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INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF RURAL FIRE SERVICES IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

FRIDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2010

Brisbane

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Committee met at 9.09 am

TIFFANY, Mr Paul, First Officer and Chairman, Aratula Rural Fire Brigade

MURDOCH, Mr Hamish, Officer, Eudlo Rural Fire Brigade

STREET, Mr Steven, 1st Officer, Eudlo Rural Fire Brigade

VARDANEGA, Mrs Lesley, Secretary, Habana and Districts Progress Association

O'KEEFFE, Mr James, 3rd Officer, Left Hand Branch Rural Fire Brigade

McNICOL, Mr Graham, 1st Officer, Marburg District Rural Fire Brigade

SNELLING, Ms Barbara, Secretary, Mount Alford Rural Fire Brigade

GANZENMULLER, Mr George, 1st Officer, Ripley Valley Rural Fire Brigade

MULRONEY, Mr Matthew, 2nd Officer, Ripley Valley Rural Fire Brigade

FINLAYSON, Mr Bruce, Group Officer, Rosalie Jondaryan Rural Fire Brigade

MARKS, Mr Anthony, 2nd Officer, Samford Rural Fire Brigade

JESSEN, Mr Jon, 1st Officer, Tallebudgera Valley Rural Fire Brigade

AVCIN, Mrs Vicki, Private Capacity

ROBERTSON, Mr John, Private Capacity

CHAIR: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I declare this session of the public hearings on the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee's inquiry into the management of rural fire services in Queensland open. I am Wayne Wendt, the chair of the committee. The other members of the committee here today are: Mr Ian Rickuss MP, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Crandon MP, the member for Coomera; Ms Di Farmer MP, the member for Bulimba; Ms Mary-Anne O'Neill MP, the member for Kallangur; and Mrs Christine Smith MP, the member for Burleigh. Mr Ray Hopper MP, the member for Condamine, could not be with us today. We also have Deb Jeffrey, our research director, with us.

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. Thank you all for your attendance here today.

Could witnesses please be mindful when they wish to make a statement to speak into the microphone. Could I also request that you turn off your mobile phones now or at least put them on silent. No phone calls are to be taken in this room. If you need to take a call, please take it outside. 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 must stress that you must direct your comments through me as chair. I also remind all those participating in the hearing today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate in the proceedings. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Before we start I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper. We will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. I should also advise that today is the final day for public hearings. We have already held six throughout the state. We have had two in Cairns, two in Rockhampton and two in Emerald last week. This committee has done some miles in trying to understand and better appreciate the difficulties associated with Rural Fire Services.

Due to the number of witnesses we have here today it will be very difficult for everyone to tell us everything they want to. As such, we would ask that everyone keep their comments succinct otherwise we are not going to get through the day. I will pass over to the deputy chair to ask the first question.

Mr RICKUSS: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for turning up this morning. The attendance has been quite good. Could you please outline the funding arrangements for each of your brigades and whether you are satisfied with these arrangements? I think we might start with George.

Mr Ganzenmuller: Ripley Valley is part of the Ipswich group. We are just starting a new funding model. Brigades will put in an operating budget. We are starting this model this financial year. We are in favour of a model where brigades operate to a predetermined, preapproved budget that covers all realistic needs. The brigades would fund their own wants.

Mr RICKUSS: You have almost answered this question. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve funding for brigades and how it might be done better?

Mr Ganzenmuller: If we look at the bigger picture, obviously the funding comes in via local councils. They are different all over the place. The Ipswich group of fire brigades actually encompasses a number of councils. There are a number of different rules and regimes in place. There is a fair amount of administration and coordination required. Looking at the bigger picture, I think that needs to be taken into account. We need whole-of-government service delivery so that the needs of all brigades are covered.

CHAIR: Matt, are you saying that it is not a levy system but a budget that you put through to council?

Mr Mulroney: There is still a levy system. There is a rateable levy of \$30 a property in Ipswich. We are moving from a straight split of the money to a budget type model. Our brigade raised \$8,000 from levies. To run a brigade on \$8,000 is almost impossible. We are moving to a model that will hopefully give us significantly more than that.

Mr RICKUSS: John, could you outline the funding arrangements for your brigade?

Mr Jessen: We believe that the brigades need to maintain autonomy and our own decisions are our local priorities. A suggested model is a base allocation with the remaining funds distributed on a rateable property basis. With urban encroachment QFRS expect the same level of service but from a declining funding base. As new urban stations open in areas we lose that funding. They expect us to help them out in those areas and we get nothing for it. It becomes a problem. We believe that a proportion of levy moneys raised in zone areas should go to support rural brigades.

Mr RICKUSS: How do you get funded at the moment? Do you have a council levy at the moment?

Mr Jessen: Yes, we do.

Mr RICKUSS: You actually answered the other part of the question about how you think the funding could be improved. You spoke about the zones. Are you happy with that answer?

Mr Jessen: Yes.

Mr RICKUSS: Barbara, would you like to comment?

Ms Snelling: I am bothered about the inconsistency across the state. I do understand that different areas have different requirements. Mount Alford is part of the Boonah group. At the moment we are funded by the levy system which is only \$12.00 plus \$2.50 for contingency fund. That is a very cheap rate. The landowners do not want to put it up because they pay so many things on their rates that they are very much against any raising of the levy. Because we mainly have small brigades they do not require a lot of money. The arrangement so far has been that a program is worked out at the group meetings to fund each brigade. There is a formula for doing that each year. It has been in place for a number of years and therefore has a whole lot of out-of-date aspects. Council and the Ipswich rural operations are trying to base it on budgets being put in.

The difficulty is that we were hounded about putting budgets and three-year plans in. That was at the start of this year. No meeting has been held. No funding committee has been convened. So absolutely nothing has happened to everybody's budgets that they were hounded to put in.

Many of these brigades are manned by small farmers who have no skills in preparing a budget. We feel that there should be more support from the Ipswich office to help small brigades formulate budgets and three-year plans. Many of them fall apart when they see this piece of paper. They have great difficulty preparing anything. They have no will to do it and are very busy people. We feel that we are abandoned and that we are not getting enough support in running the service.

Mr RICKUSS: So you feel the administration process actually needs more support than the actual firefighting practices?

Ms Snelling: What is to happen needs to be clearly worked out and it should happen.

Mr RICKUSS: You have almost answered the question about how this could be done better. Are you happy enough with your answer?

Ms Snelling: Yes.

Mr RICKUSS: Jim, would you like to comment?

Mr O'Keefe: We are happy with our funding arrangements.

CHAIR: What are they?

Mr O'Keefe: There is a levy paid by the landholders. We also have put in for some grants from the fire department. We have had some machinery grants. We are well equipped and are happy with the system.

CHAIR: What kind of levy are we talking about? How much is it per year?

Mr O'Keefe: I think it is \$14.50 per landholder.

CHAIR: Per year?

Mr O'Keefe: Yes.

Mr RICKUSS: So you are quite happy with that? So it does not need to be improved too much up in the Lockyer? You are happy with it?

Mr O'Keefe: No, not in our area.

Mr RICKUSS: John, would you like to comment?

Mr Robertson: I am a member of Tamborine Mountain fire brigade. We are in the Scenic Rim Regional Council like Barbara but our landowners have a \$25 impost which raises for us just under \$5,000. That is practically irrelevant to running the brigade. But we are very lucky on the mountain to have a very supportive community that is very active in fundraising. We raise privately about \$35,000. So we are fine. What is the recipe? If every brigade could be as lucky as us to have such a good community to support them.

Mr RICKUSS: Paul, would you like to comment?

Mr Tiffany: We are also in the Boonah group with Barbara from Mount Alford. The amount of the levy in our area is quite inadequate. We have some items that we want to buy to expand Aratula which is going to result in some costs for us. A big proportion of the levy that has been collected over the past 10 years has been distributed to other brigades and into other areas such as to the contingency fund. We are not getting the potential full collection we can get out of our area.

A solution I see for the state—because there is so much inadequacy across the state—is to follow the same lines as the urban fire service and maybe the Ambulance Service where a state levy is collected. The Rural Fire Service needs to provide a financial officer or an accounting officer who can come out and help the brigades in the preparation of budgets. When it comes time for processing bills and the revenue in and the revenue out, that should follow standard government procedures where items are put to line items and then processed by the finance officer back in an office somewhere. We want to remove the pressure of counting the pennies at a local level.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you do much highway work out there? Do you get called to highway accidents at all?

Mr Tiffany: In the last 12 to 18 months we have been getting called to assist—that is, not to actually do any hands-on rescue work but to assist with traffic control and provide extra manpower.

Mr RICKUSS: I think you have covered the issue fairly well. Hamish, would you like to comment?

Mr Murdoch: Prior to the amalgamation of councils we had the Caloundra, Maroochy and Noosa shires in our area. We had four groups covering the three shires. With the amalgamation there was an opportunity to tidy up some loose ends. Each of the four groups had different methodologies. By default, we have ended up with a system that works well. Properties are levied \$25 a year. The money raised within each group's area remains within the group. What the brigades have arranged is a methodology that, in simplistic terms, works on a small, medium and large brigade basis.

What has happened is that in the one group area they were all basically the same size brigades and they have chosen to do an even split. Within our Maroochy South group area we have deemed them to be small, medium and large. What we have done with the new model is that we have been able to pull some money out of the wealthier brigades and channel that money into the smaller brigades. By way of example, it means that—and these are just very rough figures—the small brigades get approximately \$6½ or \$7,000 a year, the medium brigades get \$14,000 and the larger brigades get \$21,000.

Mr RICKUSS: And you are getting that much money from your levies, are you?

Mr Murdoch: That has been raised from the levy. It is important to remember that whilst it sounds like a lot of money—and when we were doing that analysis a couple of years ago we found this—and from the outside you would look in and say, 'There is half a million dollars that the brigades are holding,' but when you dig down into that you find that the vehicle replacement fund was actually chewing up an awful lot of that money. Plus brigades are still having to build sheds and other facilities. From the outside what looks like a lot of money, when you delve into it is perhaps not so much. I would concur with the comments that have been made. We find it difficult to understand why funding in effect is controlled by the local government bodies. We feel that that whole system of fundraising really needs to be addressed on a state-wide basis.

Mr RICKUSS: The problem with that is that if you are in a road accident in Longreach you expect to be picked up by an ambulance. The difference out there is that a lot of them are rural property owner brigades. They look after their own fire demands. That is probably part of the reason. We will move on from that. We will not get into that debate.

CHAIR: Hamish, is it \$25 a year per property?

Mr Murdoch: Yes, \$25 per year.

CHAIR: In the Sunshine Coast area how does that work with a house compared to a unit block? Is it still \$25?

Mr Murdoch: Bearing in mind that you have the urban levy area and the rural levy area—

CHAIR: But there would be unit blocks, I assume, in those areas?

Mr Murdoch: Within our brigade area we have the village of Eudlo—those are tiny urban blocks—and the biggest blocks would not be much over 40 or 50 acres. We have 550-odd rateable properties within our area.

CHAIR: Do you have more multiple dwellings, I suppose, is what I am after?

Mr Murdoch: No.

Mr RICKUSS: Bruce, would you like to comment?

Mr Finlayson: We have a bit of a unique situation on the Darling Downs where we have what we call a local area finance committee. It operates with the Toowoomba Regional Council and Southern Downs Regional Council. Every group in the Toowoomba Regional Council area, which is what I am involved in, and the brigades within those groups submit their one-year and three-year budgets and operational plans. Then we sit down as the local area finance committee and look at the needs of each individual brigade and group for the next period of time. We allocate the \$20 a year rate levy, which is hopefully going up to \$25 or \$30 for next year, based on need to the brigades.

Large brigades have a lot of money in the bank. For instance, the Gowrie Little Plain brigade, which is my home brigade, has around about \$140,000 in the bank until tomorrow when we get another vehicle. Other brigades may only have a couple of thousand dollars in the bank. What we actually do is put a bias in our funding to the smaller brigades that do not have much by way of financial resources. When they come to build a new station or get a new appliance or whatever they need to do with either recurrent or capital expenditure, those brigades and groups have the funding to do it. Those brigades which have, at this point in time, a substantial cash reserve go without because they have resources they can draw upon. We have found this model to be very effective. We are still tailoring it at this point in time. There is a fair bit of honing to be done yet. To this point in time it has worked very well.

Mr RICKUSS: So that is really how you are managing to make this funding model work better?

Mr Finlayson: No doubt about it whatsoever. The only caution I do have—and I suppose it is a battle of power with the bureaucracy—is that I need to keep reminding the Toowoomba Regional Council employees that it is not their money. They maintain it is their money to do what they say should happen with it. I remind them constantly that it is actually ratepayers' money and they are the collecting agent like Energex or Ergon is for the ambulance levy. The council do take a commission off that to collect it—and that is fair enough. It is not the council's money to tell the rural fire brigade what to do with it.

