantastic. It shows how the rural fire brigades are appreciated out here in the rural areas. Before we begin questions, does anyone have anything further to add about the capacity in which you appear today?

**Mr Flanigan:** I am the emergency coordinator for the Central Highlands Regional Council, although I am representing myself here today. My opinions are personal. I am just moving away from the council side. So I will not be representing their views here today. I am a retired area director inspector of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service both urban and rural.

**CHAIR:** Thanks, Mike. I will ask Ian Rickuss, the deputy chair, to begin the questioning.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Thanks gentlemen for coming along. Alan Johnson is not coming?

**Mr Lewis:** No. Alan is in Rockhampton, sorry.

**Mr RICKUSS:** My question is to the Department of Community Safety. The committee understands that there are four types of brigade classifications: ione, village, rural and primary industry. What are the major types of brigades in your local region?

**Mr Lewis:** Out in this area predominantly we have about 90 per cent of primary producer brigades and 20 small village brigades, ranging from an Aboriginal community in the east at Woorabinda to the rural and remote community in the south-west at Windorah and places like Rolleston, Daringa, Comet and all of those small communities.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you have permanent staff in Emerald?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. It is managed by the urban fire service.

**Mr RICKUSS:** What about Barcaldine? Do they have auxiliaries?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, they have five auxiliary stations west of the range at Barcaldine, Longreach, Winton, Aramac and Alpha. Everything else—all the pastoral lands and the small villages—is managed by rural.

**CHAIR:** Just to clarify, is Emerald a full-time 24/7 station?

**Mr Lewis:** No. It is an auxiliary station but I believe that they are talking about upgrading it to put a permanent officer there.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Can you explain to the committee what are the unique aspects of each type of fire brigade classification? We have a fairly good understanding of the primary producer ones. They have slip-on tanks on the back of their four-wheel drives—that sort of thing. Is there much difference between your village brigades and your auxiliaries?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, certainly. There is a huge difference. We rely heavily on our primary producers. You mentioned the slip-on units. It is great to have that equipment out there. Our main resourcing in rural Queensland is the heavy machinery. We rely heavily on graders and bulldozers, and that equipment is provided by the producers out there free of charge. They do not charge the organisation for the use. They have it there for their own protection as well as for looking after neighbouring country.

The difference is that for primary producer brigades fire takes up about three to five per cent of their normal working life. They join the primary producer brigades for their own protection. They work with their neighbours to mitigate and control unwanted fires in the landscape, whereas the village brigades are set up with an appliance—whether it is a light attack or a medium attack appliance—with centralised equipment which is based in a shed or a station as such. That equipment is provided on a subsidy basis by the Queensland government, the taxpayer. They raise money themselves to buy the gear, whether it is through chook raffles or council contributions. Out here in Western Queensland the local government is very supportive and they actually allocate a budget to help these village brigades meet the 20 per cent shortfall in purchasing equipment.

We also have two ESU units here in the area—one west of the range at Tambo. An ESU is an emergency service unit, which is combined Rural Fire Service and SES. In some cases they have the first responder program, QAS, involved. At Rolleston the council has secured funding to build a \$278,000 structure. All of that money was provided by the federal government and the local government has topped it up.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Is that for shed compound?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, the complex to house all of the equipment—whether it is the fire truck, the flood boat and so on.

**CHAIR:** So it is combined SES and Rural Fire Service.

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. We have two here in the area and they are both working well. I had a request only yesterday to form one in the Barcoo shire in the south-west but I believe that the interest is not there. The government has different priorities and it has gone in another direction.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Like you say, probably the biggest difference from other areas around the state is the fact that a lot of the work is done here by primary producer brigades and a lot of it is with heavy machinery.

**Mr Lewis:** That is right.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do they have a good relationship with smaller brigades in the area? Do they get on fairly well mostly?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, certainly. These people are part of the community. If you take Comet down the road here, half an hour east of town, a lot of those pastoralists, the brigade members, are part of the P&C committee in town or the rodeo committee or whatever. They work together. The local village brigade, which has the medium attack appliance, will go out and help these producers when they are at a fire.

**Ms O'NEILL:** The Auditor-General's report is the reason we are all here. This question is about assessing the needs of the local rural fire brigades. The Auditor-General found that the department does not have a robust and systematic process to identify such things to enable the allocation of resources based on the level of risk and need? How do you figure out what people need?

**Mr Lewis:** There is a rural planning process. If we take the village brigade concept as an example, they will identify what they need. A lot of the funding is sourced not only from their own raffles but through the Gambling Community Benefit Funding, which has been a great help. Also, the RFBAQ, the Rural Fire Brigades Association, has been very supportive of our brigades in helping to meet the shortfall of the equipment needs. So it is mainly with the support of local government, gaming machine and gambling funding—Jupiter's casino funding—and the RFBAQ. They are the main sources of funding outside what the fire service allocates to these brigades.

**Ms O'NEILL:** What kind of information would they provide to you and how would they do that to let you know when to apply for some of those grants, for example?

**Mr Lewis:** It is identified at meetings, at an AGM or biennial meeting, when the brigades sit down and discuss what the needs are, and it is put in the meeting minutes. Or it happens on brigade visits. Say, if I or one of my training officers visit a brigade on a training day and we identify what they could do to pick their level of equipment up as such, then that will be pointed out to them: 'You could probably do with this to make things easier during fire operations.'

**Ms O'NEILL:** So they do not do a plan of what they might need over the next year or so. It is based on that when you go to use it you know it is not there. Is that what happens?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, it is like that in some cases. Take Muttaborra brigade in Western Queensland, for instance. It was a former auxiliary brigade. It went through a transitional process because the population of the town dwindled. So it came across to rural. They elected to still pick up a levy as such which is a rural fire levy. It changed from the state fire service levy to the rural equipment levy. They are still paying that within our community. They submit to me a five-year plan. They have budgeted for station upgrades, fencing, air-conditioning for the training room and the replacement of a pump on an appliance. That level of funding is actually budgeted for.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Who does the applications for the grant funding? Do you have someone who is an expert in your area? Did you get them to do that?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, we handle that at the area office level. Our admin officers are both very proficient at completing the applications. With the new primary producer brigade model—I do not know whether it has been explained to you—we are trying to take a lot of administrative duties off those brigades. People are busy. We do not want to be continually loading them up with all this administration work. So we try to handle a lot of that at office level.

**Mr RICKUSS:** That is complaint that we have heard, that the volunteers are getting too much administrative work that they feel could be done by the office. You are leading the way there, Larry, by the sound of it.

**Ms FARMER:** My question is to the Department of Community Safety. The Auditor-General also found that there was not an appropriate system to monitor the condition and safety of equipment. How does that happen here?

**Mr Lewis:** We have an annual audit process that we have to go through. It has created a lot of work for us. I inherited this area 3½ years ago—they added another six former shires on top of the nine that I was managing out west of the range. We have three operational staff members. It is their duty when they are doing brigade visits to carry out an audit. With the appliances, it is required that the brigades present us with a safety inspection certificate every 12 months. That is not a road worthy certificate; it is a safety certificate. We are exempt from traffic regulation.

**CHAIR:** You are talking about motor vehicles now.

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. The requirement is for the brigades to submit that at least once a year. We have been through the asbestos audits. We have had a consultant out to look at stations that have the old fibro material, asbestos. We are pretty right out here because most of our facilities are sheds as such. They have not got a lot of the older materials in them. We do a safety audit on the equipment and the facilities to make sure that the fire extinguishers are tagged and serviced regularly as per the requirement. First aid kits are kept up to date and so on. As for doing audits on primary producer brigades, it is just too big a task. We cover such a big area. You will find that most producers have their own safety plans in place on their properties anyway.

**CHAIR:** What is the requirement there? Are they supposed to have an annual review of a primary producer's slip-on that has been subsidised by the taxpayers?

**Mr Lewis:** It would be nice to live in a perfect world. They are heavily subsidised. Just recently our management has decided to issue them free to these brigades. We would like to think that if we are giving them to producers they are maintaining them and looking after them. They are not just there for the use of fire. We recommend and encourage them to use them for other things to keep the equipment up to date, whether it is a watering down the cattle yards or washing the sheds down or whatever.

**CHAIR:** What type of equipment are we talking about?

**Mr Lewis:** Slip-on units.

**CHAIR:** Are they 1,000 litres?

**Mr Lewis:** No, they are a 500-litre unit. They are a pump configuration, with a foam proportioner on a skid frame. They are a great little unit. We get a lot of positive feedback. I do not think I have received any negative feedback on that type of plant. It is not only that type of equipment. We also provide other smaller items like drip torches for lighting fires for fire mitigation. They can be a dangerous item with the wrong mix in them or if they are not serviced and have all the fittings loose and so on. So it is important that when the producers get this equipment they maintain it, because at the end of the day we are actually giving it to them at a subsidised rate, so we expect them to look after it.

**Ms FARMER:** Yesterday we heard from some of the rural fire brigades that they were required to get the checks done and submit the certificates and they would bear the cost of that themselves. Is that something people might do here?

**Mr Lewis:** That would have been a village brigade. It would not have been a primary producer brigade that you are referring to. With the village brigades, yes, that is a cost to them. A safety inspection certificate is worth \$80 to \$100 from an authorised dealer, and that is at their expense. With the producer brigades, there is a lot of private equipment out there that is not registered. We would like to think that it is in safe working condition and that it is marked—at least with a rural fire brigade sticker on it—to identify that it is used on the fire ground in a wildfire operation or they are training with it. That is all maintained at the graziers' expense.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Where would you go to get a safety certificate in Muttaborra? Is there a garage in Muttaborra that can issue a safety certificate?

**Mr Lewis:** Definitely not. Unfortunately, this comes at a cost. They have to travel 120 kilometres to Longreach to an authorised inspection station. We do not say when they have to go. They organise it. If a couple of them can travel over and do their shopping while they are in town, so be it. Although for the last inspection certificate—this is where the local government come on board—they have an ex-machinery inspector as their workshop foreman in Aramac and he visited the station and issued the certificate. So they did not have to take it to the workshop which is 80 kilometres away.

**Ms FARMER:** You talked before, Larry, about the equipment that you provide. What other equipment do you allocate from the department?

**Mr Lewis:** In our catalogue there is a variety of equipment, such as pumps and hose kits, first aid kits, drip torches and radios for communication. There are fire blankets, which are for personal fire protection. Within the last 12 months they are reissuing them free to producers with heavy machinery so they can have some level of protection in the cabs of their machines. It goes right through to tags to put on their fuel containers so they can identify what type of fuel is in each of those containers. There is a variety of equipment. Sometimes we get special orders. Western beaters—the old fire beaters—are on the equipment list. There are separate tanks so if a pastoralist or a producer wants a 2,000 litre poly tank, for instance, we will provide them with that. We provide whatever they need. There are special items that the bigger brigades—the ione brigades—may require. For example, they may require a Protek nozzle that is worth \$800. That comes at a cost and that is going to cost them some money as well.

**Mr CRANDON:** You mentioned poly tanks. Are you happy with the poly tanks? Are the users happy with the poly tanks, as opposed to galvanised tanks that perhaps were used in the past?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, Michael. The problem we have here—more so in Western Queensland than in this part of the world—is the lack of people on properties nowadays. So in a lot of cases there is only mum and dad on the place. To handle equipment like the galvanised tanks you referred to, you would need a front-end loader or a fork lift or an overhead gantry to handle that equipment. With a poly tank, you can manhandle it empty and push it on to the back of a station ute as such. Some questions get asked about use out on the fire ground and that they might melt. If anyone is going to be that close to a fire and the poly tank is going to deteriorate because of the radiant heat or whatever, they should not be there.