That does not seem to sink in sometimes with some people. We do have a power situation there. I believe the Local Government Act and fire services act make it quite clear. Maybe there might be a need from the local government minister down to some of the council employees to clarify that it is not council money but rural fire brigade money and they are just there to collect it as a service entity.

Mr RICKUSS: That is an important point, Bruce. Admittedly, some of the councils do spend a lot of money on brigades. They put tarmacs around their buildings—

Mr Finlayson: Indeed, that is correct.

Mr RICKUSS:—driveways and all of that sort of stuff which probably could be charged out. Tony, would you like to comment?

Mr Marks: Yes, certainly. Probably by way of background, Samford is an izone brigade. We are a very active brigade. We would have somewhere between 80 and at the top end maybe 130 or 140 turnouts and hazard reduction burns per annum. So it is a very active brigade.

Mr RICKUSS: Are you called to much highway work or accident work or anything like that?

Mr Marks: We do attend some traffic incidents. Mainly it is in an assist role, but at times because of the unavailability of the urban appliances we are the sole responding agency. As a brigade, we are also currently CABA—that is BA—equipped. In the past that has been in response to community need, and we have done that. That capacity will be removed from Samford by Rural Operations over time. Having said that, Samford has been a brigade that has responded to community need.

In terms of a rating mechanism, it is based on rateable properties. There is a levy of \$25 per rateable property. Being in an izone area where there is a lot of semi-rural and you could almost say village development, we do have a number of rateable properties. So we do actually collect a fair amount of money through that system. Having said that, it is also a very active brigade.

CHAIR: How much are you talking about that is collected?

Mr Marks: There are 6,500 rateable properties in our area. That is why I say that it is a very dense area. Nevertheless, the level of activity of the brigade is actually quite high. If you work it out at \$25 per property, it is a fair amount of money. Having said that, because of community need Samford has basically funded its own vehicles. We have only had one vehicle that we have taken through the Rural Operations mechanism. We have invested probably close to half a million dollars in vehicles ourselves, plus the station that we have built and also extended simply to accommodate the vehicles and the requirements that we have as a brigade. We also do a lot of hazard reduction work locally but we have also done it for the Army at the Enoggera Army base. They have asked us to come in and do their hazard mitigation work in their area.

Mr RICKUSS: Are some of your members involved with the Army base?

Mr Marks: No. It has just been an ongoing, historical situation. Based on my member's comment, we have done that since 1985.

CHAIR: Do you get paid for the work you do for the Army?

Mr Marks: We do. It is done on a commercial basis. However, when I say 'commercial' basis, when you get a lot of people out there for a long period of time, I would imagine the hourly rate is almost volunteer work. Nevertheless, it is still valuable. But it has meant that we have been able to do things like acquire—

Mr RICKUSS: You would be more than happy with the funding that you are getting at the moment, Tony, by the sound of it?

Mr Marks: We are. I have absolutely no doubt about that. Having said that, we are also mindful of other brigades in the area and we have assisted other brigades—I certainly know that other brigades in our group have likewise assisted other brigades—where there has been a need. So there has not been a requirement to pool, as has been suggested by some of the other parties. It has been pretty much self-help and understanding that we are volunteers and we are there together.

Mr RICKUSS: I am sure there are a few brigades that are envious of the amount of money involved.

Mr Marks: I am sure so.

Mr RICKUSS: Graham, would you like to comment about the funding arrangements for your brigade?

Mr McNicol: Marburg is part of the Ipswich group area. So the majority of our funds come through the levy system, which is \$30 a year. In terms of the money coming in, we see that money being for the operating costs not for purchasing capital equipment. So the council levy fund has been designed to operate the brigade. The funds have not been used for purchasing new trucks and the like. We also probably get one-third of our money from donations, fundraising and hazard reduction work. As a brigade, we cannot officially charge someone to do a hazard reduction burn, even if it is a government department. Basically they offer us a donation for doing the work.

In terms of improving the system, I think the current system of the levies in our area does work for operating costs. It would be nice if the government then took control of purchasing and upgrading trucks when they were due. Currently we have to keep our trucks I think it is for 20 years. By the time we get rid of a truck it is worth nothing. Maybe they could look at turning those over every 10 years. If you kept a truck for 10 years, you would probably get back as much as you paid for it, which would fund our next one.

Mr RICKUSS: Thank you very much for that, Graham. Vicki, would you like to comment?

Mrs Avcin: I am also the secretary for the Hervey Bay group. I have only been involved with one budget in the Hervey Bay area. We are funded by a levy of \$25 a year which was set for four years. I believe next year is the final year for that.

CHAIR: How many properties are in that area, Vicki?

Mrs Avcin: I could not tell you. At brigade level, even though you ask, you are not told. I have no idea about that in the brigade area. Some of the properties I think are classed as rural residential and then there are a lot of rural areas as well. The Hervey Bay group is a fairly new group and in the first year of operation the priority was to get a vehicle to transfer crews, take food out and things like that. We were fortunate that we got a grant from Jupiters. But there are still a lot of things that we need to equip that vehicle to be able to set up a full IMT team and to have a rest area for crews at large jobs because some of jobs that we go to out at Duckinwilla and Churchill mines can go for days.

We all submit a budget, and that budget is divided amongst the brigades. At the moment we feel that it is a little unfair in the way it is done. We have a brigade that has \$23,000 in the bank, which is the brigade that I am with—Booral—and they are going to get \$23,000 out of the levy, whereas the Hervey Bay group, which is still trying to set things up, cannot get a photocopier, storage cupboards and things like that. We put in a budget which was around \$17,000; we were knocked back to \$7,000. Yet we see brigades that have got money in the bank and they are getting—

Mr RICKUSS: Have they got that money allocated, though, for new vehicles or something like that?

Mrs Avcin: No. We feel that it is a little unfair in the way it is done.

Mr RICKUSS: More negotiations probably need to be had there.

Mrs Avcin: Come next year when the four-year set levy is up, is that levy going to be reduced which is going to make it harder on brigades? There are a lot of brigades in other areas and other groups—there are three groups in the Maryborough area. I do not know about the other groups. But in Hervey Bay we put budgets in and we are lucky to get half of it.

Mr RICKUSS: So you are an area that is developing and a fair bit of work needs to be done.

Mrs Avcin: As far as our brigade area is concerned, it is not. The group is still developing, and a lot of the other brigades are also finding that it is a struggle. River Heads, for example, has now taken over Kingfisher. There were a few things that they wanted that they got knocked back on. Now they are going to have to find funds elsewhere.

CHAIR: Vicki, are you suggesting that there are brigades which have large bank balances and they are not sharing the funds around?

Mrs Avcin: No. Booral has \$23,000. We were told to upgrade our station. They did it as cheaply as possible. They still have \$23,000 but, with the budget they put in, they are going to get another \$23,000 this year.

CHAIR: That is what I thought you were saying.

Mrs Avcin: And the Hervey Bay group needs funding. As a secretary, I am doing all the printing. If I go down to Office National and photocopy minutes of meetings to hand out at the next meeting, I am funding that personally, because the Hervey Bay group does not have the money to even purchase a photocopier.

CHAIR: Who is making those decisions based on how much should be spent and how much should be allocated?

Mrs Avcin: In group?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mrs Avcin: We are given a budget sheet—that comes from the Maryborough office—to itemise what we need, what we have in the bank and things like that. Then we had a meeting with the district inspector, a group officer, me and some first officers or treasurer from the different brigades. We all sat down and nitted it out and explained why we needed things. We were told, 'No, take it off.' That all goes to a committee with the Rural Fire Service and the council, and it is sorted out from there.

CHAIR: That is where it is being sorted out.

Mrs Avcin: The brigades have received letters asking them to do an assets list. We do an assets list for the Rural Fire Service. We do not believe we should be having to explain to the council everything we have that is over \$100 or \$500 or whatever it is.

CHAIR: We might talk to you about that after this hearing.

Mr RICKUSS: Lesley, would you like to comment?

Mrs Vardanega: As I am not directly representing a rural fire brigade, I do not see how I can.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you have a general comment though?

Mrs Vardanega: I just know that they fundraise in our district of Habana.

Mr RICKUSS: Are the brigades that you see in your area well equipped?

Mrs Vardanega: We have a fairly new truck. I know that much. And they have a fire shed that looks up to par. They could always do with more money.

Ms O'NEILL: One of the submissions, and I think it was Samford, suggested that ratepayers across Queensland could pay a fire levy which covered both urban and rural brigades. Do you think this would work? Perhaps everyone could comment, but we will start with Samford, because I know it was in your submission. Do you think everyone should pay a fire levy which covered both urban and rural and do you think that would work?

Mr Marks: I am not quite sure how that would be allocated. The reality is that our community does not really make a distinction between a yellow truck or a red truck turning up. It knows that there is a fire service. How that is then funded—I think you probably need to step back a bit there. Rural fire brigades have come out of a community need. So the need of the community is what actually forms the brigade and determines the sort of service that it is going to provide. In our case of Samford, we live in an area where the need of the community is for a very high level of maintenance and a high level of service. If you were to have one levy for all, then the sort of service that our people would be expecting is exactly the same as they would get in an urban area. That means that you then have to think about the sorts of services that the Samford brigade is providing at the moment for \$25 a year and they include just about the same as what an urban service would provide in any event—BA and road traffic assistance. We do not do road accident rescue, but we do most of the other sorts of things currently. Then that would have to be funded.

CHAIR: Where are the closest urban vehicles to Samford?

Mr Marks: Arana Hills and Eatons Hill.

Mr RICKUSS: Would that be 10 minutes by car or truck?

Mr Marks: Good question. It depends how fast the person is going.

Mr RICKUSS: At the speed limit.

Mr CRANDON: A fire truck tends to go a bit faster than the average car if there is a fire.

Mr Marks: Yes, depending on whether they are driving with directions. Experience would say that Arana Hills would be the closest and would arrive probably within 10 to 12 minutes at Samford Village. Having said that, the area that we cover can then be another 15 to 20 minutes out again to where the incident actually is. One of the things looking at our area is that there are a lot of structures. It is not just the houses that are at risk. We are still part of a semi-rural area, so there are a lot of outhouses and sheds—those sorts of things. There are a lot of structures at risk which an urban appliance cannot actually access. It is then left to us to access those structures or those premises. I can give you a case in point. A couple of weeks ago we responded to a grassfire in a paddock on a semi-rural property. The urban truck was there first. It was about a 40-square metre area. The comment from the station officer was, 'I'm glad you guys arrived because we're almost out of water and we cannot get down there.' So their truck physically could not get access or he did not believe it would gain access.

Mr RICKUSS: The horse stables are more important than the houses out there anyway.

Mr Marks: And fences. There is a whole lot of stuff that is there to be protected. Maybe the best way of answering your question is that a levy across the state may provide some answers to the funding issues faced by a lot of brigades. However, I think the more critical decision is: what sort of service should brigades actually be providing and how should that then be funded? In other words, if we as a community have decided that is the sort of level of service they deserve, that needs to be funded.

Ms O'NEILL: Thanks, Tony. Do others think that a levy collected across both urban and rural would work?

Mr Ganzenmuller: We agree with the sentiments expressed by the Samford Rural Fire Brigade. We believe that a state-wide fee could be looked at as long as the services were deemed to be complementary and not competitive. So that is where you have a lot of managerial issues to be resolved. We are looking at having an urban fire station at Ripley in the next couple of years, so we will be facing an issue of co-service delivery. We are not sure what that means. We obviously will have the vast majority of our brigade area funding wiped out as the urban boundaries come in. But that is where we would see a broader state based funding arrangement to help deliver a practical complementary service, where rural fire brigades in our area were able to be funded to do the jobs they need to do, and the community expects us to do, and the urban fire service have enough money to do what they need to do and the two services work together in harmony and collaboratively.

Ms O'NEILL: Thank you. Barbara?

Ms Snelling: Our brigade would not be able to find the people and provide the service to use a huge amount of money. I think it is much more important that the needs of each area be considered. Where I would like to see consistency is in the allocation of those moneys. I have heard everybody say something different about what happens after the money is collected. It has been surprising to me to hear just amongst this many brigades how many different ways there are of allocation. I think that is the major point.

We have a very rural based area and a huge area with bad terrain to cover. Most of the urban trucks cannot get there. You must always remember that there is likely to be bad feeling because every rural firefighter knows that the urban people are being paid to turn up and fight the same fire under the same conditions. I feel that—changing the subject but not too much—the whole idea of volunteering has to be readdressed, and this is fundamental. Some people should be paid, because it is very costly to be a rural firefighter. They put a huge amount of personal money into this. I know that is not the question at the moment.

Mr RICKUSS: Just to follow up there, the Boonah shire has not had a rise in the levy since 2000. That is 10 years.

Ms Snelling: We have a huge fight every time Boonah Group decides to ask for a levy change because a number of the local landowners have a number of rateable properties and they do not consolidate them and they are resistant to raising the levy because they feel they are paying all of those other levies as well. It is not possible to get them to vote to ask to raise the levy. The other point is that many of the brigades do have money in the bank, but they are not using it. We have 13 brigades in the Boonah group, which is absolutely absurd. Many of them are far too small, have hardly any members and they are all ageing, and people work outside the shire and are not available. To give them more and more money is not a good use of the funds.

Ms O'NEILL: Thank you, Barbara. Does anybody else want to say anything?

Mr Robertson: I am speaking as an individual here. I am not speaking for my brigade. I believe that state-wide funding is the way that things are going and probably the way things should go. Personally, as a very keen volunteer, I greatly regret that, but I think it is just a fact of life.

Ms O'NEILL: Okay. Paul?

Mr Tiffany: I think the committee needs to be aware that there is a very high level of personal feeling and ownership in their brigades. We have a 10-year-old fire truck which is halfway through its life which is incredibly dear to a lot of us because we flipped a lot of hamburgers to get that truck. With the amount of money that we have, Aratula is considered a rich brigade in the Boonah area. That is primarily because of the way we have been managed and been set up in the past. Compared to some of the other brigades and the amounts I have heard here today, we are dirt poor. I think funding at a state level is needed, but I also think a state list of what is expected from a rural brigade is also expected.

CHAIR: What do you mean by that?

Mr Tiffany: What Samford Valley is doing compared to what Aratula is doing compared to what Mount Alford is doing.

CHAIR: Do you mean operationally?

Mr Tiffany: Yes, operationally. It needs to be made black and white: this is a rural brigade's obligations in the area. If they want to do some extra, great. If they can raise some extra funding to do that, fine. But they need to have one lot of levy collected state-wide for this job for these people. I have to agree with what Barbara said about the amount of time. Time is very, very important to all of us, because we lose our time with our families. Aratula is quite lucky. If one member of the family is in the brigade, normally everybody else is as well and they are out there with you. But time is very important. Also, there is the personal outlay from your own pocket. There was a study done a number of years ago on the cost of volunteering, and it proved that the individual cost is quite high.

Ms O'NEILL: Thanks. Hamish?

Mr Murdoch: I think the community gets a pretty cheap deal from the Rural Fire Service. You cannot even buy a carton of beer these days for 25 bucks, yet there is the potential for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars, worth of property to be saved from being burnt. The state-wide funding is a good idea. But at the same time there must be cognisance at the local level that funding generally is going to be different from area to area and that, if that was the way to go, there has to be a degree of flexibility—for example, a percentage skimmed off that goes into a state pool of money but then at a local level it is up to the local brigades and areas to distribute the funds in a way that they see fit, because it is the local people who know where the needs are compared to perhaps being Brisbane-centric in making those decisions.

Mr Finlayson: From my personal point of view, the state needs to sanction the actual collection of a fire levy through the rates system. I think that is the first thing, to clarify some of the issues I raised before. Maybe there might be a need to amend statute to enable that to happen. I think we need to be very careful when considering ways of raising funding, because at the moment ratepayers pay \$20 or \$30 per annum for rural fire protection. So their expectations are at that \$20, \$25 to \$30 level, as opposed to someone in the urban brigade who pays close to \$100 or maybe more. So they have a higher expectation, and rightly so, because they are paying three times the price or five times the price. I think we need to be careful about that to start with. Once you start to raise the levy too high, then people have a right to expect a faster response rate, better equipment and so forth.

Mr RICKUSS: In some of the closer, more peri-urban type areas, that is happening anyway. Like Tony said, they do not distinguish: 'Come on, mate. You fight the fire. You've turned up.' It does not matter whether you are in a yellow truck or a red truck.

Mr Finlayson: That is right. So we do need to walk somewhat cautiously so we do not end up shooting ourselves in the foot. I cannot agree with the concept that one size fits all. I really believe that funding varies between brigade types, between rural and primary producer brigades, to your zone brigades and so forth. This is why I really do warm to the local area finance committee model that Toowoomba is doing, where you have a regional area that determines the needs for the local brigades.

Whether you are talking about business or government, it is irrelevant. When you have a centralised place of administration, it is very hard to know what really happens in the back suburban blocks of Camooweal or somewhere like that. It is impossible. You can have as many degrees as a compass and you will never have enough knowledge as to what functions in every part of the state. So I think we need to put out of our mind that a state-wide levy, one-size-fits-all model, will work. I do not think it will.

At the moment the state government subsidises vehicles and other equipment and that comes out of the general collective consolidated revenue of the state. Then the local levy, collected through the rates, subsidises or funds perhaps more the recurrent and some capital expenditures of brigades. But I really believe that it is best left to a decentralised or regional basis to determine the individual brigade funding, because that is the best model of all, I think.

Mr Marks: If I could just make an observation. What we are trying to grapple with here is: are we going to fund a bushfire service or are we going to fund a rural fire service? Because communities expect a rural fire service, which is something that is comparable to and meets the needs of that community. If we are just going to fund a bushfire service, it is very different—all we are looking at is grass and vegetation. But I think our communities are a lot more sophisticated. It would depend on what the community is as to what the need of the local brigade is. It would depend on the sorts of services it is going to provide as to what funding it is going to need both in equipment and operating costs to fund that operation.

Ms O'NEILL: Thanks, Tony. Sorry, we do have to move on. Graham?

Mr McNicol: There is one issue that people may not be aware of. On a rural property if an urban tanker is called to put out a fire at a shed QFRS can charge that landholder a fee. Maybe there is a possibility through an insurance program for there to be some money to cover that type of thing so that the rural landholder is covered by both the rural brigades and the urban brigades.

Ms Avcin: It is a double-barrelled question. If it is a one-size-fits-all approach the levies are going to go up majorly and people in rural areas will not wear that. If they do go up then I think the rural brigades will want to look at getting more benefits. At the moment they have to pay for all the maintenance on their trucks, for their safety certificates for their trucks and for their fuel. For the urbans that is all covered in their budget. You would have to majorly raise that rural levy and I do not think people would be prepared to pay it.

Ms O'NEILL: Lesley, have you got a comment about what your community as ratepayers would think of a joint levy?

Mrs Vardanega: There is a lot of waste at a bureaucratic level. Do not get me started. You might need to mute me. I am fine with paying a levy. We concur with the decentralised assessment. That makes sense as far as we are concerned. I will not take any more of your time.

Mr RICKUSS: From what I am hearing, the local area finance model seems to be one that a lot of groups would support. Would that be the broad consensus?

Ms FARMER: My question is to the Tallebudgera Valley group in particular. You made a point in your submission about urban encroachment having quite a high impact on the rural fire services. This is an issue that has been raised quite consistently. Would you like to comment on what your issues are in particular?

Mr Jessen: Urban encroachment is probably not going to affect us much more than it is now in the valley. We have lost a bit on the north-eastern end due to Stockland developments and things like that. The Gold Coast City Council is great. It has a plan. It is probably happening more out in the Nerang area where the new Nerang station has gone in. Four rural brigades have lost out. A couple of brigades have totally lost their funding. They will be relying on the rest of the group and the local finance committee plan for funds.

I think rural people pay about \$54 a year, which is fairly high compared to some of the other brigades. At the moment, it is working well. When the finance committee comes in, if that allocated pool does not get boosted by the ize areas which come under the urban brigades—and they expect the rurals to support them because they cannot get into these properties—then that pool is going to get smaller and smaller. It is going to get to a point where the rural property owners that are left are going to have a tremendous amount of money to pay as a fire levy.

Ms FARMER: So the urbans have taken over those new areas?

Mr Jessen: That is right.

Ms FARMER: One of the things that people have raised with regard to urban encroachment is that some people in built-up areas do not understand fires and are not interested in hazard reduction. Would you like to comment on that?

Mr Jessen: That is true. There are a few. Fortunately, in the Tallebudgera Valley a lot of the people are proactive. It takes a lot of work on my behalf and that of my second officer to get people on side and explain to them that it is better to have the fire coming down the hill or down a steep part of their property instead of going up the hill because they will have their animals inside their bedroom. A lot of people are landcare people. Once they start understanding that it is fine. In the last couple of years people are starting to come around. As you get further into town where it is a bit more densely populated it is out of my area and in the urbans area and people do not understand.

Ms FARMER: So you rely on people going around and visiting the properties and having a personal relationship to get people to do things?

Mr Jessen: That is right.

Ms FARMER: Would anyone else like to comment on that?

Mr Marks: We are in exactly that situation. From an urban service delivery point of view there is no hazard mitigation activity really. It is mostly a suppression based activity—that is, there is a call-out, you put out the fire and go back. Rural brigades are there 24/7 providing a service to the community which is hazard reduction plus suppression. If the rural brigades become so underfunded and so depleted that they are not there there will be no hazard mitigation activity and it will simply fall back to the state to somehow manage that issue. That is just a disaster waiting to occur at some point.

Ms FARMER: How do you manage it?

Mr Marks: From our point of view?

Ms FARMER: Yes.

Mr Marks: We are very active in our community. We are actually asked to undertake hazard reduction burning. We use that as a training opportunity.

Ms FARMER: Asked by whom?

Mr Marks: Community members will phone up and say, 'We are looking to do X'—which may be clearing their back paddock or getting rid of a whole lot of grass and trees that have fallen over from the storms that have come through and have piled up—'could you burn it?' We are fortunate in that we still have a number of people within the valley who have a good understanding of the use of fire. Notwithstanding that, they will do it themselves; they at least keep us informed as to what is going on.

I would make one other comment as well, and that is this: the model that seems to be followed into a peri-urban area is not a full urban model. It is urban, auxiliary and then rural. That really is causing some issues from what we hear. If you have a joint rural and auxiliary brigade and you both turn out to the same incidents, one is getting paid and one is not. That is the service delivery situation that exist at the moment.

As a brigade, Samford has gone through this process. We already provide a level of service that is way beyond what an auxiliary service could provide. At the moment we are being asked to move back into a model which says, 'You are just a bushfire service.' But our community is expecting a lot more. I think this is going to be a real issue for the service, particularly if you impose some sort of state-wide levy. I do not see that auxiliary model working particularly well in terms of how you transition in that peri-urban area.

Mr RICKUSS: That is the difference, Tony. The urbans do not light fires to put fires out, do they? You back-burn to put a fire out?

Mr Marks: Yes.

Mr Murdoch: Within our Maroochy South group we have two situations. One is with regard to the Tanawha brigade which borders Buderim, Chancellor Park and that area. Through urban encroachment their levy base had reduced to about \$700 a year. What eventually worked out was that the neighbouring brigade were less active. So the two brigades eventually—it took quite a few years because of personality issues—amalgamated. Under our funding model that actually solved the problem because it meant that there was sufficient funding within our rateable collection to fund the whole operation within that area.

We had an issue with the Kiel Mountain brigade, which is right in the guts of the urban development belt. With the realignment of the urban boundaries, over the year their revenue base has also been reduced somewhat. The last discussion that I was involved in was that they were possibly looking at introducing a model which I believe has been very successful up in Bundaberg. Through urban encroachment they needed the urban service but because of the terrain and the cane fields they still had to have a strong rural presence. They have a funding arrangement where the urbans are actually funding the rural operation within that little area. I stand to be corrected, but from what I have been told that has actually been successful.

Ms FARMER: That is very interesting.

Mr Robertson: On the mountain we have an auxiliary brigade as well. We work very closely with them. We get on very happily. We just do not seem to have these paid and unpaid issues. On Friday, a week ago today, for example, there was a fire in Coomera Valley which is our adjoining area on the Gold Coast. They were there, we were there and our auxiliary brigade was there. We all just mixed and matched no bother.

The other people that we work with very closely, because we have about seven pockets of national park on the mountain, are the National Parks and Wildlife Service. That also works very happily. Obviously again, they are paid and we are not. It just does not seem to be a problem.

Mr O'Keeffe: Can I just respond on the hazard reduction issue. We are about cold burning in our area. It is a safety issue. We have no real boundaries. We join rough country. Fires start up there. It is a heavy grass-growing area. The only way we can combat the issue is by burning more often. If we have one fire each year it creates its own break. If we have that we do not need hazard reduction burns. We have been running like that for years. It is a safety issue.

We have a problem with urban people coming in and buying areas. Some of the areas they are buying comprise 300 or 400 acres. They lock them up. Within three years it is a terrible fire hazard. It is an issue for their neighbour who wants to carry out burns. The law states that if a neighbour wants to burn he has to put breaks in at his own expense. In that area it is very difficult to do because it is difficult terrain. It is causing a big issue in terms of our preventative burning, as we call it.

Ms FARMER: What do you think should be done about that?

Mr O'Keeffe: I would like to see the law changed so that the person who locks the country up has to fork out some money to keep the fire from going on to his property. They should have to get a dozer in and put a break in or something like that.