**CHAIR:** The reason that was brought up was that when we were in Cairns there was some discussion about trash fires. Farmers and producers who tow plastic poly units with tractors were saying that they were getting burnt and they would rather have the gal tanks.

**Mr Lewis:** The other thing you have to take into account is: is that a wildfire situation or is that part of their farm practice and farm management?

**Mr RICKUSS:** It is part of their farm management.

**Mr Lewis:** We are talking about wildfire control.

**Ms FARMER:** Mike, I appreciate your statement about your appearing as an individual this morning. Can you comment on whether the council gets involved in allocating equipment to rural fire brigades?

**Mr Flanigan:** Recently—I am sure you are all aware—there was a conference held at Home Hill, and the LGAQ and the Department of Community Safety signed an MOU, an agreement for closer cooperation. So we have only started to formalise matters in this area. In the past we have given them all the support that they have needed. When they put their hand up and have required council to provide support, we surely have done that. We are working to formalise some of those activities to supply support to the rural fires brigades, given the council also is very involved with the administration of SES, and those emergency outfits work closely together to resolve a situation.

**Ms FARMER:** So that may or may not include equipment but the MOU is still to be rolled out.

**Mr Flanigan:** That is right. We will have to come to the table on that. The equipment side of it is solely the premise of the Rural Fire Service at this particular time. We are there in a support capacity for equipment or operatives.

**CHAIR:** Mike, we were actually unaware of that meeting. How long ago did that take place?

**Mr Flanigan:** Probably about four months ago.

**Mayor Marshall:** It was a conference at Home Hill. It would have been four months ago. It was back in April. That MOU was drawn up between local government and emergency services. Our council equipment has always been available if it is in the area. If there is a fire on the coast, there is equipment on the coast. But if we have equipment 100 kilometres away, it is too far away. Any equipment that the council Emerald

has been available in an emergency. The issue we had was people ordering equipment—who was ordering it and who was going to pay for it? Most of the time it was given freely, but some of it had to be charged out. That is what will be sorted out through this MOU with ES.

**CHAIR:** Cedric, you are a councillor?

**Mayor Marshall:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Mike, are you a councillor?

**Mr Flanigan:** No, I am an employee.

**CHAIR:** I just needed to understand.

**Mrs SMITH:** Larry, I have another question for you, I am sorry. From the submissions we have received and from the hearings that we have had communication seems to be a problem for everybody. I am wondering how you communicate your policies and procedures directly to the rural fire brigades?

**Mr Lewis:** That is done a number of different ways. There is a lot of verbal communication. We send out newsletters. There is also the service bulletin that comes out. There is the *Smoke Signals* magazine that comes out from RFBAQ. If we are having a training day I will use the media—the Western Queensland ABC and the local radio stations in Emerald and Longreach—to make that known. Because we are covering such a big area it is important that we try to get out to as many people as possible to notify them of what is happening. We try to get producers together for an information day. There is an issue. We put notices in the newspapers but you will always have a number of people who do not read the newspapers and do not listen to the radio.

**CHAIR:** Tell us about it.

**Mr Lewis:** We also use other technology such as computers. People can bring up web pages that have all the rural fire information on them. We send out all our notices to our fire wardens. For instance, the high fire danger period starts as of the 29th of this month so we have sent notices about this out to all the fire wardens. There may be one or two who have missed out but we try to get it to them somehow. But you never get everyone, unfortunately. There will always be someone who misses out. That is the communication to the brigades. What about communication on the fire ground?

**Ms O'NEILL:** How does that work?

**Mr Lewis:** It works quite well in this area. We have grey areas where a repeater does not cover. I would like to think we are getting a fair bit more cover. During major fire operations—and Springsure would be the good example; we have a few people here today who were mixed up with those fires—when you have aircraft water bombing and people on the fire ground there is a bit of confusion between different radio frequencies. Generally, I think we get the word out all right in the rural areas.

Some of the western districts do not have any links with Firecom in the central region. So we rely on the local property networks. If they have using UHF CB radios, that is what we operate on. There is network of CB repeaters across most of the area and we will try to link into them as well.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So you use UHF and VHF?

**Mr Lewis:** VHF more so this side of the range than on the west. They are closing that network down in Rocky.

**Mr RICKUSS:** The UHF one?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. With the fires that I have been involved in over here we have not had too many problems.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I am curious to hear what the gentleman from the councils think. Do the council grader operators operate on UHF or VHF?

**Mayor Marshall:** The councils have their own frequency. Most of our gangs have UHF. There is an issue in our area, particularly in the coastal area, with coverage, particularly mobile phone coverage. You only have a certain distance that you can use UHF between vehicles. There is a huge black spot along our coastal area when it comes to communication when there are wildfires in the mountain country.

**CHAIR:** Which is your council?

**Mayor Marshall:** I am mayor of the Isaac Regional Council.

**Mr Lewis:** That is up in Moranbah.

**Mayor Marshall:** We have 100 kilometres of coastline and we go out towards Alpha. Our boundary is the Belyando River. We come down to near Comet.

**Mr RICKUSS:** What is your feeling, Mike?

**Mr Flanigan:** As you would probably realise, the Central Highlands covers a vast area of 60,000 square kilometres. We have our definite black spot. Communications with our staff out in remote areas is a high priority for us. We are concerned about their wellbeing and safety. We cannot rely on just radio coverage alone. We have to take a step in another direction.

A recent initiative was the issue of a personalised unit that the operators in remote areas can carry. We can check on their wellbeing at any time of the day or night. They can communicate with the council through a series of codes. Code 1 is that they are doing okay. Code 2 is they have a problem. They might have a breakdown but they are not in any serious trouble. Code 3 is send help because they are in trouble because something has gone wrong or they have a medical.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Is it a beeper type system?

**Mr Flanigan:** It is pretty much like that. That is a backup in areas where we do not have radios. We are currently working with other organisations to try to ramp up our communications right across the Central Highlands Regional Council area. We are trying to alleviate this situation by putting more modern gear in which is not cheap. We are moving to put funding submissions into the next round of the NDRA program for upgrading our communications across the region.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Are you going to VHF or UHF?

**Mr Flanigan:** The technology that is out there now is VHF. The gear that is being put in front of us is very high-tech from the states. We are looking at it closely. It is very expensive gear.

**Mr RICKUSS:** VHF is a bit more separate, is it not? With UHF anyone can get onto it.

**Mr Flanigan:** This is more user friendly. We do not have to worry about anyone coming in on top when we are trying to organise an event or manage a significant event or just have our own communications within council.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So it is a bit more personalised?

**Mr Flanigan:** The local cement truck is not coming in on top of you.

**Mrs SMITH:** Dick, would you like to comment on the issues between your association and the department? How does the communication work or does not work?

**Mr Irwin:** In relation to association.

**Mrs SMITH:** The RFBs?

**Mr Irwin:** The association is there mainly to supplement some of the areas between the Rural Fire Service and volunteers. Our main aim is to try to ensure that they are fully informed of any changes. We endeavour to be a nexus between the volunteers and the fire service. The association is based on strong chains of command. We encourage the brigades to follow their own chain of command first. If there are any difficulties then they can come back through the association. Having said that, it does not mean to say that we just let them sit out there. If we see that may be a problem then we certainly provide as much information as we can.

We provide supplementary information, just as Larry is saying, through email. We have had a great deal of difficulty in recent times due to the privacy laws. It has made it very difficult for people to communicate. We understand that. We naturally encourage the brigades and the brigade volunteers to provide us with their information directly and then we can transfer information on.

I will comment quickly on a couple of points that Larry raised in terms of the supply of blankets, slip-on units et cetera. Don Alexander, the association's representative in the Barcaldine area, has been a great driver of these safety issues, especially in rural areas. The blankets that are currently being supplied are very substandard. It is causing a great deal of concern. We have been raising this with the organisation. These blankets are critical for protection. A lot of the appliances that are used and that Larry has been referring to are graders and/or dozers. Sometimes they are not enclosed. Sometimes you may have to get outside the vehicle and your only protection outside are the fire blankets which are provided. The standard of blanket provided now is half the standard of the blanket that has been provided previously. That is about eight seconds that you could survive outside. That is not a lot of time.

The other issue relates to slip-ons which are really critical in this area. Larry touched on the point that the Rural Fire Service is now providing the slip-ons at no cost. But there is a catch to that. They have reduced the number of units that are available to the primary producers. That is causing a lot of concern in the area. Up until this point the association has been providing a 50 per cent subsidy for those slip-on units. The organisation is now saying that it will only provide X number and it will provide them free. That limits the availability of those units across the state. That puts a further pressure on the volunteer out there.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Would the association feel that they were better off with double the opportunities at a 50 per cent subsidy?

**Mr Irwin:** Absolutely. The landholders are more than happy to contribute, as they have done in the past, because that gives them some ownership and responsibility as far as management is concerned too.

**CHAIR:** If it is 100 per cent it would seem to me that there is an opportunity for people to abuse that situation which then creates a problem for other people to try to obtain one. It seems odd to me.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Larry, would most of the primary producers be happy with fifty-fifty?

**Mr Lewis:** Over the last couple of years they were subsidised up to 80 per cent. Don Alexander was very proactive in making that happen. I do not know whether I would agree with saying that the producers will take advantage of that. There is an ownership problem.

I have a limited budget to work with. I have to be seen to be fair. I am trying to resource 187 primary producers brigades. If you put four into one area it is hard to encourage the people who miss out. As it is station based equipment it is actually on properties. It is not centrally based in a shed out on farmland, for instance. Getting people to share the resource is hard. They think so and so has one over the fence so why can they not have one. You have to explain that it is a brigade resource and it is there for the use of all the brigade not just the person who has actually got it on their place.

It does cause a little bit of angst when the requisitions are coming across your desk like confetti. You may be trying to set someone up in the south-west or over in Duaringa. We have to be seen to be fair.

**Mr Irwin:** We need to be fairer across the whole organisation. As you go closer to the coast—and Larry was talking about the village type brigades—the subsidy for an appliances is 80 per cent. It could be anything up to \$80,000. A fire is a fire is a fire. It still has to be managed. So the amount of contribution towards a slip-on unit is minuscule in comparison. The benefits that it can have to a community or an area are really important.

I certainly understand Larry's problem as far as his own budget is concerned. From a whole state point of view there should be greater funds allocated to those primary producer brigades. As I said, they talk about equity, but there needs to be balance between the landholder in the bush and also in the city.

**CHAIR:** Larry, am I right in thinking that these things are available free of charge Queensland-wide or is this how you do it here?

**Mr Lewis:** No, it is actually the policy for the state. You will find that they are looking at rural Queensland now. At one time a brigade in the south-east corner could apply for a mop-up unit. I believe they are looking at our rural areas more. They are allocating this equipment—

**CHAIR:** A mop-up unit being a—

**Mr Lewis:** The firefighting plant. They are looking at the Romas of the world and here, the Barcaldine and the Cloncurry areas. They are concentrating the flow out this way. I do not know what it is like down around Maryborough, Dick.

**Mr Irwin:** The association is encouraging a lot of the brigades in the coastal areas that did have those pieces of equipment to provide them back to the association. Naturally, we have to get permission from the fire service and then we are revamping them and then sending them out to western areas. They are just sitting around. We are covering the cost of getting them up to speed.

**CHAIR:** So in some situations there might have been a couple of slip-ons but now that a new light or medium attack vehicle has been bought the slip-ons are put to the back of the shed and they sit there?