We have approached the Ipswich fire bureau about this. We have not had anything that has helped us at all really. They put on a sausage sizzle which did not really help. I would like to see funding put into educating people who come into the area that cold burning is an issue. If a property is allowed to grow up and a fire gets away then it does damage a property. A cold burn does not do any damage to a property at all.

Mr RICKUSS: We actually have a clash of ideologies there.

Mr Mulroney: We have a similar issue with hazard reduction burns in the valley. As you know, Ripley is a growth area. Most of the traditional farmers have moved out of the area. We have people buying up blocks of land and locking it up. We are very active in our area when it comes to education. We have six members in our brigade who are volunteer community educators. That is a new program that started up through QFRS. It has given us the resources and the training to get out there in the public.

We also do a lot of the council's hazard reduction burns. The more we are out in the community doing these burns the more people see us and realise what we are doing. It is educating the public by being out there that we find works very well.

We are also finding urban encroachment is a major issue for us. I would say that probably a third of our call-outs are to assist urban brigades in areas that they physically cannot get their trucks into. Many other brigades are saying that too. A third of our time is spent on areas outside our brigade area. Last year probably more like 80 per cent of our time on the fire ground was spent outside the Ipswich area on deployments and things like that.

Mr Ganzenmuller: Rockhampton was a classic.

Ms FARMER: During the big fires?

Mr Ganzenmuller: We had nine intrastate and interstate deployments that our brigade provided members for. Matt and I were in Rockhampton, for example. If a brigade wishes to provide members for the deployment lists they need to make sure they have sufficient adequately trained members. As it turned out, for the first two days in Rocky we were given other rural vehicles to operate. On the second two days we were actually in auxiliary pumpers as assistant crew. In terms of the training and funding of the brigade looking forward, we need to look at that complementary service. We can help out in different circumstances if the service deems there is a need for that.

Mr CRANDON: My question is to the Habana and District Progress Association. Lesley, in your submission you suggested that the future reporting/compliance mechanisms must be a streamlined system accompanied by a workable solution, perhaps with paid help. Could you please advise what solutions you would suggest?

Mrs Vardanega: We were just making the point in saying that we know our rural fires feel pressured as it is with all the bureaucratic compliance they have to undertake. One of the issues is the age of members of rural fire brigades. These guys are going to find it very difficult to recruit members if they have all this administration work to take care of. Whatever you put in place, do you think it might be beneficial not to thwart the operations of the rural fires but assist them? I think the idea is to facilitate things.

More bureaucracy is bad. What we are saying is that if there has to be more compliance then we need paid help with that so that they get on with their fundraising and their vehicle maintenance because they do that well. The thing that stuck out for me in the Auditor-General's report No. 3 to parliament was where he said, 'I consider that the Rural Fire Service currently provide effective management of fires within rural communities,' and he went on. He states that this is an effective system.

What we are saying is that the guys are under pressure as it is with all their paperwork and compliance issues. Whatever you suggest on top of what they are doing needs to come with somebody to help them with the administration of it. They are good at the practical things. Our guys do a lot of back-burning which they are good at.

I will back up a bit. One of the issues we find is the changing societal values concerning smoke. We think that is a non-issue. New people are coming into the rural areas. What are the societal values concerning the Victorian fire tragedy. It is as cut and dried as that. Whatever extra administration you put on us, please give us some paid help to help us with it so we are not loading up our guys even more, because they do a great job. History in Queensland shows that.

CHAIR: We only have a few minutes left. There were many more issues that we dealt with in other places simply because we were able to speed through them more quickly. The number of people today has slowed that process down. Because we only have a few minutes left can I ask each group to say in two minutes what the issues are that you want us to take out of today.

Mr Ganzenmuller: In terms of an operating model, we would like to propose that the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service take a strategic view on where the Rural Fire Service fits in. We would like to see the Rural Fire Service, as part of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, as a distinct operating division but maintaining all the synergies of the one organisation. The whole of the organisation needs to know exactly where each of the players stand. There is still an element of confusion out there at the moment in terms of who does what, who is responsible for what, who pays for what, leading to competitiveness instead of complementary behaviours.

In terms of funding, I believe you have heard a number of different variations here. There is always more than one way to skin a cat. People will always make systems work as best they can. We believe that rural fire brigades need to understand what their community expects of them. The Rural Fire Service needs to take that into account—that is, understand the risks and capabilities of the community and make sure that there is the appropriate funding, training and structural support.

I am talking from a large brigade's point of view; we are lucky that we have over 50 members. I agree with everyone who made comments about administration. Treasurer is the hardest position to fill even in a large brigade. We would fully support area office providing more administrative support moving forward. We believe brigades should be run like businesses. We believe that the auditing process every financial year will help with the budget processes required moving forward.

We would like to see a 10-year plan drawn up between the local regions and the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service to drive change. If people know about the changes as the population changes and as the risks change then they will be more accepting of change. That will help get rid of the emotion in a lot of the decision making. I believe that will help steer the evolution of the Rural Fire Service.

Mr RICKUSS: That is particularly so in the peri-urban area of Ripley. You can really see it coming.

Mr Ganzenmuller: That is right.

CHAIR: John, what are the key points you want me to take away today?

Mr Jessen: I totally agree with George. Funding is a big problem, as is the demand on volunteers. People seem to forget what we all are; we are all volunteers. We are away from our families, as has been said here. Training is another issue, as is administration. In each volunteer organisation—whether it is us or surf-lifesaving—there are only a few who do any of this and the load is getting beyond a joke. We need assistance with regard to doing the one- and three-year plans and those sorts of things. We are fortunate because we do have a couple of people in the brigade who do this as their job. There are a lot of brigades around, as Barbara just said, where people are not sure about this type of thing. It takes so much of their time to do it.

CHAIR: Point taken. Barbara, would you like to comment?

Ms Snelling: I agree with everything that has been said about the load. In the time that I have been secretary the load has multiplied tenfold. A lot of people in the Ipswich area office, to which we are answerable, could be doing a lot of the work that they are loading onto us all the time. They seem to be forever shoving work onto us. They forget that we have a living to make and we do not have the time to do this.

This is causing people to be frightened off from taking an administrative position. The same goes for the out-of-touch approach to training. We have not discussed training. We have many possible volunteers who find the lower levels of training totally inappropriate because they do not take into account their current skills. They will not go and sit in the classroom and be told a whole lot of things they already know. We are frightening away possible young people who do not want to undertake the out-of-touch type programs that are offered.

CHAIR: Jim, would you like to comment?

Mr O'Keeffe: I would like to see more people burning in a controlled manner. I would like to see people taught how to burn safely and in a controlled manner. That would take the load off the fire brigade. It can be done easily such as after rain. I would like to see the fire brigade educate landholders on how to do cold burns. I think that is the issue for us.

CHAIR: John, would you like to comment?

Mr Robertson: I highlight the value of aged people in the brigade. I am biased of course, as you can obviously see. I think that is important. The QFRS hierarchy should respect our volunteers. We have excellent relations with our local auxiliaries, but I certainly feel that there is a marked lack of respect from the hierarchy for the volunteers. Finally, a special interest of mine is having maps and navigation. This does not matter normally but if you get a bad fire situation, as in Victoria, it does.

CHAIR: Paul, would you like to comment?

Mr Tiffany: To summarise, it would be good if we could get state-wide funding. Brigades should provide their own budgets with the assistance of rural fires management. We need to look at rural fires from an operational and business perspective. On the business side, we should have a local committee that deals with someone who is office based and works out the funding on a state basis. We all agree that we have different levels of funding that we need. Then that could be linked to what you are expected and obligated to do. If you need to do more for your community then you can do more for your community, but this is the absolute minimum that you need to do. There needs to be more support for the volunteers. We are having a lot more contact with our brigade training support officer out of Ipswich. It took a great deal of jumping up and down and shouting, but we see him at least twice a month now.

CHAIR: Hamish, do you want to comment?

Mr Murdoch: I concur with much of what has been said today. I would ask everyone who is in the decision-making process—the director-general, the commissioner, yourselves and your parliamentary colleagues—to keep in the back of your minds the intangible benefit that our service provides to the community and, more importantly, the intangible cost to the volunteer fire brigade community. To put it into perspective, there are 35,000 volunteers. I believe the average wage these days is approximately \$25 an hour. For every combined hour that works out at \$875,000-odd that does not appear on any balance sheet anywhere, to the best of my knowledge. Whatever changes are made, do not spoil the magic of the group. We do work well. We do a professional job. Just keep the magic there.

Mr RICKUSS: I worked it out at \$1,000 a volunteer with 25,000 volunteers and that became \$25 million.

CHAIR: Steve, do you want to comment?

Mr Street: Personally, I would like to see a state-wide funding scheme that is then redirected to the regional area level so it can be redistributed more appropriately. As everyone has mentioned, every brigade has different requirements and different needs depending on their community. As the population of Queensland is going to keep increasing it needs to be distributed at a regional and local area level. Collection wise, I think a state based system would be good. Perhaps QFRS could set aside a small percentage of funds that brigades could then apply for for additional requirements as needed. Landholders could apply as well. One problem in our area—and everyone is having it—is that more people are moving into the area. Where you used to burn out, say, two properties now you have to approach 10 different people to do the same thing. Maybe property owners could apply for funding.

CHAIR: Bruce, would you like to comment?

Mr Finlayson: I guess three words summarise my experience and feelings—ambiguity, uncertainty and inconsistency. That is the present system as I see it. I firmly believe there needs to be a state based, uniform, structured accounting system that comes from Kedron right through to the smallest brigade in the state, and my submission deals with that issue. I think there must be a definite clarification of the legal relationship and status of the individual rural fire brigades with QFRS itself. I am a major believer in a decentralised system from the point of view of operation but a centralised system from the point of view of structure.

We also need an effective and simple to use website. I would like to see available to every brigade email addresses. So if you are the first officer of Clifton brigade, for argument's sake, I could email you at foclifton@queenslandruralfirebrigade.gov.au, or something like that, so that way we do not have to be using our personal email addresses.

Also, I believe that it is important to give some public recognition to employers who have employees who are members of a rural fire brigade. It could be something similar to what the Defence Force reserve did 25 years ago, give or take. They put out stickers for employers that they could use on their letterheads or put on their front doors. If you are in a small business—and I am a small businessman myself—and you have one of your four or five staff members go away on deployment for a week, or the boss himself, then that leaves a ginormous big hole. If you are Xstrata or someone like that and you have four or five members go away on deployment, you would not even know it. I think if we could give some recognition to small businessmen, that would be beneficial.

CHAIR: Good ideas. Tony?

Mr Marks: I have a clarification to make. I think I mentioned that there were 6,500 rateable properties in our area.

CHAIR: You did.

Mr Marks: It is actually just over 3,000. I did the maths and it certainly did not come anywhere near that. So it is just over 3,000.

CHAIR: We will scrub that from the record then.

Mr Marks: I have five very quick points. Volunteers volunteer because they want to see their community kept safe. It is a recognition of what the community is actually asking by way of the service delivery that they want. I think that means that there needs to be consultation occurring between the local communities and the RFS, or QFRS, to actually say, 'That is your need. This is how we are going to support you in the delivery of that need,' not to be told that one size fits all. I think we have heard that to date ad nauseam. Volunteers do want to provide their services, but they do not want to have it complicated by bureaucratic processes. I suppose the big question is: do regional Queenslanders actually deserve a bushfire service, as things seem to be driven, or do they actually require a rural fire service that meets their needs for fire protection in their community? They would be the things I would bring to the committee's attention.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Graham?

Mr McNicol: I think probably the most important thing is that the Rural Fire Service works because of the volunteers. I think if you take away that volunteer system then it will fall apart and you will have to put in paid staff. We have seen it in the past that there have been changes made without any consultation with brigades and we have lost a lot of members. They brought in a system where everyone had to have training in FM1. We lost a lot of our good, older members who knew the area, had done the training, had all the certificates up to date, but they changed the rules and then they had to do more training. Remember that they are volunteers. The easiest solution to volunteers was to say, 'Stuff it. I quit. I do not need the hassle.' I think by supporting volunteers and keeping them, that is how the Rural Fire Service will survive.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Vicki?

Mrs Avcin: I will not cover the funding because everybody else has covered that. Retention of volunteers is a big issue, I believe. That takes in the structure of brigades and the training. I have been in three different brigades in totally different areas of the state, and the one issue in every single one of them

is the retention of volunteers. Like Graham just said, we have had level 1 training; we have had FM1; now we have FMS. In two years time we are going to have something else. They keep changing the boundaries. For the people who have done the training previously there are big issues in terms of saying, 'You have done your training. That is it. End of story. Move on to the next level.' But we do not have a next level. We have been waiting for FM2. That has been scrapped now. Now we are waiting for something else. People do get fed up.