**Mr Irwin:** We are doing the sort of thing that I mentioned.

**CHAIR:** We were given a piece of correspondence related to radio frequencies in Rockhampton yesterday. I am just trying to understand. Maybe it is a typography issue. It stated—

As of the end of July the entire QFRS VHF repeater network connected to Fire Com have all now been disengaged ... Brigades are advised that the Fire Com network is now QFRS UHF channels only.

So they are UHF on the coast and VHF has been turned off. Did you say before you have UHF here and not VHF?

**Mr Lewis:** There is commercial UHF and the 40 channel station that the truckies and caravaners use. That has nothing to do with the QFRS UHF system over on the coast. That works out here.

**CHAIR:** I do not think anyone understood that.

**Mr Lewis:** It is correct that VHF is being decommissioned. They are just going to concentrate on the commercial UHF—the QFRS frequencies. That is what our brigades work on with the urban trucks in and around these areas. They can communicate with Firecom.

**Mayor Marshall:** I will make a point of clarification. The system the truckies use only only works for a distance of probably 10 or 15 kilometres. The other UHFs—like those we have in our council equipment—can travel 25 or 30 kilometres. It depends on how many transmitters you have situated in your area. That is the difference we are talking here, is it not?

**Mr Lewis:** Commercial radios have up to 200 channels. So you actually dedicate different channels to an organisation, for instance. I think the VHF they decommissioned was the forestry and national parks ones.

**Mayor Marshall:** They are the radios that can go virtually all over Australia. You have a big aerial on your car. That is a different system again.

**Mr Irwin:** The UHF frequency is a closed frequency within Emergency Services. No-one else can access those areas. The radios that are provided by the fire service allow the ability to go into the CB channels so that there is communication between the farmers and the primary producers who are just using CB radios and things of that nature. That is very beneficial. The association has provided some support to a number of UHF repeaters in these areas instead of further north to endeavour to improve the communications between landholders and the closed circuitry of Emergency Services.



**CHAIR:** Mike, I did not get a response out of you. What is your view on the UHF and VHF?

**Mr Flanigan:** I will give you my experience from my former career. I was on the coast. South-East Queensland was my zone—the Gold Coast, Brisbane and south-west Queensland. The rural brigades that I managed down there were all on the VHF Firecom Brisbane or Toowoomba systems. There were no real issues in that zone with communications from a fire point of view. In fact there were very good communications right throughout that whole zone. Up here it is a different story of course. I do not have any experience up in the Central Queensland area with communications from the fire service point of view.

Having said that, the brigades down there are quite different. I am sure as you move through your inquiry that you will find an extremely vast difference between the way brigades operate here and down in the south-east corner. The intensity and the passion down there is the same as up here, but they have a lot more issues to deal with down there with the ever-expanding zones—that is, population expansion. Where the urban fire service cannot meet those demands there is responsibility for covering whole communities with very limited equipment. That is coming up for you guys I guess.

**Mr CRANDON:** Larry, we had 60-odd submissions. A number of them identified conflicts between urban and rural brigades both in respect of funding and call-outs to interface zones. Is that an issue in this area?

**Mr Lewis:** No, we have very good working relationship with the urban service. There may be a few problems in Firecom when they take this information. For a particular fire or call-out there may be a bit of confusion. It does not cause any angst. We welcome them with open arms if they are going to help us. As I mentioned earlier, the number of people in rural Queensland is dwindling. We certainly have to have them on board to help us. We had them over at the great fires at Springsure last year. They brought firefighters in from Blackwater, Emerald and Capella to assist. They specialise in structural fire fighting, hazchem spills and swift water rescue. We do not want to be involved in that type of rescue.

**Mr CRANDON:** You are talking about them coming and giving you a hand. Do you ever have to go and give them a hand?

**Mr Lewis:** From time to time we do. That is especially the case in the urban fringe around town. They will request to have the producer equipment come for a grass fire. They will hand it over. As soon as those primary producer brigade members arrive on scene they will hand it over. They will walk away.

**Mr CRANDON:** What about the cost associated with any of this? Is there any money going backwards and forwards to cover costs—that is, where the urbans have called you in and you have borne a cost? Is there anything happening there?

**Mr Lewis:** They do offer to fill the vehicles up. For the brigades that have a light or a medium attack appliance and have come to one of their fires to assist they will fill their vehicle up and send them home. But it is not done for primary producers vehicles or anything like that.

**Mr RICKUSS:** The mines have some pretty talented blokes who are pretty well trained on fires. Do they come out to assist you as well?

**Mr Lewis:** They certainly do. I will make special mention of this. Last year for the Springsure fire—and I keep mentioning it—they sent three machines and a semi water tanker. Those machines are probably the biggest Caterpillar 16G graders you can buy. They are a grader tractor as wide as this hall. We had those on the fire ground for at least three days. They worked through the night. They sent a fitter with them. If they broke down the fitter was on hand to keep the machine going. That was free of charge to the service. They were terrific. They want to be part of the community as well. That was their contribution towards that fire. That is only one case. They will respond. They have specialised equipment on mine sites that they will send off those leases to assist primary producers.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Is there any formal set-up with them or do you just know one of the foremen and you give him a call to see what they can do?

**Mr Lewis:** Firecom will actually call them if it is requested. We have formed some relationships with them. We have worked in partnership with some of these mining companies. They have people in mines rescue who are only too willing to get out and do something different off the lease.

In saying that, I will reinforce the support that local government gives us. They always have equipment available. At the end of the day, I know that someone has to pay for it. That has to be sorted out. I am pleased that the MOU which Michael and Cedric referred to was signed. That question is raised at a lot of disaster management meetings across the area. If the equipment is readily available—you do not want to be floating machinery for miles to a fire—and someone can justify using it, because we do not like throwing gear at the fires where it is not necessary, then we do. With the producer model, it is important that primary producer brigades utilise all of their equipment that is readily available before they go looking for outside assistance with heavy plant hire and so on.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you want to comment on the question, Cedric?

**Mayor Marshall:** Council has a very good working relationship with all of our mines that access the main highways. Some of the mining companies have acquired second-hand red vehicles. They came to us and said, 'Listen we have this set-up.' Actually one came from Innisfail. As you know, a lot of fuel is carted on our highways. They offered this service to us if it was ever required. When it comes to grass fires the mines are very receptive to helping.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I have a question to the whole panel. Do you attend many road accidents out here? Larry, do you get called to many road accidents?

**Mr Lewis:** The Rural Fire Service does not, but the urban service from Emerald and Blackwater go to a terrible lot of accidents. They often call on our people to assist if they need someone to preserve the scene and to help them out.

**Mr CRANDON:** Is that assistance easily taken up? Is there ever any argy-bargy? Is there any conflict there?

**Mr Lewis:** I am not saying that there is any conflict but sometimes we cannot turn anyone out. There is a bad stretch around Duaringa on the Mount Flora Beef Road, where all these miners come to grief. At times we cannot provide assistance because our volunteers are working. Their key role is to protect their community, so they are not going to leave the community short to send a truck out on the highway. We get called from time to time. I do not think there are any issues with that.

**Mr Flanigan:** With the Rural Fire Service, they are volunteers and their portfolio, as Larry has been talking about, is not road accident rescue. That is the urban fire service's area of responsibility. However, we talked a little earlier about ESU units and the one at Rolleston. ESU, as I said before, is a combination of the SES, the Rural Fire Service and Queensland ambulance first responders. The SES unit we have there are qualified in road accident rescue and keep their competency levels up as required. We have an SES unit at Rolleston who are utilised frequently for road accident rescue, freeing trapped people with the rescue equipment.

When I was in the south-west with the auxiliary fire services that I managed, even though they were the primary road accident rescue response, they were still part-time people. They were not full-time professional rescue operatives. I had staff there who were uncomfortable with doing the actual cutting out. Even though they were part of the urban fire service, some of them still had reservations about doing that. So there was a management issue there.

**CHAIR:** Reservations in what respect?

**Mr Flanigan:** Reservations with cutting dead bodies out of cars.

**CHAIR:** So it was an emotional response.

**Mr Flanigan:** Yes, absolutely. They are auxiliaries and not full-time, honed for the nitty-gritty stuff. Sure, someone has to do it. But these are wives who have been called away from the house to help with a horrific accident and they say, 'I'm not happy about doing that,' so we put them up with the truck looking after the pump or looking after the communications or we give them something else to do away from than scene. With the rural people, they are not exposed to that whatsoever. Sure, they will assist at a scene and help the police manage the scene. We get the SES in to help with traffic management. It is an all-of-agency operation to resolve it. But with the volleys and the rural side, no.

**Mayor Marshall:** Our rural fire people normally only get involved in fires on the highways when there is a wheel bearing collapse, not so much in accidents. Because of the distance between our towns, if a semitrailer has a blow-out or a wheel bearing collapses and a fire starts, that is when our rural fire guys get involved. In the mining industry, all of the fires and the SES are mining workers. There is no issue with the mines supporting them. They are all volunteers when it comes to the fire brigades in the community and the SES. That is another reason the mines get so involved. It is their employees who are involved, whether they are off work or at work. It is a great service we have in our area.

**Mr Lewis:** Following on from what Mike was saying about the SES units having a road crash rescue role in some of the rural areas, I have discussed with Firecom—that is in Rockhampton—that they do not seem to have the SES units on the call-out list. They will always respond with a red fire truck, an urban fire truck, for road crash rescue at Rolleston, for instance, or at Jundah or Isisford and places like that before they start ringing the SES groups. In those more rural and remote areas, I think it is important to note that they should have those SES units down as a first response to get people out there because some of those trucks are travelling 200 and 300 kilometres in some areas.

**CHAIR:** How do you address that?

**Mr Lewis:** I have been discussing that with Firecom and they are working on a project, but they do not seem to have those contacts within the system as yet. It is something that I can work out with them. But there are different models. There are different models in rural and remote. It is fair enough here in Emerald because it has a red truck that can respond. But in those places you are in isolated areas.

**CHAIR:** Who is your local MP here?

**Mr Lewis:** Vaughan Johnson.

**CHAIR:** I think you need to have a meeting with Vaughan Johnson.

**Mr Lewis:** I speak with Vaughan regularly. That is not a problem. I did not want to take it to that level.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Just get in his ear though. As MPs, unless we hear about these sorts of things, we do not realise that it is not happening. So have a talk to Vaughan—and I will mention it to Vaughan, too. It is probably a process that Firecom on the coast has not tweaked to because it is not such an issue.

**Mr Lewis:** That is right. You might only have one vehicle accident in every 16 or 18 months. But it may save someone's life at the end of the day.

**CHAIR:** That is right. If it is a matter of someone not communicating correctly, I am sure Vaughan would be happy to take that forward. It is probably something a little bit outside this committee's responsibility. But just touch base with Vaughan.

**Mr Flanigan:** Talking about Rolleston, the ESU down there have a very close relationship with the QPS in that area. It is a very close relationship. If the police get a call to a situation down there, the second call the senior constable makes, after telling police communications that he is going, is to the ESU to be alerted.

**CHAIR:** What is your suggestion, Mike? This sounds like it is a Firecom issue that has stuck a stumbling block.

**Mr Flanigan:** Larry is on it. That is for sure.

**CHAIR:** I see people shaking their heads at the back there. We can talk about this afterwards. I do not want to get lost in the heat of all of this. What is the impact of urban encroachment on rural fire services? This is probably more of an issue for our coastal people. But obviously there is urban encroachment out here into rural areas. Has that had any immediate impact on any of your fire services so far and how you do your job out here?