There are other issues in brigades that keep getting swept under the carpet. There is bullying. There is cronyism. There are cliques in brigades. The system by which our officers are elected needs to be put in concrete: you start here, you work your way up, you do that level, you work your way up. So that by the time you become a crew leader or a first officer you have the experience, you have the years behind you, you have the qualifications to be put in charge. It is too easy now for somebody to do their FMS training and say, 'There is a crew leader course next month. Let's do it.' They have no experience. Because of that discrimination, cronyism, cliqueness, it is all favoured. Young people come in and see this. They are not part of that clique. I am not saying this happens in all brigades, but it does happen in a lot of brigades. They say, 'Stuff it. See you later,' and they walk out the door.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mrs Vardanega: It is pretty obvious that there are people here with more going for them as far as fire knowledge is concerned. But I concur with the comments about the decentralisation, supporting the volunteer and not overloading them with too much bureaucracy, making it more efficient and streamlined. There are people with more going for them, like this lady and these people who have spoken, who know how to go about that. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Obviously there is a very wide divergence of opinion. We have noticed that right across the state, and that is what has been so valuable, I think, to the committee members. We are going to take a break now. There are matters that we did not get through—for instance, fire wardens; urban encroachments we did not touch as much as I would have liked; training; communication strategies; attracting and maintaining volunteers, which we just touched on then; and equipment lists. I know these have been matters that have been very interesting around the state and we have not had a chance here to discuss them. The time for today's session has expired. If members have any additional questions we will write to you. Thank you for your attendance today. We will now adjourn for a short break and the next session will start in about seven minutes. You are more than welcome to stay as observers if you like.

Proceedings suspended from 10.38 am to 10.48 am

COTTER, Mr John, President, AgForce Queensland

JOHNSON, Mr Robert, Government Liaison Officer, AgForce Queensland

TROST, Mr Gregory, Manager, Industrial Relations and Grower Services, Canegrowers

COOK, Mr Clive, Senior Director, Conservation, Strategy and Planning, Department of Environment and Resource Management

POTTER, Mr Glen, Director, Organisational Services, Gold Coast City Council

POOLE, Mr Glenn, Auditor-General, Queensland Audit Office

HOLLIER, Mr Peter, Regional Manager, Rural Operations North Coast, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

JOHNSON, Commissioner Lee, Commissioner, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

ROTHWELL, Assistant Commissioner Steve, Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service

HYDE, Mr Michael, General Manager, Customer Services, Redland City Council

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

BURKE, Mr Robert, Member, Rural Fires Association of Queensland

HEMBURY, Mr Perry, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Volunteering Queensland Inc.

CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare this session of the public hearings on the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee's inquiry into the management of rural fire services in Queensland open. I am Wayne Wendt, the chair of the committee. The other members of the committee here today are: Mr Ian Rickuss MP, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Crandon MP, the member for Coomera; Ms Di Farmer MP, the member for Bulimba; Ms Mary-Anne O'Neill MP, the member for Kallangur; and Mrs Christine Smith MP, the member for Burleigh. Mr Ray Hopper MP, the member for Condamine, could not be with us today. We also have Deb Jeffrey, our research director, with us.

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. Thank you all for your attendance here today.

Could witnesses please be mindful when they wish to make a statement that they speak directly into the microphone. Could I also remind everyone that their mobile phones should be turned off or at least switched to silent mode. No phone calls are to be taken in this room. If you need to take a call, please take it outside. 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 chair. I also remind all those participating in the hearing today that these proceedings are similar to parliament to the extent that the public cannot participate in the proceedings. In this regard, I remind members of the public that under the standing orders the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Before we start, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your submissions in response to the committee's discussion paper. You can see them all here. We will examine some of the issues raised during the course of this hearing. We have already held six prior hearings throughout the state. We have had two in Cairns, two in Rockhampton and two in Emerald last week. We have had some very good feedback on those. I would say that the committee has a very good idea of where things have been going as of today. I will now hand over to the deputy chair, Ian Rickuss, to ask the first question.

Mr RICKUSS: Auditor-General, could you please summarise for the committee what you consider to be the critical issues in your report?

Mr Poole: This was an audit that we undertook between January and May 2008 and it was a report that was tabled in parliament on 15 May 2008. The objective of the audit was to determine whether there were suitable systems operating to ensure that there was efficient and effective management of rural fire
Brisbane

brigades across the state. The audit also considered whether adequate systems were in place to ensure that any increased risk of fire as a result of climate change and urban encroachment patterns was addressed.

The audit found that, while the Rural Fire Service is currently providing an effective management of fires within the rural communities, the service, we believe, was at risk of becoming unsustainable due to a combination of a number of external and internal factors. Certainly I would want to acknowledge the effort of the many volunteers from across Queensland who deliver that service to the community.

Within the QFRS we found that there was a lack of comprehensive forward planning and risk management processes as well as inadequate systems to effectively assess funding and resource requirements of the brigades. Effective decision making was also hindered by inadequate performance measurement, and there were limitations on the systems to ensure training and workplace health and safety standards were met.

These deficiencies, while they were not directly impacting significantly on the performance to date, we saw had the potential to become more important due to the increases in frequency and intensity of wildfire incidents as a result of climate change, urban encroachment and difficulties in recruiting and training new volunteers to replace the ageing volunteers who were already within the brigades. We made a range of recommendations around those areas of forward planning, risk management, brigade funding, resourcing, performance measurement and training. They were probably the critical factors from our perspective.

Mr RICKUSS: Did you expect your report to put more pressure on the volunteers to take a more bureaucratic approach?

Mr Poole: That is an issue for QFRS as to the solution to the issues. We saw that across government, across many areas of activities, those activities are becoming more sophisticated and the delivery of those services is becoming more critical. Therefore, part of the response needs to be in the areas that were identified. Exactly how those issues were to be addressed is really a matter for QFRS and the allocation of responsibility between QFRS versus the volunteer out in the individual brigades.

Ms O'NEILL: My question is to the Department of Community Safety. We understand that there are four types of brigades—izone, village, rural and primary industry. Can you explain to the committee what the unique aspects of each type of brigade classification might be? How do the requirements for rural fire services in the various regions differ across the state?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: There are a number of classifications of brigades—the primary producer brigades, village brigades, rural brigades and izone brigades. We also have special service delivery brigades. We classify them in relation to the types of brigade and the body of work that they do. The bulk of our brigades are primary producer brigades, which are basically property owners looking after their properties and their mates' properties. It scales up through to the varying levels of rural and village, depending on what sort of infrastructure is in and around those locations, and to izone brigades, which quite clearly support izone locations. Special service delivery brigades are brigades that might operate out of resort islands or mining areas. So they are the classifications we determined and that is how we rate brigades.

Ms O'NEILL: What is your opinion of the requirements for rural fire services in the various regions and how do they differ?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: They differ in the communities they support. We have actually looked quite closely at how we support those brigades. The primary producer brigades, for example, are probably our biggest number of brigades. We have 645 primary producer brigades. As you are probably aware, we do have a rural fire brigade manual and we have a whole range of criteria and reporting that brigades have to comply with. With the primary producer brigades, they are more at arms-length from the organisation. So we have limited some of the contact requirements, some of the meeting requirements, to better support them so we do not put that bureaucracy on to those brigades.

Mr RICKUSS: Steve, do you class your rural fire brigades as a rural fire service or as a bushfire service? That was brought up a number of times this morning. Do you want them to be a bushfire service or do you want them to be a rural fire service? In rural areas, such as in my area in the Lockyer, there are a lot of farm buildings, sheds, horse properties and agricultural properties.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: The way we structure it is that Rural Fire Service volunteers belong to rural fire brigades—1,478 rural fire brigades make up the Rural Fire Service. Principally, their role is to provide bushfire fighting. They can provide support roles in relation to road crash rescue, hazardous materials management, structural fires, but they are really support roles. We do not have an expectation that they go into that field of work. To go into that field of work, workplace health and safety issues kick in which mean greater training, greater accountability, different equipment needs and of course that comes with different cost models. So it is principally about bushfire fighting and support to others in line with what the brigade actually feels they want to be part of.

Mr RICKUSS: In areas where probably the nearest auxiliary or urban brigade would be an hour away and the bushfire brigade is five minutes down the road, they are going to try to put some water on a house fire, aren't they?

CHAIR: They would be the first responders.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: That is quite right and that is what we promote, that they can assist in structural firefighting but externally. We do not promote them going internal firefighting. That creates a whole different training regime and a whole range of aspects there. For them to assist with external protection is fine.

Ms FARMER: My question is to the Gold Coast City Council and the Redland City Council. I have a couple of questions. How many RFBs, rural fire brigades, do you have in your council districts? How are they funded?

Mr Hyde: We have several units on both the mainland and the islands. We have full-time urban brigades at Cleveland, Capalaba and the Redlands. Then we have paid part-time urban auxiliary brigades located at Coochiemudlo and North Stradbroke islands. There is a heavy presence there.

Ms FARMER: In terms of the rural fire brigade, I am sorry, I missed that.

Mr Hyde: We have rural brigades but they are based on the islands and there are a couple on the mainland. I am sorry, I do not have the specifics.

Mr Potter: We have 18 rural fire brigades across the city. They are funded through two sources, one being a special rate against the properties that are not levied the urban fire levy. The other is a donation from the council which varies from year to year. This year it is \$100,000. That is out of whole-of-city funds. Other ratepayers of the city contribute to that as well.

Ms FARMER: What do you think are the major issues for your rural fire brigades?

Mr Potter: The major issue we believe is certainty of funding. The councils adopt an annual budget and therefore funding and the adoption of the special rate is subject to the council of the day. Going forward we believe it would be far better—hence our submission—if the funds were collected similarly to the way the urban fire levy is collected and distributed.

Ms FARMER: Mike, would you like to comment on what you think the major issues are for your rural fire brigades?

Mr Hyde: The islands have the rural fire brigades, if I can correct my previous statement. The major issue for us is to make sure that we have awareness from the public. We are seeing incredible tension with the digestion of what is coming out of Victoria from their fire catastrophe. When we try to translate that into a council area which has a very green council—everyone would know we are pro-koala habitat and that sort of thing—there is a natural tension between what people who support that sort of thing want versus what people who feel that their property is in danger want. There is a whole city urban interface there.

We have the same dilemma out on the islands which are covered by rural fire brigades. The basis of our submission was to try to get some full-time support to try to address the tension there. It requires education—

Ms FARMER: So you are talking about hazard reduction?

Mr Hyde: Hazard reduction, mainly, and awareness. I guess it all revolves around hazard reduction—the way you store things around your house and that sort of thing—and very much on the green environment that encroaches on it, maintaining biodiversity yet still having a safe environment for property and life. We see that the rural fire brigades are a key stakeholder in making that happen for us. If a person from a rural brigade speaks to the public, whether it is an education campaign or at a community hall meeting or whatever, they speak with a different level of authority to someone else. The authority inherent in their uniform and their training is very powerful when it comes to addressing those sorts of issues.

Ms FARMER: How are your rural fire brigades funded?

Mr Hyde: The normal way. I am not aware of them being funded in any unusual way.

Ms FARMER: Do you have a levy?

Mr Hyde: I believe so.

Mrs SMITH: My question is to Community Safety. The Auditor-General's report found that the department does not have a robust and systematic process to identify the nature and level of brigade activity to enable the allocation of resources based on the level of risk and need. Can you perhaps tell the committee how the needs of local rural fire brigades are assessed? What sort of information is provided by those RFBs to the department? How is that information used by the department?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: That was a recommendation that came from the Auditor-General. I can remember in the discussions back then that they did ask us how we actually allocated vehicles, equipment and grants to various rural fire brigades. In particular, they looked at the reporting back from those brigades in relation to response activity and training activity.

It has been very hard for us over the years to get those reports back from brigades. We are mindful of the fact that we are dealing with volunteers. For them to complete paperwork to send in to us can be seen as a little bit onerous.

What we have done to address that and what we would do for allocation is base our decision on information provided by the local area teams based on the knowledge of how many calls they did go to and what their activity levels were like. We do look at performance reporting in relation to their turn-outs, which is recorded through our new ESCAD system. We have also recently introduced a simplified electronic fire incident report which we can use. We also look at their activity statements on their one- and three-year plans, which were mentioned earlier in relation to budgeting. We are still trying to align some of those reports. We have verbal discussions on their activity. We still have a bit of a way to go with reporting processes. Again, we are mindful of the bureaucracy placed on volunteers.

Mr RICKUSS: Is there any recording of highway call-outs? The Warrego Highway and the Cunningham Highway run through my electorate. They are both high use highways. Some 3,000 or 4,000 B doubles a day go on the Warrego. Quite a lot of accidents occur. The rural firefighters are there first because they get the call-out as well. Is that being recorded? Is that taken into account in your data.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: As I mentioned before, we do record that especially through our new ESCAD system. We now record the vehicles that go and the types of incidents. Even though we might not get reports back from brigades we actually still have the basic information about who attended and what the incident was. That is being recorded now.