**Mr Lewis:** It has not had a great change. Emerald is a growing township, as you know, and the likes of Moranbah, where Cedric is, has an izone area as well. It is probably going into some of the rural areas, but most of the rural area around Emerald as such is farming land, so there is a lot of cultivation. I do not see any problems with it.

**CHAIR:** What about the council?

**Mayor Marshall:** No.

**CHAIR:** Councils and rural fire brigades are working pretty well in that respect?

**Mayor Marshall:** Yes, we have a good working relationship.

**CHAIR:** What about the moving of the borders between urban and rural? We have struck problems particularly on the coast and even in my area in South-East Queensland where urban brigades move their line out a bit further and take over some areas that were previously covered by rurals. Is that a matter that worries anybody out here?

**Mayor Marshall:** I am not sure of the hierarchy as to who is in charge when that happens. There has been some angst a couple of times. It is not major. The rural guys have the knowledge when it comes to major grass fires and big fires. The urban guys are more for house fires.

**CHAIR:** Structural.

**Mayor Marshall:** The big issue we have at the moment—and this is the first time it has ever happened in Dysart and Middelmount—is that fires have just come and burnt around the town.

**Mr Lewis:** The perimeter.

**Mayor Marshall:** They burnt the perimeter of the town. In previous years the urban fire brigade guys used to get in some practice at night and come and burn sections. But that was taken away and they were not allowed to do that. Then there was an issue with the issuing of permits. Council is now responsible for the issuing of permits to burn around the town. It is state government land and the fire permit was never issued by local government. We have an issue with that.

**CHAIR:** Is that still up in the air?

**Mayor Marshall:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Does anyone have any comments on that?

**Mr Lewis:** I cannot comment on that, Wayne. I am not familiar with what is going on in that part of the world.

**CHAIR:** It is a different area director.

**Mr Lewis:** Yes.

**Mr Flanigan:** There is only one person who can issue a fire permit, and that is the fire warden. The council cannot do that.

**Mr Lewis:** But the permit that Cedric is referring to is local government.

**CHAIR:** That is not what I am hearing here though.

**Mayor Marshall:** This is in the town area, yes. These are new changes to legislation just in the last 12 months.

**Mr Lewis:** The local fire warden would be the officer in charge of the fire station.

**Mayor Marshall:** They are all volunteers. They work for the mines. There is no permanent.

**Mr Lewis:** No, but it would be an auxiliary officer.

**Mayor Marshall:** We spoke to them and they said, 'No, not any more.'

**Mr Lewis:** I will have to check that out.

**CHAIR:** Can you check on that, Larry? We are not aware of that either. As far as we are aware, it is fire wardens only.

**Mr Lewis:** The captain of those stations is the designated fire warden. I cannot see what the issue is.

**Mayor Marshall:** There might be a misunderstanding there somewhere.

**CHAIR:** Hopefully they are not telling you porky pies.

**Mayor Marshall:** That is right.

**CHAIR:** That is a dangerous issue to be involved in.

**Mayor Marshall:** It is, yes.

**Mr Lewis:** There is a local government permit. I know they have one here, Mike. To burn council controlled land, you have to go through local government to get their permission before you proceed to the next step to go to the local fire warden. Where there is some confusion there between the local government permit and—

**Mayor Marshall:** Not when it comes to burning around towns. We want that done every year, because there is fuel out there so high at the moment. At the moment they are burning around the towns of Middlesbrough and Dysart, because we could have some issues there if this fuel was not burnt.

**CHAIR:** Did you want to comment on the urban encroachment into rural areas?

**Mr Flanagan:** Yes, I can comment on that. Being a former inspector at Ipswich and Caboolture, I was right upfront involved with the movement of the izone into the Jimboomba area. Jimboomba was an isolated rural community and the urban sprawl from the Gold Coast and Brisbane and beyond took over the Jimboomba area. We had to manage the upgrading of the fire service responsible for protecting those communities from the rural brigade to the urbans. The rural brigade there is a very, very proactive brigade, just like Samford—Samford is another issue. We had to have lots of community meetings and consultations because the agenda was to pull the doors down on the yellow trucks and the next day roll the doors up on red trucks. They were very emotional times for me and other people who had to manage that situation.

The end result was that the rural firefighters were going to have their skills upgraded to auxiliary firefighter level—breathing apparatus training and aggressive internal structural firefighting. Some were happy about it; some were not because they were then given the responsibility of turning out to fire alarms at the shopping centres. It was a whole new world for them. Some liked it; a lot did not. They said, 'We have a block of land down the road. We're going to start a new shed down the road and we'll keep going by ourselves. We don't like what is happening here.' They were very volatile times.

The izone expansion from the Gold Coast and Brisbane caused lots of problems. There are still areas where there are rural fire brigades, and you will find this in further meetings. The Bonogin Valley, Mudgeeraba and Tallebudgera Valley still have rural fire brigades covering highly populated areas, with expensive homes and industrial areas that have volatile activities. Those areas are still relying on the Rural Fire Service to provide protection. If there is a fire at Dreamworld, for instance, the first fire engine you are going to get through the front gates is the Wasp Creek Rural Fire Brigade. They are the closest and they will respond quick smart. It is a rural fire brigade turning through the gates first to Dreamworld.

**Mr Irwin:** There have been some changes in that regard. There were quite a large number of rural brigades in that Gold Coast-Ipswich area that trained and had the ability to do aggressive structural firefighting. So they had breathing apparatus. In recent times that has been withdrawn, so they do not have the ability to do that anymore. That role is falling heavily back towards the urban area. That in itself has caused some angst with the rural brigades in some of those areas. They are feeling as though they have been pushed out of those areas. Again, because of the limitations or the reductions in the urban call-out abilities in comparison to the number of rural brigades in that area that can respond often more readily or fairly quickly, that is causing some concern for them in their community. They are no longer responding to those fires. They are being questioned by the community, 'Why didn't you come? Why didn't you turn up?' So there is some angst in the other direction now. They had that ability and now they do not have that anymore.

**CHAIR:** Is it possible for them to coexist? For instance, I have the small town of Marburg near my home. We have an auxiliary station there and less than one kilometre away we have the Marburg rurals, and then we have another one over the hill and then another one over the hill a couple of kilometres from there. Is it possible to coexist?

**Mr Irwin:** The association is currently discussing the possibility of having another level of brigade. We had a series of brigade classifications—primary producer class 1, class 2, class 3 and a transitional brigade or it used to be called a class 4—which was like a transitional brigade between a rural brigade and an auxiliary brigade. Especially in the Gold Coast-Ipswich expansion area, we are saying that rurals are still required because of the topography and the types of vehicles that they have.

When an urban brigade comes into an area because there is expansion in that area, the rurals tend to be pushed to one side. If an urban station is put there, the available response is very limited unless it is a 24/7 station, and there are not too many of those in those sorts of areas. They tend to be only eight-hour stations, whereas the volunteer brigades in those areas up until the urbans came in have operated 24/7. We are saying that there is an option for those sorts of brigades, subject to the volunteers who want to do that. I can name a couple—Woodhill and Greenbank brigades are extremely active and want to be involved.

So it is another level that I believe the organisation should look at to help supplement the provision of service to the growing expansion in that area. Marburg could be one of those brigades also. It really is dependent on the volunteers being able to provide the time to meet the level of training that is critical to meet the standards that are going to be expected of them—for example, if they are going to have breathing apparatus.

**CHAIR:** Still as a volunteer though.

**Mr Irwin:** That is right. But there are still volunteers out there who want to do that and who are prepared to do that and who are prepared to give the time. The organisation should give strong consideration to that as far as the provision of service is concerned.

**Mr Flanigan:** I know that Director-General Jim McGowan's passion is to have more co-location, combining the emergency services through the Department of Community Safety. He is very focused on having everybody part of the one organisation. I know Marburg very well. In fact, I opened up the rural fire shed there when I was inspector. At the time the comment was made, 'You've got a fire station down the road and you've got a new one up here and another one over there. That is wasting public money. You have a shed here and a shed there. You have to pay rates on that one and electricity and telephone.' They went on and on.

**CHAIR:** They all want two vehicles.

**Mr Flanigan:** It was a ludicrous situation that has continued. I know that Jim McGowan is anxious for everyone to get in the one shed, if they can. The ESU is a model that I think you will see more of down the track. Just in relation to what was said before about the rural brigades doing aggressive internal structural firefighting using breathing apparatus, most of that came about by former mismanagement of the districts by the inspectors at the time—there is one in particular, but I will not name names.

Woodhill, Greenbank and Russell Island, as examples, had a number of rateable properties—we will probably talk about this later on on another issue—and they accumulated vast amounts of public money and they did not know what to do with it. So they said, 'We will go and buy breathing apparatus,' off their own bat without authority from the commissioner of the fire service. They fitted themselves out with the firefighting gear, the breathing apparatus, and they stuck it in their shed or on their trucks. But guess what? There was not any structured training and there was not any structured maintenance of that very vital equipment.

When I took over, I was aghast to find all of this gear sitting on the trucks that could be used by firefighters that was way out of test date. There was no maintenance and they had not had any training whatsoever in those operations. Guess what? The gear disappeared. I took it off the trucks and put it into Roma Street, and it is still hanging on the pegs there. That was how that came about. They had too much money and they were left to spend it in any way they wanted without any management.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Leading on from that, what is the role of fire wardens in the local area? Do you have fire wardens in the area?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. I have about 197 positions on the books. I am probably short of about 12 or 13 at the moment because of the transition of people moving away from the area. It does place a bit of responsibility on those people who take on those roles, but it is important. It is our bread and butter in this part of the world. Those people on the ground are my eyes and ears. I could not handle fire management of this region without them. The area is too large. There is different topography, land types and so on. We rely heavily on local knowledge. These people have been brought up in those local areas. They know the land and manage their country well and they know the fire behaviour within those areas.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Normally are they older, experienced locals from the area?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. We have an ageing population. I suppose that is the case in most areas. There are some younger people stepping up.

**Mr RICKUSS:** There is nothing wrong with a bit of grey hair.

**Mr Lewis:** No, definitely not. We are all growing older. I certainly respect the people who take these roles on. They are respected within their communities. That is why they have been given that position. They have been nominated for the role, and I will certainly support that nomination when it comes across my desk. You have probably been informed that just recently they have done away with the chief fire warden network across the state—that is, the former clerk of the courts and the government agents—

**CHAIR:** Police sergeants.

**Mr Lewis:** And the officers in charge of small police stations. That position now is occupied by me as an inspector for the area. So I have a better handle on what is happening within my area. I certainly rely on my training officer who is not here today, Alan Johnson. He lives here in Emerald and can handle things while I am out west. So it takes a bit of that workload off me. Our permit system is probably the best permit system in Australia. It is the only government permit that is free these days.

**CHAIR:** At the moment.

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, at the moment.

**Mr RICKUSS:** One of the suggestions that the committee received was that fire wardens should be able to identify hazards and commence action to eliminate that risk. Do you encourage your fire wardens to talk to landholders around the place if they feel there is a fire risk? Is that a role outside their scope?

**Mr Lewis:** It depends on the situation. Fire is a third party at times and we get very involved in investigations and arbitrating between landowners. There might be different industries involved—for example, between a grain farmer and a cattleman who has had country locked up for a couple of years and he pulls scrub and he is ready to burn when the grain is ready to come off. We get tied up in those types of situations. Yes, I do encourage them. But if it is going to be a hot topic, if they are going to fall out with their neighbours, that is when I encourage them to come back to the inspector to try to sort that situation out.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So you feel that the role of the local fire warden is to have a bit of common sense.

**Mr Lewis:** For sure. It all comes back to communication at the end of the day—speaking with people. A large problem that we have is that we have a huge body of fuel across Western Queensland and the highlands and you could count the number of places that have breaks in place probably on one hand. I came in over the Territory border the other day right through to Barcaldine and probably only a half a dozen places have put breaks in. That is unfortunate for those neighbours if a fire does happen to go off their country into neighbouring pastoral country. There will be some losses sustained, whether it is assets, infrastructure or stock losses. I am out there. That is part of our role to get out there and encourage people to do the right thing by their neighbours and to liaise with the wardens.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Cedric, do you have a comment about fire wardens? You would deal with the local fire wardens pretty well, wouldn't you? The council would have a pretty good relationships with local fire wardens.

**Mayor Marshall:** We do not have a lot to do with them. We get along with all of our guys fairly well. I do not know whether this is the right session to raise this, but our issue is with emergency call-outs. The issue we need addressing—and I do not know how we are going to do it—is when our rural fire brigades get an emergency call-out but they could be 200 kilometres from where the particular fire is. They need to be educated on where the rural fire areas are.

**Mr RICKUSS:** That is coming from Firecom.

**Mayor Marshall:** The Peak Downs Highway has up to 4,000 people a day travelling on it. It is day and night traffic. Someone will get a call from Firecom to say that there is a fire at X, Y, Z. Someone has called the emergency number and then Firecom will call a rural fire brigade somewhere. They could be 150 kilometres from where the fire is. They do not know the numbers to call. I do not know how that can be addressed. That is an issue we have out there. These calls could be at two or three o'clock in the morning and they could be 200 kilometres away and they have to try to explain to the person on the other end of the phone that they are nowhere near it.

**Mr Lewis:** I would be happy to respond to that. It is an issue. The information that they are gathering at Firecom is not always correct. The people reporting the fires could be a tourist from Victoria or New South Wales. They have not taken a lot of notice of the mileage signage on the road. They could be giving the operator the wrong information. We cannot blame the operator for this, but they are not always gathering the correct information. They have all the contacts. They are not ringing the fire warden as such. They are ringing the rural fire brigade, whether it is a primary producer brigade or a village brigade. They will ring from the first officer through to the fourth or fifth officer and so on. The secretary is on that call-out as well.

I have received calls of this nature. You have to be able to read the weather as well. It could be in the middle of winter when it is probably three degrees in the morning and someone has reported a fire. In that situation they should just leave it—it will burn itself out under those conditions. It is horses for courses. If it is a 40 or 50 degree day with 20- to 40-kilometre an hour winds blowing, certainly it is a problem. But it is not a problem in winter at that hour of the morning. It is an issue. The problem we have is that people are educated now from a young age to ring 000 if a fire is left unattended. My predecessor went chasing a fire up towards Belyando Crossing. They drove up there because they could not get anyone. There must have been something on in Charters Towers. They never found the fire. Whether it was someone playing games, I do not know.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Just back to the Central Queensland Local Government Association, do you believe the rural fire brigades should be involved in mitigating fire danger or is it council's responsibility? If you see a block overgrown on the outskirts of town—we were talking about burning off around the town. Do you think that the rural fire brigades should be more involved than the council?

**Mayor Marshall:** Possibly in some cases, yes. Most of the time around the towns it is handled fairly well by the urban brigade. We are open to any suggestions for help anywhere when it comes to rural fires. Some of those places are 40,000 to 50,000 acres. They are not so close to town, as you state in the question. We will accept help from anyone within the rural fire brigade when it comes to those issues. Larry mentioned the lack of fire breaks out west. Our blokes luckily are a bit more proactive out our way and there are fire breaks both sides of the fences now. Any help we can receive from any of the rural fire brigades we are quite happy to accept.

**Mr Flanigan:** I know that that is true with our own council. We are proactive in working with all agencies to protect the community and the infrastructure in those communities. We are taking proactive activities right now to do just that with the looming bushfire season—putting fire breaks in and undergoing slow burn activities. The landholders are doing their own activities. I am out in the region frequently and I see that the landholders are very conscious of the oncoming season and they are putting fire breaks in along their property and all sorts of mitigation activities to resolve that. Council has also been involved in some of those activities.

While we are talking about this, I have brought this bushfire brochure along. In Western Australia, for instance—this is the Geraldton council—they are very on the pace about how people should step up to the mark. It is first and final notice about whether you have done your fire preparedness programs yet. They must do their fire breaks and vacant residential land must be slashed by a certain date. If not, they will come around and drag you out. So they are right on it.

**CHAIR:** Can we get a copy of that please?

**Mr Flanigan:** Certainly.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Max, how do you feel the fire warden role is working? Do you feel that it is working well? Do you feel that there are any improvements that could be made?

**Mr Rogers:** The fire warden system is working quite well. I believe that the fire wardens generally are very experienced. Unfortunately we have an ageing population, so they are senior members of the community. They know their local community. They are capable of making a judgement as to whether or not it is advisable to issue a permit. I think it is working quite well. I do see that there is probably going to be an increase in their workload with the result of the recent issuing of an edict about 29 August to 2 January. But that is a matter of the public being educated. It is a matter of communicating adequately to the public. I see the system working quite well.

**Mr Flanigan:** While we are talking about the fire wardens, I believe that in relation to any restructuring we should also consider their time. Time is money. Although they volunteer and have been volunteers in the past, I think consideration should be given to some form of gratuity type payment to the fire wardens for their time to administer all of this. We take these people for granted. They do it for nothing. They would probably refuse the money anyway, but at least it could be offered as a gesture.

**CHAIR:** How would it be done? On the number of permits?

**Mr Flanigan:** That is a matter for discussion I guess.

**Mr RICKUSS:** There was some discussion at other meetings about whether the permit structure could be improved a bit in respect of the form and where the person signs the form. You might be able to talk on this, Larry. The person who gets the permit—

**CHAIR:** Before you answer, it is past the time we are supposed to have a coffee. Can we come back to that in a minute? I would like to hold this session over. We will adjourn for a short break.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.33 am to 10.51 am**

**CHAIR:** We will resume the committee meeting. Larry, I think you were going to respond to a question.

**Mr RICKUSS:** What was it about, Larry?

**Mr Lewis:** It was about urban encroachment in the izone areas. It has not caused too many problems here. I understand what is going on in other areas of the state, especially along the coastal strip where some brigades have ownership of their patch and next minute you have a red fire truck running around. I actually offered my urban colleague Steve more because I have too much to look after now. He can have as much as he wants.

**Mr RICKUSS:** He said he is keen to take on a bit more.

**Mr Lewis:** It does not pose a problem out there.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Where there is urban encroachment and the boundaries have to change—and I know you tried to give away some of your area—do you negotiate those changes? Does that happen officially enough?

**Mr Lewis:** It actually involves a very thick document. It was only six or eight months ago Steve put in a proposal and we went through that consultative process. I think it was in the Clermont area. We actually both sign off on it. We communicate with the brigades involved. If there is any negative feedback I pass that on and that becomes part of the document when it is submitted.

**Ms O'NEILL:** You probably talked about this before, but what is the mix of urban rural and fire brigades in your area?

**Mr Lewis:** The urban brigades look after the areas where they collect the state fire service levy—the bigger townships.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Is that the majority?

**Mr Lewis:** No, it is a small percentage. The larger populated areas in our area are Blackwater, Emerald, Springsure, Clermont, Longreach and Barcaldine.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Is Barky in your area?

**Mr Lewis:** Barky is part of the urban levied area that the urban service looks after. Everything outside those urban areas is the responsibility of rural operations. The urban service look after the roads and vehicle accidents. That is all part of their responsibility. All the pastoral brigades and primary producer areas come under rural operations.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Does anyone else want to comment on the way that the boundaries are negotiated?

**Mr Flanigan:** Part of the consultation process with communities is working out a response time for the urban station to the newly defined areas. It is all very well for an urban fire service to provide an emergency response into a new area but we have to work out how long it is going to take for those vehicles to get there. There are methods to work out how long it is going to take a crew to respond to a particular incident. That is all part of the factoring.

**Mr Irwin:** The boundary issues are very dependent on the area director of rural and the area directors urban. It has failed miserably in many areas of the state. It is causing a major concern in many of the areas. It is something that is really close to my heart because I put a procedure together back in about 2001 to ensure that there was a good process followed. Up until recent times that has been adhered to really well. There have been some major failings in many other areas of the state, including Marburg and the Gold Coast where there has been very poor communication. Max Rogers and I had a meeting with Lee Johnson last week concerning this. Even he admitted that there have been some major failings in that area. It is not as though there is not due process in place but, again, it is a communication issue.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Up in my area they have actually gone to 14 minute response time for the urbans. Is that the situation across the state? I can see some nodding. The problem with response times is places where the red trucks just cannot get in. There are gazetted roads that are not made. Even off some of the highways there are big embankments. That is creating some angst amongst my rural community. They feel as though they are losing the levy for these areas, but the red trucks will not be able to fight the fires there anyway.

**Mr Irwin:** As far as the management or business case is concerned, that is a part of the process. If rural brigades are going to be disadvantaged then they need to ensure that there is adequate funding if a joint service delivery requirement is still expected. The actual point that you are raising, Ian, is very much the case—that is, there has been urban expansion but the need for rural appliances is still there due to the topography and the land types. Urban crews may be able to reach a point in 14 minutes but they may not be able to get past that point once a fire expands.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Did you want to make a comment on that, Cedric?

**Mayor Marshall:** No.

**Mr Flanigan:** I know that some urban brigades down in the south-east corner have identified that very fact and to assist the rural brigades have changed their vehicle configuration by having larger trucks with four-wheel drive capacity to reach some of those places.

**Mr RICKUSS:** They just took it away.

**Mr Flanigan:** Okay.

**Ms FARMER:** My question is to you, Larry. We are obviously talking about a volunteer workforce. One of the things that the Auditor-General raised was the impacts on the volunteer workforce and how we actually keep it going at the capacity that it is now. I have had some interesting conversations with people this morning about some of the pressures. Do you get involved in recruitment drives or how do you look after the volunteer workforce to make sure it does not decline too much?

**Mr Lewis:** In different areas the recruitment and the keeping of volunteers changes. I had a case yesterday. I have a village brigade that has become inactive because everyone works out of town—that is, they work at the mines or on large cattle stations or whatever. They have their names on the books but they do not spend a lot of time within these communities.

We are going to have an open day. We will bring all the equipment into the town and send out invitations to the grazing community and others. You will find that most volunteers in the traditional rural and remote communities are not only involved in rural fires but also involved in the SES, the first responder program or could be the president of the Campdraft Association or the P&C at the local school. They are spreading themselves very thin.

Unless there is an incentive it is hard. We have spoken about tax incentives, especially in these isolated areas. We do not have a lot of trouble in communities like Rolleston because we have a pretty permanent workforce. But then again they are required to work away. You just have to do what you can with what you have.



A major issue early in the piece—people are accepting it now—was getting a criminal history check to become a member. At one time rural fires would recruit anyone and everyone because we were pretty thin on the ground. It is not as though the people who are refusing to have criminal history checks have a criminal history by any means; it is just the extra administration required that is causing problems. It is a national requirement. To be member of Red Cross or Meals on Wheels I think you have to have a criminal history check done.

There is some of the angst amongst some of our people. They want to become a member so you put a folder in front of them and then they have to go through all the system. I am open to any suggestions to get volunteers to come on board because it is getting difficult. It is a getting to be a problem.