Mr RICKUSS: I think it would encourage the brigades to be more realistic with their responses to you if they realised that that data was being used to see whether they should be getting blue flashing lights because they are working on a major highway or other equipment that is relevant to their circumstances.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: I think one of the things that you need to be mindful of is the types of calls and whether brigades elect to turn out to those calls. They might not wish to be subjected to going to major road crash rescues. They might not be available to attend. It would be a case of recording those that do attend. It is voluntary; it is not an expectation of the organisation.

Mrs SMITH: Steve, just a follow-up. Do you provide feedback to the RFBs about how you use the information that they are providing to you? If so, how do you do that?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: We do. We are going through a process at the moment—we introduced it towards the end of last season—where we are conducting operational planning forums across the state within each region. Several have been conducted in each region. Those forums comprise rural volunteers, auxiliary firefighters, permanent staff, management and a range of other speakers, in particular Firecom managers. We discuss the importance of documentation and feedback on calls. We are using those as fairly open forums, but with structure about the information we get out and the feedback we receive.

Mrs SMITH: Mr Auditor-General, would you like to comment on that?

Mr Poole: It was certainly one of the features of the results from the audit. We found across quite a number of brigades that we went to a lack of documentation on activity levels. We felt that this was important because the absence of this material meant that the department lacked some critical information about activity levels which would flow into its decisions around equipment needs and training needs but also flowed back into the area of planning for the future—planning for where the brigades were going.

We understood the issue in a number of the brigades about the paperwork and perhaps the lack of attention to that side of it. But what we also found was that in the district office there did not seem to be a process for following up the information that was not supplied. So therefore there was no feedback loop. If no-one was chasing it up and you did not do it for a year or two then obviously no-one was using it. Therefore the incentive for the brigades to actually complete that work was not there.

CHAIR: Bob, I have your submission in front of me. We have been all around the state. I must admit that I do not think we have met anyone from the Rural Fires Association of Queensland. Can you tell me what your role and the membership of your organisation is? How does it differ from the Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland?

Mr Burke: I have some brochures for you which outline the work of our organisation. It was formed in 1983. It has been going for some time. The difference between us and the Rural Fire Brigades Association is simply that we have people within our organisation, there are something like 40 of them at this particular time, who come from all walks of life and from across a whole spectrum—from career fire officers to auxiliary officers to rural fire brigade volunteers. That is the framework of our organisation. We meet every two months and we are kept very well informed of all aspects of rural fire and other fire activities throughout the state. We are also kept very informed of fires in other parts of Australia and the world because we have people who relate that information to us. Have I missed a question or two?

CHAIR: How many people are involved? How many members do you have?

Mr Burke: Forty, give or take a few. I do not know the exact figure.

CHAIR: What is the major difference? I am still not quite sure I understand.

Mr Burke: Our interest is the whole aspect of fire control and rural fire control ranging from training to research and administration. My organisation has quite a few thoughts on that. We are more across the whole spectrum of fire, particularly rural fire, in the state than, for example, the rural fire brigades. That is no disrespect to rural fire brigades. I worked for the system for years and formed literally hundreds of them.

CHAIR: I just needed to understand that. Dick, would you agree with the difference?

Mr Irwin: Yes, very much so. A lot of the members are either current employees of the paid fire service or retired personnel who have retained that enormous interest in the impacts of fire across the landscape.

CHAIR: So you are not in competition?

Mr Irwin: By no means at all. We are very much supportive of the overall views of the community.

CHAIR: Excellent, thank you.

Mr RICKUSS: My question is to the Department of Community Safety. The audit also found that there was a lack of an appropriate system to monitor the condition and safety of rural fire brigade equipment. Could you please advise the committee of what systems the department has put in place to monitor this equipment?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: Prior to the Auditor-General's report we did conduct a workplace health and safety report of fire stations. We contracted an external organisation to look at that. They raised a number of recommendations. We worked with the local brigades. In particular, some brigades had asbestos so we developed asbestos management plans. We worked through some of the minor issues that were easy to achieve straightaway such as fire extinguishers.

From an equipment and an appliance perspective, we have had our staff do compliance checks to make sure they are okay. We do annual inspections ourselves of the equipment in the stations—more so the appliances. Naturally we talk to the first officers in the brigades about the maintenance of the equipment.

Mr RICKUSS: I have been part of some pretty involved quality assurance programs over the years. Have you got a fairly simplified process for quality assurance? Quality assurance can be as difficult as you like or as simple as you like. Lee, would you like to outline the sort of systems you are putting in place that are realistic enough but simple enough that they can be run by volunteer firefighters?

Commissioner Johnson: If I could have your indulgence for a moment, Mr Rickuss, the things the Auditor-General has found have come from inadequate funding. Those systems and processes and the impact on rural fire brigades of having to stump up the money themselves to maintain vehicles and to run vehicles is the fundamental root of the problem, in my view. We place a tremendous onus on rural fire brigades to basically fully fund this.

Earlier today we heard the questions that you asked about the funding system. The funding system we are talking about came out of the 1994 PAC review which related to the ability of local authorities to impose a levy. That is not compulsory. Most local authorities in Queensland do not have that levy. Some councils fund brigades of their own accord. What was clear to me in listening to that evidence was the widespread inequity in terms of our funding base across Queensland.

I am sorry I have not answered you directly. We are, as Steve has said, putting in place processes through workplace health and safety and asset management but the real dilemma we have got is that individual brigades have the onus of maintaining equipment, including appliances and fleet, at their own cost. We do not pay for that, and never have. That is the fundamental difference between Queensland and the rest of Australia.

Mr RICKUSS: Are you saying that that is funded fully by government in the rest of Australia?

Commissioner Johnson: Every other state in Australia fully provides fleet, buildings, equipment and brigades can, in some states, put in requests for a bit of extra equipment over time. In Queensland the onus is on the community. That is where we have evolved from. That has come about over time. That is the legacy of the system we have. As you heard also, many people are very happy to volunteer. But the issue that we have to deal with is that some brigades have quite substantial bank balances and many others cannot scrape two bob together. I am sure the committee has heard about that inequity across Queensland. My concern is that in an age where Mr Poole, the Auditor-General, Workplace Health and Safety and national training competency standards are imposing requirements on us, which we then have to transfer to our volunteers, it is a difficult environment.

Mr RICKUSS: Part of the real problem, as I see it, is that there has to be an appropriate system in place so you can identify the cost. Even for governments to fund this, there needs to be an appropriate system. That is what I am saying about quality assurance programs. I feel it is your department's responsibility to put in place a tick-off sheet for quality assurance programs that say, 'The brakes on the fire trucks have to work. The lights have to work.' It would be fairly easy to tick off. It has to be fairly easy so it is not onerous for the volunteers. But it also has to be realistic. That will then give you some cost outcomes at the end of it, surely?

Commissioner Johnson: Exactly. I might ask Superintendent Hollier to add some area comment on how that goes. Let us talk about the fleet, for example. Essentially the government provides 80 per cent of the cost of the fleet and most brigades have to find the 20 per cent. Once that transaction has happened the fleet becomes a government asset. However, the government does not maintain that fleet. That is the fundamental problem. Obviously in our response to the Auditor-General's report, those issues that you have talked about are now being improved. Have we got an ideal asset management system? No, we have not. I will ask Superintendent Hollier to explain how they interact with brigades at an area level.

Mr RICKUSS: Just before you start—do not forget, some of these vehicles only do 30,000 kilometres in 20 years.

Commissioner Johnson: That is correct.

Mr RICKUSS: It is not as though there should be a high maintenance cost for them.

Commissioner Johnson: But the workplace health and safety audit clearly found that there were illegal modifications. Vehicles were modified locally because locals do things. That caused some concerns for us. A lot of good maintenance was carried out as well.

Supt Hollier: Further to what the commissioner has stated, at an area level there is a responsibility for the area staff to work cooperatively with the rural fire brigades. The emphasis is on working with the fire brigades on getting the compliance certificates for the appliances on an annual basis. Unfortunately, that comes at a cost. The cost is borne by the brigade to get that compliance certificate to ensure that they are at an appropriate level of roadworthiness, if you want to use that term, to be used on a regular basis for the purposes that we want them to be used for.

There is a program where the area staff report on the compliance level of brigades that have submitted a number of certificates for appliances that have been looked at. Where things have not been looked at, it is the responsibility of the area offices to chase that up and make sure that that compliance actually occurs. There is a process there. With the reliance on the brigades to undertake that certification and compliance, we have to wait for them to get that done at a time that suits them. It does come at a cost to them, as I said earlier.

Ms O'NEILL: My question is also to the Department of Community Safety. At our Cairns hearing we heard some comments about galvanised water tanks being used to fight cane trash fires. Those fires burn extremely hot and the water tank is close to the fire. We were told that the previously available galvanised tanks have been replaced with poly tanks. They believe they are unsuitable for that kind of fire. Can you tell us what kind of consultation takes place to ensure that equipment is suitable for the various diverse requirements?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: A contracted supplier provides the tanks for our slip-on units and the lighter appliances. With a lot of vehicle designs now we have had to go for the poly tanks due to weight restrictions—that is, the water and the number of crew that are being carried. I have not heard the issue about the tanks not being suitable.

CHAIR: These are tanks being towed by tractors?

Mr RICKUSS: They are the 3,000 litres that you put on farm trailers.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: I have not heard of any issues with the tanks. It might be a localised issue. If that were the case, that could be taken up at a local level and reported back to us. We have only heard that people were satisfied with the poly tanks.

Mr Trost: This matter was identified as a problem by the Canegrowers organisation through its membership.

CHAIR: Where has it gone though? If it has been identified, where has it gone? Has it been escalated?

Mr Trost: No, it has not. I suggest to you that there is no consultation in respect of appropriateness. Local complaints have been made but that has not generated any further investigation and outcome.

Mr Irwin: I certainly support exactly what Greg Trost is saying. Over a number of years there has been what has been referred to as an equipment committee. That was put together by the volunteers and the Rural Fire Brigades Association. That has not existed for five years or more. They are things that happen when there is no consultation and things are done without any thought of the users in different areas.

Ms O'NEILL: Just as a comment, the hearing also heard from people who said that when the poly tanks are on the primary producer units it is ideal because a couple of people can shift it around. Then they fill it up. They were not generally against poly tanks; it was in that specific cane trash fire situation. Could you please provide the committee with a copy of the current equipment list?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: We certainly can. We have just released an updated version of that.

CHAIR: Could I just follow up on the issue of the equipment committee. Would you like to comment on the fact that it has not been around for five years? If that is the case, why is that the case? Is there a different methodology involved now?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: We established an appliance committee to review the retendering process. We did have volunteer representation on the committee. It was headed up by one of our regional managers.

CHAIR: So an appliance committee is different to an equipment committee?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: It was an appliance committee. The equipment that goes on the appliance is part of that.

CHAIR: But you are suggesting we are not missing anything by getting rid of an equipment committee and replacing it with an appliance committee?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: It is about when there is a need to replace equipment. It is not as though we turn equipment or PPE over on a regular basis. We have stayed with the same models for a period of time.

Mr RICKUSS: So your equipment list does not change often enough to warrant an equipment committee; is that what you are saying?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: No, the equipment list has changed. I note some of the concerns raised that some of the smaller equipment was removed from the subsidised equipment list. Things like hose clamps and washers and a few other things were removed from the equipment list because we felt that if brigades could afford it they could go directly to the supplier to purchase it.

Mr RICKUSS: What happened to the equipment committee? Why did it disband five years ago?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: I would not know if it was five years ago.

Mr Irwin: It would be seven more than five.

Mr RICKUSS: More than five?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: We will introduce things onto the subsidised equipment list or remove things depending on the need.

Mr RICKUSS: Where does that information come from then? Do you just pluck it out of the air or does it come back from—

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: That would come from feedback through area officers on what is seen to be equipment that is needed. We have not got an equipment committee per se. We did have an appliance committee when we were looking at a retendering process to go through that documentation. If we were looking at wholesale equipment changes we would form an equipment committee again. To form a committee to review what is working—

Mr RICKUSS: You can do it as a death by a thousands cuts—

Ms O'NEILL: Did anyone else want to comment before we ask the next question?

Mr Irwin: There have been some dramatic changes in the equipment area. Had there been consultation or had the equipment committee still been in place safety issues, such as excessive noise, would not arise. I will give an example. One of the early Isuzus that came out after the equipment committee was dropped had a problem with the exhaust system. That poor placement was due to a lack of consultation with the people who use it on a daily basis. That is where the majority of problems come in. A tender may be made on price, not necessarily on performance.

I concur with what Commissioner Lee Johnson said. A lot of these issues stem from poor funding. But certainly a lot of these issues could be better addressed if there was better consultation. There are more things happening within Kedron but more fires happen outside there. They really need to deal with the people who are putting the wet stuff on the red stuff.

Mr RICKUSS: One of my fire groups actually got into trouble for relocating the exhaust on their truck because it was in the wrong place.

CHAIR: The issue of equipment, equipment lists and equipment committees has been raised several times around the state at all locations. It is obviously something that occupies a lot of time out there.

Ms FARMER: My question is to the Gold Coast City Council. In your submission you advise that your council's special budget committee recommended that the state government consider fully funding rural fire brigades with councils acting as collection agents, much as they do for the urban brigades. You talked a little bit about funding earlier. Can you expand on the thinking behind that recommendation?

Mr Potter: The thinking behind it was that basically there were a number of members whose divisions have rural fire brigades. They were thinking that because councils do adopt a budget on an annual basis there was no certainty for funding going forward. Most councils I would imagine throughout Queensland have a process in place at this point in time to collect urban fire levies. That process could well be used to collect a rural fire levy as well. So the same process would be available, and that is a simple administrative process, whereas the special budget is a separate process that we run through. A special rate is then raised on that basis and has to be administered on an individual basis as well. We think it is probably more efficient to have it raised through the state.

Ms FARMER: You would be thinking of it as a levy, as councils collect now, rather than a full funding model?

Mr Potter: Yes, we would think of it as perhaps an attachment to the urban fire levy. Just add another category within the urban fire levy.

Ms FARMER: Mike, would you like to comment on that?

Mr Hyde: No, I am sorry. I do not have that detailed knowledge. I am only new to Redland City Council, so I have not got that detailed knowledge. I do not want to mislead the committee.

Ms FARMER: That is fine. Sorry to put you on the spot. I am interested in the views of the Department of Community Safety. Steve, would you like to lead?

Commissioner Johnson: Obviously, for me, funding of the Rural Fire Service is the most strategic issue that we face. Again, I am not sure how many people around the state have raised the issue, but it was brought up here this morning as a particular issue. I would think it is definitely a policy issue for government. I would think that government as a whole would certainly take some guidance from the recommendations made by the Public Accounts Committee. I refer back to the 1994 outcome, which was the first time that the Rural Fire Service started to get on its feet. In 2001, I was appointed acting commissioner. Further in 2002, I realised that we had two disparate fire services—both urban and rural operations—operating unsafely, without that collaborative effort that was talked about this morning. I think since 2002 an enormous amount of work has gone into building the capability and capacity of the Rural Fire Service.

What I need to make clear is that currently \$20 million of urban fire levy funding funds the Rural Fire Service. Principally, in one way you could say that that pays for the paid staff, but there is no formula, there is no system, for funding rural fire operations. The amount of consolidated revenue has decreased over time and fluctuates with election commitment funding and special purpose funding for fire appliances. The capital program for rural comes out of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service urban capital budget. This is, to my way of thinking, an issue that needs to be resolved one way or another.

The timeliness of this review is, in my view, a benchmark spot for how we go forward into the future. The concept of whether we have a state-wide levy or a wholly state funded service is obviously a decision for government as a policy position. But I do not think we can go on indefinitely the way we are. We have a very capable Rural Fire Service. We have developed good capacity. There are a lot of great things happening. But, as I have heard already this morning—and no doubt you have heard—there is much to do, including having the ability to assist rural fire brigades, for example, with those administration issues that were talked about this morning. We have 115 FTEs, full-time equivalent staff, to manage 34,000 volunteers. Whilst we have made dramatic improvements in training and support to brigades, fundamentally there is a lot of work to be done.

Ms FARMER: I would like to get some comments from AgForce in particular, too. John, would you like to comment on the funding issue?

Mr Cotter: I would like to comment on the commissioner's comments about how far the Rural Fire Service has come. I can assure you, as someone who has had probably 40-odd years involvement, it has come an enormously long way. I think it also has to be put into context with how far the communities have come during that time. AgForce is particularly interested in the 600 rural primary producer brigades. Their interest is in about 70 per cent of the landscape of this state from Cape York to the far west, to the Channel Country, to what is probably the most critical issue which is the interface between peri-urban and rural interface areas. Certainly it is the area that causes most concern, I think, to both the service and the genuine primary producer brigades.

The days of where we basically looked after ourselves are gone. We now have some good support, particularly with things like communications and equipment where it is relevant. I think that is pertinent to the rural sector—that the equipment is relevant to the needs and the requirements. You asked a question about how equipment is allocated. We are strong advocates of equipment being allocated on a community demand basis in conjunction with fire service expertise to deal with things like changing climate and issues like that. The critical part of that interface is understanding the workplace responsibilities of the commissioner and his staff. It is very hard to have an overview of how you control a fire in rural areas of the magnitude that we see a number of times. It is very much an uncontrolled workplace. That becomes a huge issue for a bureaucratic organisation. That will not change. That will continue to be the case.

I also add the comment—and it is something that the commissioner and I have discussed—that once you get into those rural areas it is very much about fire management. I have heard a lot about equipment and so forth today. But a lot of that becomes a lesser issue when you get into broadscale areas where fire management becomes an issue of local machinery; local knowledge about how to use the landscape to manage those fires; and aerial support, which is now very much available and is of enormous assistance both from a surveillance point of view and from a firefighting point of view. There is a whole range of factors that have taken an enormous step forward as far as the rural sector is concerned.

The critical issue is that the engagement with those local communities is absolutely paramount, because at the end of the day they will respond. They have a vested interest to get the best result. Local government have been an enormous supporter of rural areas and rural brigades in a lot of cases, but they are under pressure, as are a lot of community organisations, to sustain that support. The key element that we need to look at going forward for rural areas is flexibility in how we manage those areas; community involvement and consultation; and adequate, relevant support with equipment and expertise.

Ms FARMER: Thank you for that, John. That was a very good, broad description, I think, of the issues for your members. Can you comment specifically on your views on how rural fire brigades are funded?

Mr Cotter: Personally, our own brigade was funded for many years directly from council general rates. Under amalgamation processes, that has become a fire levy, which did not inspire a lot of ratepayers. But it has certainly given us a base from which to put a minimum amount of funding into it. But I concur with the commissioner in saying that, from a state perspective, I think there certainly needs to be a secure process by which they can do forward planning and also integrate the planning processes as we

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see population growth and people moving out into these areas. The fire management process needs to be funded adequately from a state level or a national pool to provide the resources. It is not just about trucks and equipment. As I think Mr Burke said, it is about research. It is about forward planning. It is about a whole range of things. More than anything, it is also about educating a community to understand fire.

Ms FARMER: Would anyone else like to comment on that issue before we move on?

Mr Irwin: Certainly funding for rural is critical but, as John alluded to, throwing buckets of money at people will not necessarily address the issue. It is all about understanding fire management, as John has said. Unfortunately, because of the way the organisation grew and how it is now being managed in the areas—which is generally by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service—their fire management is generally based on structure and also very much on accountability. We welcome the Auditor-General's report because it certainly brings forward some of the deficiencies within rural. But, unfortunately, their yardstick or measure tends to be based on accountabilities of urban areas—very static, defined areas. In the rural community that is just not the case. Every area has different requirements and different needs. Not only that; if you throw a bucket of money at a brigade area, unless the community can utilise that money and are capable of manning that equipment and providing that service, it is all wasted.

Ms FARMER: I think the issue was raised by AgForce that it must be linked to strategic planning.

Mr Irwin: Yes, it is not just a matter of getting a one-size-fits-all model or necessarily having two brigades side by side treated the same way, because they may be a primary producer brigade and an izone brigade and those brigades will have different community capabilities. Even though it might be really easy to put them into a box, it is just not like that. The organisation really needs to look at that very closely. The only way they can address that is by communicating with the people.

Mrs SMITH: My question is to the Rural Fires Association. One of the submissions suggested that ratepayers across Queensland could pay a fire levy and that the levy would cover both urban and rural fire brigades. Bob, your submission hinted at a similar arrangement. How do you see that working?

Mr Burke: Quite simply. In the organisation that I represent, I and all of our members believe that every Queenslanders should pay a fire levy and that should be paid on a sliding scale depending on risk. That is the important factor. That money should be collected by the councils and then that money should be given to the commissioner, for example. The commissioner should then return the moneys appropriate to a particular area to his assistant commissioner. The assistant commissioner for a particular area really should be on top of everything. One of the things that is really wrong with this organisation at the moment is that after 20 years and two months we still have two fire services. That is the real problem, folks. It really is.

We should really put a red line through the words 'rural' and 'urban' services in the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. There is only one service. Until we meet and greet that, we will not get anywhere. Coming to the point that you raised, this could be organised through this funding system whereby everyone pays the levy. It would be coordinated and it would be appropriate for the area and the assistant commissioner, through his or her staff obviously, would know exactly what is required. It impacts on funding. It impacts on management. It impacts virtually on everything. We have even talked about equipment. So that is basically my answer to your question.

Mr RICKUSS: Bob, the comments that we have heard are that the volunteers would like their stand-alone organisation. We have heard that more often than hearing them say, 'No, we should all be done away with and we should be just one fire service.' The comment we are getting from the bush is: 'We want a stand-alone rural fire service.'

Mr Burke: I understand that. But, with due respect to the people who are saying it, we have crossed that bridge. That was 20 years ago. It is so difficult to turn back.

Mr RICKUSS: There are 35,000 volunteers out there.

Mr Burke: But the system cannot be sustainable like that. The only way the system is going to work is to have one fire service and have it all coordinated. For example, we still have two fire vehicles of a different colour. It creates a them and us scenario. We have to bring the career fire officers, the auxiliary fire officers and the rural brigades—the volunteers—together as one. If necessary, they should work with one colour of vehicle and work from one fire station, clearly understanding that each and every one of those people are professionals. They are professionals, and each and every one of them has something to give to the commissioner.

Mr RICKUSS: Thank you very much. That is very positive.

CHAIR: I have read your submission and I note that one of the recommendations was to have similar coloured vehicles. What are your thoughts on that, Lee?

Commissioner Johnson: Bob is correct in many of his assertions. In 1990 the Rural Fire Service and the QFRS amalgamated when the government brought in the then Queensland Fire Service and, in 1991, the Queensland Ambulance Service. We are one fire service. We operate operationally as such. Since 2002, the capability of both organisations or divisions within the QFRS operate collaboratively together, and no more so than our experience last year. If you ask me was it perfect, I could not say yes. We had some hiccups along the way. But we have made progress under the auspice of AIIMS, the incident management system, where we all operate on the fire ground in a structured way and in an organised way, and the most important feature of that is health and safety.

If we look to our colleagues to the south, there are two distinct fire services in New South Wales and there are three fire services in Victoria. They are not all collaborative; they are competitive. We have come a long way. There is only one entity—that is, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, endorsed by the Fire and Rescue Service Act.

We have certainly looked at closer amalgamation. At the moment, Steve is the operational head of rural operations right across the whole state of Queensland, and he has a management team out in the region. The urban fire service has assistant commissioners in each region in charge of their operations. However, at certain levels of operational activity, the assistant commissioner urban is the commander, if you like, or the person overall responsible to me for the performance of the QFRS in times of major firefighting, and that to this point has worked well. Whether there is another step further down the track for even closer alignment, I guess time and experience will tell.

Whilst I do not necessarily agree with Bob's statement, I think a lot of the volunteers are certainly keen to have that identity—their own symbols, icons and identities—and I do not fundamentally see anything wrong with that. Where I become pedantic with my staff, with my managers and leaders, is that I will not tolerate non-cooperative activity. We expect that that respect that Bob talked about is there, and we have to understand the role of the volunteer and the effort they put in. Again, we have more work to do in improving that. But, with 34,000 volunteers and about 4,000 urban style firefighters, there are going to be some personality spats and disagreements and people not getting on. But they are diminishing year by year.

I can report to the committee that I personally believe that the operational capability and capacity of QFRS as a whole is very high. We are continually looking at how we can improve that and enhance our capability, particularly our command control capability, because that skill which rural fire officers have, just as much as permanent staff and part-time staff, is also deployed widely across our state on behalf of our department to support, for example, EMQ in times of major disaster. Many rural volunteers form incident management teams and help our SES colleagues and our other colleagues in times of flooding and cyclones.

CHAIR: We might leave it there and come back to that. Michael?

Mr CRANDON: My question is to Volunteering Queensland. Perry, the committee is interested in understanding what prompts people to volunteer to join rural fire brigades in particular. Where do volunteers come from? Why do they join? What motivates them in that regard? In the end, why do they leave? Could you give us an insight?

Mr Hembury: Yes, it is an interesting question. In Volunteering Queensland, about three or four years ago now we coined the phrase 'the volunteering revolution' that we were experiencing. I do not in any way want to summarise for the committee what I have heard this morning, but all of the issues around funding, the structure of the services, equipment, vehicles and increasing accountability et cetera are all, to our way of thinking, taking place on the shifting sands of the volunteering workforce and the trends that we are experiencing. Those shifting sands are coming about by, if you like, the winds of change in the demographics. The evidence is clear that the voluntary workforce is ageing, getting tired if you like. There is an attrition rate there that is not being addressed in many areas.