**CHAIR:** I am not sure I understood your point about criminal history checks. Are you against them?

**Mr Lewis:** I am certainly not against them. Some of the people are criminals, too.

**CHAIR:** Maybe one of the reasons they shy away from filling out the form is that they have a dubious criminal record.

**Mr Lewis:** That is the situation from the other side of the fence. That is what we find with people who are coming to us to become members. As I mentioned, it was a simple process. Someone would come to a brigade meeting, they would see the secretary, they would sign them up as a member and they would be on the books the following day. As soon as that information hit our area office we would put them in the system. Now it is a lengthy process. It might take from a month to five or six weeks and sometimes longer to get the letter back. The volunteer will receive a letter from the organisation to say that they have been accepted as a member. Then they go to the brigade with the letter to make the application. That is the case for the producer brigades as well. That is not just the situation for the village and izone brigades.

The other thing is the transient nature of our grazing community. They may have blocks of dirt in the gulf or down around Roma. If they want to transfer their membership from Western Queensland to the Roma area up or to the gulf area they have to go through that process again. They are in the system and are a registered member of a rural fire brigade but they have to go through the process again.

**Ms FARMER:** That is ridiculous.

**Mr Flanigan:** The same is the case with the ESU at Rolleston. We have a person who is a rural fire brigade member and wants to become an SES member. Guess what? They have to do another criminal history check.

**Mr RICKUSS:** If he wants a blue card he has to do another one.

**Ms FARMER:** Going back to the volunteers, the open day sounds like a pretty good initiative. You have identified a bit of a risk with volunteers so you have come up with something and you are getting involved. You might think of another area where perhaps the volunteers are getting a bit older. So you have in your head areas that may need a bit of attention and where you may need to be a bit more proactive. Do you collect any kind of statistics or data on where you might be at risk with your volunteers or is it just something you know because you are working your area?

**Mr Lewis:** I can understand what you are saying but it is such a changing environment. People go and work for the western shires and sign up as members but they may only last six or 12 months and then they are gone so we are back where we started. The issue is keeping them interested. Some of these communities might only have one fire every 12 to 14 months. We train them up like soldiers. It is like training a soldier to go to war and you do not send them. They get a little bit peeved off.

There is lots happening within their communities. To even run a training event in these communities we have to collect the community events calendar for at least a 12-month period and try to work out when would be the best time to capture them and get them all accredited for training. Training is a huge issue, as you know. For instance, I selected a date—and I did not think it would be such a big issue in the far west—and then it clashed with a bronco branding event in Tibooburra in New South Wales which was not on the calendar. So all the members are down bronco branding. In these areas we work with the brigades. They come up with a day that suits them.

On this side of the range we have a lot of miners. I suppose a lot of agencies suffer this problem as well. They are working seven days on and seven days off or four on and four off. So you only get half the members along to a training event.

The organisation is promoting the recruitment of volunteers. It is on the internet—and I know that not everyone gets onto computers. It is in the newspapers. We have to make it attractive. I do not know what the answer is. The last thing we want to do is actually pay people because it takes the local spirit away. People like being part of a volunteer organisation.

**Ms FARMER:** Cedric, would you like to comment on volunteers?

**Mayor Marshall:** I really cannot make any comment on that.

**Ms O'NEILL:** When you advertise or promote volunteers do you actually say what they will be required to do or do you take it as read that people would know? One of the things that I found is that people do not put their hand up because they are not sure what they will be asked to do or how often or what the commitment is. I found out that I could join the SES and I thought that I was way too old and too fat to do that. I was surprised that they have a job for everyone.

**Mr Lewis:** That is the same for rural fires. There is active and inactive memberships. We would expect the active members to be operational and out at the coalface. Others are in a support role to assist those operational people, whether it is manning a radio or driving a truck with a bit of water as a mother ship tanker to fill the smaller trucks or whatever. They do not have to be on the fire ground as such.

**Ms O'NEILL:** And that is clear in your advertising?

**Mr Lewis:** I think there is enough material out there on that. There may be some grey areas there. If a person shows interest in joining a rural fire brigade you would think they have a general idea what they are joining for. It has been identified that we have an ageing population. Over this way we have members who are over 80 years of age who are still on the books, which is great. They are valuable members. They are passing on their skills to the younger members.

**Ms FARMER:** One of the things that was raised with me during the morning tea break was about paperwork. You have talked about the criminal history check when people are applying. Do you think there is too much of a bureaucratic burden on volunteers?

**Mr Lewis:** There may be. It is horses for courses again. I would like to think that we are taking that out at area office level. Out here at Rubyvale we have a shed which belongs to the Gemfields Rural Fire Brigade. They have an office and they have their own web page. The secretary has taken upon herself to be at the shed from 8 o'clock in the morning until midday. That is their decision. I thought it would be something that you could run from home, but they have the time to do that.

I know what it is like on the coastal strip because I have worked in those areas. Some people live and breathe fire. Out here it is just part of your normal working life. If it has to be done, you will do it. Some of the fire wardens might think that they have a little bit more responsibility with the new legislation regarding permits for smaller fires. Unfortunately, that is a burden being put on us because of past fire seasons and the findings of the royal commission into the Victorian fires. It is unfortunate that 170-odd people perished. We have to step up to the plate and fall into line with all the other fire agencies across the country. It does not mean it is right. It is different landscape.

**Mrs SMITH:** I would like to ask either Dick or Max whether the association has done any sort of analysis on the make-up of rural fire brigades? If you have, could you share any of those results?

**Mr Irwin:** As I raised a little while ago, the privacy laws have created some issues for us. We are doing that. It is certainly of great concern. The Rural Fire Service has done that. In the latest rural fires bulletin they have put out some statistics on age groups. Of course, that is pretty concerning. We have noticed a bit of a shift in their graph. We are really concerned about the ageing population. We are trying to encourage more gen Ys to join.

In some areas that is received very well. As Larry and others have said, it is about keeping people occupied. It is all very well joining a brigade, but if you have nothing to do or you do the same old thing day after day or week after week people get bored. Volunteers vote with their feet. If you cannot keep them occupied sufficiently you lose them—and that was the concern I raised before about Greenbank and similar brigades. Their membership is based on the activities of the brigade. If there are no activities then they will go and find them elsewhere. They are people who want to give and be involved. It really does have to be interesting.

I know that is out of whack with areas like this where, as Larry said, only about three per cent of their working life is fire related. So it is really only a very small percentage. Larry also made the comment about people he has seen in the south-east areas where they just live and breathe it. It is their hobby. It is their pastime. They do not go and play golf; they are involved in rural fire brigades. That is extremely commendable, but it is important that we keep that moving. It is probably not as glamorous as surf-lifesaving. It is pretty hot and hard work. This is not a reflection on any other emergency services, but people do not go and fight fires for sport. When you look at all the other areas that involve swimming or swiftwater rescue or abseiling, people do those things for sport, but not many people go and fight fires for sport. It really is a different situation.

It is a problem that the association is endeavouring to have input into to ensure that there is greater encouragement for people and to make it interesting and to create benefits. As Larry was saying, people volunteer. They do not want to be paid to do those tasks, but I think people are looking for rewards of some sort—whether it is recognition, whether it is providing benefits in being able to purchase equipment or things of that nature—to encourage them to be a part of an organisation. I think we do that on a day-to-day basis. We fly with one particular company because we might get benefits for doing so. I think the organisation needs to look at those sorts of things when it comes to volunteering. Our Premier says that she wants to increase the number of volunteers by 50 per cent over the next period of time. The onus should not just be on the individual bodies to have to do this; government has to do something as well.

**Mr CRANDON:** Mike, are you aware of how many rural fire brigades there are in the Central Highlands Regional Council area?

**Mr Flanigan:** No, I do not have that figure.

**Mr CRANDON:** Is it possible to get that from you at some time?

**Mr Flanigan:** Sure. That comes under the rural fire inspectors zone, of course. He administers those.

**Mr CRANDON:** Do you look at it from a regional council area?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes.

**Mr CRANDON:** What do you see, Mike, as the major challenges for the rural fire brigades in the area?

**Mr Flanigan:** It is the same with other emergency services—I used the SES as an example and, as Mary-Anne was saying before, she was not aware of what she could do within those services. You can talk about websites and promotions and publicity of what you can do. But, as Larry said before, the ageing population is happening nation-wide. It is not happening world-wide. It is a situation where people are growing older and younger people are not stepping up. There was a population shift from the rural zones to the coast. They would take their membership with them and the skills are gone and not replaced. It is an issue right across the board for all organisations to provide the numbers and provide the services.

I am very heavily involved with SES administration. They have very good information flow to the community about how to be a member and what is involved. They promote very strongly that you do not have to be climbing on roofs and doing tarping. As Larry said before, you can help with stores, administration, first aid—things of that nature. You can still be a volunteer and be a member on the books and doing the community service that you yourself wish to provide, but you do not have to step up to the mark and do the actual operations.

**Mr CRANDON:** So the major challenge is numbers?

**Mr Flanigan:** Always.

**Mr CRANDON:** Larry, you would agree with that?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, definitely. The different communities that we deal with, from mining to pastoral, have different models and different challenges.

**Mr CRANDON:** I was talking to Dick and Max over morning tea about a couple of things and I want to run them by you. Earlier we touched on the idea that there is a cap to the number of slip-on units being made available around the state. I think the number is 50. I would imagine that is for a year. They are being subsidised to 100 per cent. I asked the question, and I want to get your views on this from your own perspective: would you see an issue with the association providing an equivalent number of units—in other words, doubling the number of units that you could have available in your area? Would you see an issue with that? Is there some conflict there?

**Mr Lewis:** No, definitely not. I would welcome that.

**Mr CRANDON:** You would be falling over yourself with joy.

**Mr Lewis:** If they wanted to give us another 50, we will take them. I can understand that Dick and his team have probably met with our commissioner and had discussions on it. I do not know what the outcomes were. If they are prepared to help our people, I would certainly support it.

**Mr CRANDON:** The reason for the question—and I wanted to hear from your perspective as an area director—is that the outcome is that they cannot get the equipment to match the numbers that you are putting into the area or indeed into other areas. It sounds like it is this red tape issue again. I just wanted to know from your perspective whether it was an issue or whether that was your feedback to the central organisation or whether it is the central organisation that is blocking it.

**Mr Lewis:** I would say that it is certainly head office. We feed back to our management all the time on it. We have budget constraints, but it is great that the RFBAQ want to help out. We will accept that help at this level. I do not know what they want to do at head office. Just on the slip-on matter—and Max may touch on this—we have had sponsorship in recent times not only from the RFBAQ but from Reliance Petroleum. They have provided 20 units or \$100,000. This is their second year they have come to the party.

**Mr CRANDON:** The units are \$5,000 each, are they?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes, they are about \$5,500. The service is bundling the package up with a speed loader unit. That is the frame to sit the unit on. They are providing that at taxpayers' cost.

**Mr CRANDON:** If these guys were able to get into bed with Reliance Petroleum, from your perspective—I am just talking about your perspective—would that be an issue for you?

**Mr Lewis:** No, certainly not. I do not have a problem with it. We were very fortunate that we got five of those 20 units in both the Central Highlands and Western Queensland. That is not a bad slice of the cake when they have to be spread around the state.

**Mr CRANDON:** You did well.

**Mr Lewis:** We did pretty well. I was actually on the selection committee too, I might add.

**Mr CRANDON:** It is not what you know; it is who you know! Thank you.

**CHAIR:** One of the issues in the submissions is to do with the subsidised equipment list. We touched on that briefly just before. It has been raised in many submissions. It has also been raised in many of our hearings. What are your views in relation to the current list? Do you think it is adequate? If not, what can be done to improve it?

**Mr Lewis:** They have taken some of the smaller items off such as hose fittings—Camlock couplings—which is a big issue. I know that was done at head office level for the simple reason that a lot of our producers use those types of fittings on their properties—whether they are using them on their spray equipment or pumping water for stock. A lot of the larger items are still there.

**CHAIR:** Why did they take off the small ones? Is it because people could be asking for them and using them for other purposes?

**Mr Lewis:** No. I do not think it is that. They think that they are readily available through their agents—whether they shop through Elders or Dalgety or Wesfarmers or Landmark. A lot of the items they were holding down in the warehouse. They had to reduce the warehouse because a great tunnel went in under the main office, I believe. I have not been there. They reduced the number of items that they are holding at central stores. They have cut back. For any special items I just have to do a submission. If someone comes up with an item that is not on that list, I will try to push it through for them.

**Mr RICKUSS:** What is your success rate?

**Mr Lewis:** It has not been too bad. Another item they cut back on was cutting edges on grader blades. I know Don got that put on in the north some years back. They have done away with these subsidies. They have done away with subsidies on chainsaws. Chainsaws are another area. We are providing training on them. We are not putting the numbers through that we would like to. They are a dangerous item. Unless you are accredited, we look at training and accreditation. We do not expect our volunteers to grab a saw and use it without any type of training. I know a lot of pastoralists and primary producer brigades have been through the school of hard knocks and used saws to build yards and fencing.

**CHAIR:** Going back to the list, though, we have heard criticism that the list used to be that thick but now it is this thick. I have asked for a copy of it, so we are going to have a look at it ourselves. Has it reduced in the number of items available in recent times?

**Mr Lewis:** It has.

**CHAIR:** How hard is it to keep that list up to date? For instance, we have also heard that people have applied for something on the list but three months later are told that that is no longer available. Do you find it is responsive?

**Mr Lewis:** We get a few inquiries. Out this way people are more accepting. They get the catalogue and the price list and say, 'Oh, well. That's it.' They are happy with the subsidies. It would probably be nice to have a stores list as thick as your hand, but a lot of it has to do with costing and budgets. For those special items—and it is great that RFBAQ have come on board—they will help with the application process. They will look at it and help these brigades out.

**CHAIR:** You do not think there are any complaints in your area in relation to the scheme or the list?

**Mr Lewis:** No.

**CHAIR:** Do you want to comment, Dick or Max? This is not what I am hearing elsewhere.

**Mr Rogers:** The list has diminished, as Larry says. The reason given for those Camlock fittings being taken off was that it was just as economically viable to get them locally. As Larry says, with the stores carrying all of these different fittings, they took up space. A number of the items that are still there are the larger items. Drip torches and hoses—those types of things—are still on the list. But certainly a number of items have diminished. I cannot recall the number. But you are quite right that it has diminished from that thick to this thick.

**CHAIR:** Have you heard any complaints from any of your members in relation to the list?

**Mr Rogers:** Certainly there have been comments about it, such as 'You can't get that anymore.' So far as overcoming those problems is concerned, generally the brigade can purchase those items from the local supplier.

**CHAIR:** And still receive the subsidy?

**Mr Rogers:** No. You only get the subsidy when you go through the area director and it goes down to Kedron. When you go and purchase those goods at your local hardware store or wherever you can obtain them, you pay full retail price.

**CHAIR:** Mike, do you have anything to say in relation to that?

**Mr Flanigan:** Yes, I do. I know that it is government policy for emergency services to try to resource their supplies from local businesses to support businesses in rural and remote locations. So I do believe that we should encourage that right across the board to maintain the brigades' capability to respond and provide the services. If they can be subsidised once they have purchased and supported local business, that would keep the doors open, and the brigades do not miss out either by having some sort of reimbursement coming through to them.

**CHAIR:** Cedric, you are not involved in this?

**Mayor Marshall:** No, not in that sort of thing.

**Mr RICKUSS:** This is a question I have just remembered. I have got my long-term memory back. It is a question about fire permits, and I will direct it to you first, Max. A comment was made in relation to the fire permits that are issued that the form is not appropriate. There is no place to get the person to sign it and they do not have to contact anyone if they are going to light a fire—all that sort of thing. Do you think the fire permit itself could be revamped?

**Mr Rogers:** First of all, they are required to fill out an application for a fire permit, notifying neighbours et cetera and sign, giving all sorts of conditions that they are going to implement and what equipment they are going to have before they are issued with the permit.

**Mr RICKUSS:** But the actual permit itself does not have much on it.

**Mr Rogers:** It does not. That is true. The other aspect of the permit—and I know some fire wardens have managed to overcome this—is that the address of where the fire is to occur is not the address of the person who is applying for the permit. They can be an absent owner or whatever. So there is a need for that provision to be on the permit.

**Mr RICKUSS:** So the fire permit needs to be revamped.

**Mr Rogers:** I would suggest that it would be a very good idea.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Would you agree with that, Dick?

**Mr Irwin:** Yes. Progress on this started nearly five years ago. There were some major suggestions for the revamping of the actual permit form, highlighting a couple of those areas that Max raised. A lot of areas just show portion numbers or lot numbers, which give no resemblance at all to the fixed address of where the fire will occur, which again can add to the confusion for Firecom if a fire is reported in. It may in actual fact be a permitted fire but brigades are activated accordingly. That is one of the things that Firecom faces. When they receive a 000 call they have to respond. They cannot just ignore it. Even in the situation that Larry raised, where it might be three degrees in the middle of winter, Firecom cannot make that call. It really must fall back to the local area.

But there are a whole lot of areas on the permit that need to be addressed. There are some difficulties involved in that. There are certain legislative requirements even now on the existing form where, for a condition to apply, the warden must write it on the permit. Even though there is a section on the permit that says, 'The permit must be in the hand of the permittee,' it is not actually a legal condition because it has not been brought in under the legislation. The only way for that to apply is for the warden to make it a written condition on the permit. So there are quite a number of areas that need reviewing. Unfortunately, that does not seem to have been done in the last process.

**Mr RICKUSS:** What about you, Larry? Would you like to comment on that?

**Mr Lewis:** There are a few shortfalls there, but you have to keep these things simple. We do not want to make them too involved. The people out there are doing a great job. They are doing it on a volunteer basis. We do not want them writing the Gettysburg address either when they are filling out a permit.

**CHAIR:** The issues of an address make very much common sense to me.

**Mr Flanigan:** The fire warden, as we all know, is a respected member of the community. He is a man with a level head and he knows everybody—he knows the newcomers and the people who are suspect. He knows the city-ites who have moved out to the bush, the hobby farmers and the long-term landholders who know their business and know their patch. If an old mate said, 'I'm going to do some burning off next weekend, Harry. Just write me up a permit please and either post it to me or drop it in the box and the next time I'm in town I'll pick it up,' by this time the fire is well and truly finished. Requiring the person who is applying for the permit to sign for the permit makes the procedures a little more onerous.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I can understand that here more so. Probably in the izone areas it becomes a real issue. Unfortunately, they are starting to get areas where the fire warden would not know everyone. Even here, the population has gone from 8,000 to 12,000 in a matter of five to 10 years. There would be a lot of people on the outskirts here, I would imagine, that the fire wardens would not know as well as they think they do.

**Mayor Marshall:** That is a bit of an issue. The further out you get, the bigger the blocks, of course. It means that the blokes have to drive to the fire warden to get the permit in his hand, whereas before they could call and ask, 'Can you write us out a permit?' and the fire is done and dusted before the bloke even gets the permit.

**Mr Lewis:** People wait for the right window to light up and they want the permit at a moment's notice. Unfortunately, you should be able to plan your fires out a bit better than that. Minimum notice would be 48 hours. Some of these areas that Cedric referred to are a bit isolated but there are other means of getting a copy of the permit to the permittee rather than physically driving over and giving it to him over the fence. You can scan the document. You can fax it.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Admittedly, when generation Y are our age it will not be an issue, because they will just push a button.

**Mr Lewis:** That is right. The application is on the Rural Fire Service web page now.

**CHAIR:** I was going to ask if it was available electronically.

**Mr Lewis:** You can download it. You do not have to ring the fire warden to get a copy of the application.

**Mr Irwin:** It is really important that the fire warden is protected from litigation in that regard. Again, the application for a permit is an important factor. If the permit is not signed by the applicant—and that may be too difficult—it is important that there is protection for the fire warden, because the onus really does fall back on the permittee. There certainly have been a number of challenges where there have been insufficient conditions placed on a permit by a fire warden. We want to make sure that the role of a fire warden does not become too onerous and then people walk away from those positions.

**Mr RICKUSS:** It is good business practice not to make things too onerous. Phone calls now are recorded on most phone bills. If someone keeps a phone diary, as a fire warden, that may be a way around some of those issues.

**Mr Irwin:** Having said that, it is important also that the fire warden has the skills and knowledge to ensure that there are adequate conditions placed on the permit for the protection of his neighbours as well. That is what the permit system does. It protects the permittee from any litigation as long as he follows the conditions on the permit.

**Ms O'NEILL:** Larry, the issue of funding has been a major cause of angst in a lot of submissions. Can you clarify for me how the funding arrangements work in this area?

**Mr Lewis:** Our village brigades, for instance, raise money through public raffles. Some people will give them a cheque for doing a mitigation burn around their property. They will pay them \$50 or \$60 or whatever it is worth. But we are currently working with the Central Highlands Regional Council to introduce a rural equipment levy. That has been thrown around for a while now. It was highlighted on the gem fields where they were building a shed and trying to buy equipment. Under the old shire structure before the amalgamation, Emerald shire would give the gem fields, Willows and Anakie, \$3,000 each year from revenue, from ratepayers' funds, for the brigade operations. These brigades grew and that amount of money was absorbed. The mayor at the time said, 'If you want more money, just make another submission,' and they would top it up.

I addressed the council on the rural equipment levy. You have to understand what the gem fields are like. There are probably some people out there who do not pay rates. It was going to be a dog's breakfast collecting the rates. But now they can see the importance of it. In their next budget they think they will bring in a rural equipment levy. That is just in this regional council area, unlike the other regional council areas in Western Queensland where those local governments contribute to the brigade operations. They do not collect a rural equipment levy. It is just money out of the general rates.

**Ms FARMER:** My question is to you again, Larry. It is about training. You mentioned a couple of times about the training you provide. Do you provide the training in this area? If so, do you provide the practical training as well? How does that work here?

**Mr Lewis:** I do become involved in training but I have two other officers. I have an area training officer in Alan Johnson, who is not here with us today, and a brigade training and support officer in Carol Wrage, who is based in Barcaldine with me. We offer the training. We go out and we do hands-on training with the brigades. I know they have training on the web now, so you can do the training sitting at a computer. We provide all the training courses from FMS, which is the base level firefighting, through to assisting our urban colleagues at a road crash rescue. Another one that has declined in the past is to do with a linkstick de-energiser, which is a stick used for pulling a fuse out of a pole. We have linksticks in the rural and remote communities. We have not got them in closely settled villages like Comet, because Ergon Energy is on hand within half an hour.

**Ms FARMER:** For the purposes of *Hansard*, what is a linkstick?

**Mr Lewis:** It is an electrical de-energiser. It is for those specialised brigades where Ergon Energy is not readily available to respond to pull the power. If one of our brigades responds to a structural fire and there is an overhead power line going to the fascia of a building and it collapses, it is still alive and it puts our people at risk on the ground.

Dick and Max's organisation has helped us buy these linksticks. They are a thousand dollars. Now we have to provide the training. You need to be a specialist trainer with an electrical background. We have to get someone in. Ergon were providing the training but now they have withdrawn from training outside organisations.

As for hazmat training—that is not the full course that Steve provides to his people—people are trained to assist. It is important because there are more and more dangerous goods going through these areas to the mines. Trucks are tipping over and so on. We will provide as much training as people want. There will be a fire warden workshop here on Saturday.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Up in North Queensland they have games where the rural and auxiliaries get together and have a competition. Do you have those in the central region?

**Mr Lewis:** In the central region we have an exercise called Exercise Capricornia. That is designed for the village brigades with specialised trucks. It is not so much advertised amongst our primary producer brigades but they are more than welcome to come along if they want to participate.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do the urbans participate in those too?

**Mr Lewis:** The auxiliaries did at Yeppoon last year. This year it was in Emerald. The auxiliaries helped us, but they did not put a side in.

**Mr RICKUSS:** They did not want you to show them up?

**Mr Lewis:** That is probably right.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Do you find that sort of thing useful? Your people would enjoy that sort of stuff, wouldn't they?

**Mr Lewis:** For sure. It actually gave the coastal brigades a chance to come out here and look at this part of the world. It provides communication between us and them. We see what they are doing along the coast. They build up relationships. It is certainly great for them.

**Ms FARMER:** Just on training specifically, does the department provide training on the administration tasks that the rural fire brigades have to carry out?

**Mr Lewis:** Not as such. We have the brigade manual. My administration person out in Barcaldine has training accreditation. She has done a certificate IV.

**Ms FARMER:** She will help them out?

**Mr Lewis:** Yes. I encourage our administration staff from the area office to visit these brigades and work through things with the secretaries and treasurers. Because it is such a large area we do not get to reach everyone, but the offer is there. If secretaries want to drop into our offices we will help them out.

**CHAIR:** I am going to pull up very soon, but what I will do is give you an opportunity to make a closing statement or submission so we can come away with what rural fires mean to you. Is there anything that you want this committee to take away? We will start with Cedric.

**Mayor Marshall:** The funding of our rural fire brigade is an issue. On the coast we have the rural fire levy, which is given to the fire guys, but there never seems to be enough money. That goes towards maintenance of vehicles and so forth. There is a shortage of vehicles in our area. Our rural fire brigades use a lot of machinery on their properties. I do not know whether this is an issue for this committee, but who do we need to speak to about boundary changes?

**Mr Lewis:** The area director.

**CHAIR:** That is probably an operational matter, but I am interested in that. Are you saying that that needs to be reviewed more regularly?

**Mayor Marshall:** Someone sits in Brisbane and draws up an area. They look at a map and say that there is a road when it may be a stock route. There may be a road reserved but it may not have been developed. Some of those things we need to address.

**CHAIR:** I would like to think that those things would be dealt very quickly once it is brought to someone's attention.

**Mayor Marshall:** Unfortunately, volunteers are a dying breed. They are issues we have in the larger rural areas. Because of the boom in the mining industry it has taken people from everywhere. The council is 80-odd workers short.

**Mr RICKUSS:** But you only have 40 per cent of the money, though?

**Mayor Marshall:** We can get into enough trouble raising rates. Trying to get volunteers is an issue. The rural area has been cleaned out of workers. It is a challenge.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Larry, do you have some closing comments?

**Mr Lewis:** I have an issue with staffing. I was acting in Rockhampton for a couple of months before I went on leave. My offsider stepped up and did my job. We have not got the staffing levels to backfill jobs. It would be nice to have an extra person in the area because I am running from pillar to post, the same as Alan.

I do not know what the answer is. I do not know whether you have been addressed on the rural enhancement package where they have increased staffing levels across the state. But they reduced numbers in rural areas to do that. Out in Barcaldine where I am based I lost a training officer and they took the inspectors position from here. So I manage both areas.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Did they go to Rocky or somewhere?

**Mr Lewis:** No, they opened an office in Caloundra. They are busy areas; do not get me wrong.

**CHAIR:** That is what I am trying to identify. Are they doing that because they believe there is more risk there and it can be handled better there?

**Mr Lewis:** It was—

**Mr Irwin:** Money and numbers.

**Mr Lewis:** Then they closed the Cloncurry area office. So rural Queensland suffered because of it. I know that position from Cloncurry ended up somewhere on the coastal strip.

**CHAIR:** Interesting.

**Mr Irwin:** That was a long-term issue raised with the fire service, especially when this review was done. There are now 17 areas covered by the Rural Fire Service. There used to be 15 areas. The extra areas are Townsville and Caloundra. In our submission, but even prior to that, the association had recommended that there needed to be one area director, one training officer and one full-time administration person in each area.

There was an understanding that areas like Cloncurry could not sustain the work because of pure numbers. The reason we said they needed to be there was when people went on holidays they could backfill. This is causing an enormous amount of concern across the state. Larry has to go to Rockhampton to relieve in there. It is almost as though the union is actors equity. It is like that.

If areas like Cloncurry, Miles and Emerald had retained their personnel there would not be the difficulty that they are facing now. In areas like Miles and Emerald which have seen an enormous growth in mining there has been a dramatic increase in levels of risk for the people and the fire service in the area, but in actual fact they are reducing the numbers. With areas like Caloundra, Ipswich and Townsville growing there is a risk there, but there is also a risk here. They have reduced the numbers instead of retaining them, as was recommended by the association.

**Mr Rogers:** One of the things that I would like to mention is, what I call, investment in the future. The association recently supplied personal protective equipment to a group of young people in years 11 and 12 in Cooktown. The uniforms were made by Stewart and Heaton who manufacture uniforms for all rural areas. They are being trained in the basic level of firefighting by a teacher who is an officer of a brigade in the area and also a training officer.

**CHAIR:** Is this FMS 1, is it?

**Mr Rogers:** We see that as being the future. Even though they may not necessarily stay on their properties—they may go elsewhere—they will still have a basic grounding in firefighting. They will hopefully in later life join a brigade. I think two of them are already members of a local brigade up there. Being only 16 or 17 years of age, they are obviously a bit young to go on to a fire ground. We see that as an investment in the future.

**CHAIR:** So this is held after school, is it?

**Mr Rogers:** During the school day.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Wayne and I talked about whether this could put into a certificate I course or an FMS 1 course through the high schools.

**Mr Rogers:** It is also being implemented slightly differently at Kilcoy. At Kilcoy it is a weekly course they undertake. Basically they go to the local fire station where they practice or have their lessons. The agricultural college here had 20-odd students and it was very successful.

**Mr Lewis:** And they have them at Longreach agricultural college campus as well.

**Mr Rogers:** We see that having an impact.

**Mr Lewis:** They are our future landowners and managers.

**CHAIR:** That is a very proactive approach. That is something that I think is worth considering.

**Mr Rogers:** We are also looking at the provision of training for chainsaw operators. That is one of our most recent things. The brigade has to pay for their tuition or they have to pay it themselves. The association has just undertaken to run a course with professional instructors and we will subsidise 50 per cent of that.

**CHAIR:** They are a couple of hundred dollars we were told in Rockhampton yesterday—and that is just on-ground training.

**Mr Lewis:** That is stage 1.

**Mr RICKUSS:** Are they only doing one or two people at a time?

**Mr Rogers:** We have 12 booked to do the course.

**Mr RICKUSS:** I have done forklift training and they charge you \$100 but they put through 20 at a time.

**Mr Lewis:** It works a bit differently. Because a chainsaw is classified a dangerous tool a trainer can on his own and with no offside train up 12 people. They can assess up to 12 people. If you get 16 or 18 people you need another trainer to assist.

**Mr RICKUSS:** How long does it take them?

**Mr Lewis:** It is a 16-hour course for stage 1. That is cross-cutting and it is not felling the tree. A lot of that is chainsaw maintenance and sharpening the tool which is the core part of it.

**CHAIR:** No wonder it is costing \$200 or \$300 if it is that long a course. You cannot expect people to do it for nothing. It was raised yesterday in Rockhampton that there are a number of people who would like to do this course but it is not being provided. They are suggesting that the QFRS is not providing the opportunity to do this training.



**Mr Lewis:** Depending on how proactive the brigades are, the whole brigade may want to do it. Unfortunately, as a service we have to give everyone the opportunity. We pick two key people out of each brigade to undertake the training. We cannot train 40 members of one brigade. It is the same as first aid training. We will train a couple out of each brigade. We do not want everyone first aid accredited.

**CHAIR:** Does the QFRS pay for first aid training? The QFRS does not pay for chainsaw training; is that right?

**Mr Lewis:** We have in the past. We have done it out here. The chainsaw instructor at the agricultural college has recently been appointed as one of our training officers in the Charters Towers area. So we poached him from the agricultural college.

**Mr Irwin:** There is limited funding allocated.

**CHAIR:** It is very expensive, I can see.

**Mr Lewis:** The cost is the RTO—the training status. We had a partnership agreement with the agricultural college where it cost us \$60 for the certificate and for the use of their RTO. The agricultural college trainer is a brigade member so we paid him as a casual trainer. That is how we got around it. To get an outside training person in it is huge money.

**CHAIR:** We will have to move on. Max, are you happy with that?

**Mr Rogers:** I would like to mention one other thing. Some years ago we had an equipment committee. The association was represented on the committee. Unfortunately, we are not represented anymore. There is quite a bit of discontent within the volunteers that the equipment supplied does not satisfy everyone. One size does not fit all.

**CHAIR:** We have heard that.

**Mr Rogers:** We would certainly wish to have representation on an equipment committee.

**CHAIR:** Point taken. Mike, have you got any final comments?

**Mr Flanigan:** Yes, I do. I would like to see some move made to revisit the fire levy—that is, a fairer system across the state where everybody pays some form of fire levy. There are several categories we could probably revisit there. Everyone has to step up to the mark. If they expect emergency services to turn up and help them in times of need they have to put something on the table.

**CHAIR:** Are you suggesting that it remains in the area? For instance, everything that is taken by the Ipswich council would remain there? Are you suggesting that we subsidise it?

**Mr Flanigan:** I would like to see the whole levy system revisited, for a start, in all its aspects. I would like to see more transparency in the brigades' accounts. You do not see it out here because they have larger areas to cover and the brigades are not so proactive. Down the coast they are. They receive large amounts of money from ratepayers through council collections. That goes into their accounts. There is no way in the world as a former inspector that I could drill into their accounts to see how much they had been drawing interest on public money. I think that there should be some sort of accountability in terms of what is sitting in those funds. It could not be moved, by the way, by the inspector or anybody else out of that shire.

**Mr CRANDON:** How long ago were you down there? Have you just moved up here?

**Mr Flanigan:** I was an inspector in 1998.

**Mr CRANDON:** You were down there in 1998?

**Mr Flanigan:** Yes.

**Mr CRANDON:** So you have been up here for the last 12 years?

**Mr Flanigan:** I retired from the fire service in 2006 and arrived up here in 2008.

**CHAIR:** I think it has been a very productive morning. The time allocated for this session has now expired. If members have any additional questions we will write to you. We would like to thank you for your attendance today. It has been very useful. Every time we have a hearing we are actually learning a little bit more. None of us profess to be experts. That is exactly why we are talking to the experts. Thank you once again.

**Committee adjourned at 12.03 pm**