Where we experienced in times past almost an automatic desire on the part of Queenslanders to commit to the sort of work that the fire services achieve, we are finding now that we are dealing with different expectations of a younger generation. They are certainly looking for a lot more flexibility in their voluntary commitment. That is a very difficult area, I think, for organisations and fire services to deal with. They are looking for the pragmatic issues of learning new skills and identifying ways of volunteering that might lead them into a chosen career path. But they are also looking for a match, if you like, between their voluntary commitment and their own values, their own value system. They are looking for innovative ways to engage with organisations. We are seeing the emergence of virtual volunteering, for example. It is a very, very complex area that we are continuing to research. We are trying to open up as many lines of communication as we can with the organisations and with individual volunteers, trying to find ways in which we can raise greater awareness.

Mr CRANDON: Do you have any specific data on why people are leaving other than they are just getting too old to do it anymore? Do you have any data on why younger people are leaving?

Mr Hembury: We are in the process of gathering that data as we speak. Anecdotal evidence is certainly suggesting that, of course, there is the ageing issue, as you said. Also, we are getting quite a good deal of feedback that the cost to volunteers is a big issue these days. We have heard others speak this morning about the cost that impacts on organisations and on individual volunteers. We are hearing volunteers saying, 'I've been using my own vehicles. They're wearing out. I'm having to take annual leave to get time off from my employer.' There are those sorts of things. There are broader issues of business engagement, the employers, as well. It is data that we are constantly gathering. We are running various workshops around the state.

Mr CRANDON: Is there material that you could provide the committee in that regard?

Mr Hembury: Yes. I think the research is in the early stages admittedly, but we can provide progressive data on that for sure.

Mr CRANDON: Thank you. Could you give us your thoughts about how brigades can improve their ability to encourage volunteers and, as a follow-up to that, how do you think the Department of Community Safety could assist?

Mr Hembury: This is the \$64,000 question—how do you attract younger generations, the gen Ys and gen Xs and so on? Part of the problem we believe, with all due respect to the services and to the organisations, is that they are not, generally speaking, adequately aware of how to engage with those younger communities using the social networking formats and the like. We are working currently with the Office for Volunteering to devise new ways of engaging with younger people, especially in the 18- to 30-year-old age groups. There will be a big campaign hopefully next year to encourage greater awareness around that. It is an ongoing effort. We are conducting educational and training exercises with organisations to try to encourage them to explore new and innovative ways of reaching young people.

Mr CRANDON: Are you saying that you have engaged with rural fire brigade organisations?

Mr Hembury: Yes, with some. Those we have had very positive feedback from appear to be using very integrated ways, if you like, of achieving that. They are addressing their internal culture, for example, and ways in which they can support individual volunteers in more substantial ways. This all has a cost factor, of course, for organisations. We appreciate that. But many of them are trying to explore new ways of engaging with them, where possible providing flexible work arrangements and supporting them as much as possible. I believe it is fair to say that we are going to work more closely with the Department of Community Safety in all of these areas in coming months and coming years to find even better ways and more ways of educating organisations and the services in these areas.

Mr CRANDON: Perry, in the interests of time, could you provide us with the contact details of some of the rural fire brigades that you have engaged with so that we could perhaps write to them and get their direct feedback?

Mr Hembury: Yes.

Mr CRANDON: The last part of the question was: how do you feel the Department of Community Safety could assist? Is there something specific they could do to assist rural fire brigades?

Mr Hembury: Yes, I think we just need to communicate very clearly and very frequently. We need to work together in a very strong partnership, if you like, to identify more ways or better ways of communicating and getting the word out there. I suspect a lot of it will be using Web 2.0 technologies, creating new and dedicated websites and getting suitable content on there and getting those sorts of things out there in a cost-effective way. Yes, the indications are, from what I understand, that we are already engaging in the early stages of that communication. I think that will continue to gain momentum.

Mr CRANDON: Thank you.

CHAIR: Steve, what would you like to tell us?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: Recruitment and retention of volunteers is a very serious issue for us. In relation to youth, we held a volunteer summit earlier this year—a conference, so to speak. We had 206 volunteers turn up. We took the opportunity to survey them at the end of the conference to see what the biggest issue was for them. Overwhelmingly they came back saying, 'Attracting youth into the brigades.'

We have been doing a little bit of work with the department of education. We are trialling a certificate II program at Kilcoy State High School. On Monday this week we had—not big numbers—nine students graduate. Those nine were given a certificate II. They have signed up with six local brigades. That now has been broadcast and communicated to all of our area officers and they are all looking at engaging with their local state high schools to get that program in place.

We have done a lot of work with agricultural colleges. I know the Emerald agricultural college campus have 22 students signed up there. We are also exploring Facebook and Twitter, the social networking side of things. So we are doing a lot of work in recruiting younger people into brigades. We do see that as being very, very important.

Mr RICKUSS: I think you have a program in Cooktown as well in the high school.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: Yes, we have one in Cooktown. We also put a recruitment kit together in November 2007. This is designed to assist brigades. We are happy to work with brigades to help with their recruitment. This pack we put together was based on some research from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre. So it is founded on research. We are very mindful of that.

CHAIR: Is that for us?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: Yes.

Mr RICKUSS: My question is to the Department of Environment and Resource Management. That is you, Clive. You have been sitting there with interest for most of the morning. The committee has had a number of submissions discussing communication issues with government agencies. Could you please advise the committee how the department communicates its policies and procedures directly to rural fire brigades? I am sure you are aware, Clive, that you quite often get blamed for a lot of fires. I do not know whether you should be blamed for them, but you do get blamed for a fair few of them.

Mr Cook: Yes. Thank you for the question. The manner in which we articulate the policies and procedures with which we manage our patch is principally through our website, where we have a whole range of other medium. We do, if you like, community announcements prior to burnings to let people know what is happening. The issues that affect us principally are that shift, as we spoke about this morning, from rural to peri-urban areas, because rural fires are different to the peri-urban and izeone type of fires. We are seeing that a lot of our resources are being sucked into the peri-urban areas because of the mandate to protect life and property. Then the biodiversity or ecological fire management—which is the broadscale fire management that we do across the 12½ million hectares that we have—is different. So our skill sets in our workforce have to be married to that as well.

Mr RICKUSS: Do you actually talk to the local rural fire wardens who are neighbouring your groups? Last year or the year before 17 fires were started in the forestry out west of Gatton, and I was getting phone calls saying, 'The bloody forestry has lit all these fires,' but it was actually someone driving along and just lighting fires.

Mr Cook: Yes, we try to be proactive about that pre-season. We put a notice out of our intention to burn. We work with different levels. We work with high-level interdepartmental committees and so on. At the regional level and at local level we make announcements to all of the local shires and brigades, and quite often we work hand in glove with them in any case because they are part of the team. As you aware, we form part of a state funded resource for the rural fires as well. Quite often though, as you know, a plume of smoke goes up and we get blamed for it. Arson is a big issue for us. The statistics for fires that enter the protected areas in the state are very low compared to the fires that leave the protected areas in the state. That is very much a function of a lot of arson that takes place—people lighting up on our behalf, thanks very much.

Mr RICKUSS: I had this issue brought up with me a few years ago. Is your equipment now compatible with the rural fires equipment? At one stage you used inch-and-a-half fittings on your machines and the rural fires used two-inch fittings on their machines. Is there compatibility now?

Mr Cook: Yes, I would say that it would be pretty close to 100 per cent, particularly with all the new equipment. There is interoperability between the different units of the fire services, ourselves and so on. Communications is another good example where we had a bit of a disconnect. We could drive past each other but could not talk to each other. We could wave but that was about it. Now we have better communications. As the commissioner has indicated, we run the same incident management control systems as well. So the interoperability between our functionary units, the rural fire brigades and also the fire service itself is getting better. So you should be able to hook up a hose from one unit to another.

Mr RICKUSS: Would Canegrowers and AgForce like to make a comment on what the department of environment does to you at times?

Mr Cotter: How long have you got?

CHAIR: We have about 60 seconds in fact.

Mr Cotter: I think it goes further than just the department of environment. What I have an absolute passion for is in line with the commissioner's comment that if you own the property you own the fire. I think that should not negate any state owned land or Commonwealth owned land, including the Army or anyone else. Unfortunately, that is not the case and it is not the case for a variety of other things like pests and weeds as well. I just think there is an enormous opportunity for that issue to be addressed. I do not think it is good enough, for instance, for Main Roads to say, 'We'll pay the rural fire brigade to burn the roadside.' There has to be a far more responsible attitude taken in relation to crown land or non-government owned land than there is at the moment. I think we have come a long way with national parks particularly recently. There is still a varied degree of arrangements across the state—an enormous difference. But I am of the understanding that that is certainly well on the way to being addressed, and so it should be. The responsibility has to be equal, not on one side or the other.

Mr Trost: I support what John said. There have been many instances over the years where fires have escaped from national parks into cane land. The issue of hazard reduction management continues to be an issue. With regard to Main Roads and clearing the verge of main roads, growers have had difficulties. They have had to provide indemnities to Main Roads when they are actually doing the work that Main Roads should be doing, so the balance is not right. Cane growers do a lot of work and are very particular about the headlands and so on around their cane fields.

CHAIR: Bearing in mind the time, we are going to have to finish up very shortly because we all have other appointments this afternoon. But I am going to give everybody 60 seconds to sum up. Bearing in mind, Dick, that you have had a couple of goes at this already, I will give you a go. Could you tell us quickly some of the major points you would like us to take away from today. Dick, you go first.

Mr Irwin: I think there is a greater need for the fire service to be more collaborative and more engaging with the community. It is essential that that happens. The rural system is very different from the urban structure. If they wish to address the growth in volunteering across the state, which the Premier has said she wants to do, and if they want continuance of being part of one fire service—if that is what is needed—then being more collaborative and more engaging with the community is essential. As I said, that is completely different from what is applied to paid staff. If nothing else comes out of this and if the fire service hears nothing else, that will make a difference for the future of the volunteers.

CHAIR: Thank you, Dick. Perry?

Mr Hembury: Yes, I think we all appreciate the significance of a healthy volunteer workforce. I think our message is simply that we need to continue to find ways and to explore new ways of nurturing that workforce and new ways of attracting younger people especially. Recruitment strategies perhaps need to be explored. We need to find new ways of managing and retaining the volunteer programs to some extent, and of course we need to support the volunteer workforce so that each individual volunteer has a positive, satisfactory experience in their work which, of course, will lead automatically to higher levels of retention and effectiveness in their jobs.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr Poole: I had my go when we did the audit and wrote the original report. I certainly want to thank the committee for the work that you have done in following up on that. We would normally look to follow up on an audit 18 months to two years after we have done it. At this stage we have not followed up on this one, although we have had some discussions with the department on their progress during the last little while.

There is one issue that I want to reinforce. There were some comments earlier about funding and the importance of funding. While I support that, I also see that there is an issue around the way the funding comes at the moment. It rather splits the accountability in that the QFRS is responsible for total fire issues within Queensland. However, funding coming from local government rather diffuses the accountability about how that funding happens and how that funding is spent. When we questioned around budgets and so forth, the QFRS were effectively saying, 'No, we can't follow that trail because the funding comes from local government.' That does seem to me to cause some issues of dispersing and diffusing that accountability regime. Who are the local brigades responsible to—the people who pay the bills or QFRS? I would ask the committee to have a look at that issue as part of your wrap-up.

CHAIR: And we did identify some of those issues this morning. Clive, do you have some quick comments you would like to make?

Mr Cook: Yes. I wrap up by reaffirming that the parks service and DERM stand ready as a partner in moving this agenda forward in the sense that we are part of the community, not apart from it. We work with our neighbours and with our colleagues. I use the metaphor of the hoses connecting together. Our 700 fire trained staff are available in rural communities to assist there as well. It is about coming together, not growing apart.

CHAIR: Thanks, Clive. Lee or Steve?

Commissioner Johnson: I might ask Steve to add some information about training when I finish. The opportunity presented by this parliamentary process is really for me fundamentally about the next era of rural fire in Queensland, just as the 1994 PAC hearings enabled brigades to get a methodology for funding that did not exist before. From a strategic point of view, the funding of the service is the most important issue for me going forward. It would clear up some of that ambiguity that was talked about and provide certainty so that we can all go forward as stakeholders with a well-mapped out and well-planned future for assets and fleet and service delivery models and the like.

The other aspect that I will touch on just before asking Steve to touch on training is the importance of fire management. The Rural Fire Service philosophies that the organisation was created with back in 1949 have not changed—that is, landholders are responsible for fire management on their land. We will do everything possible to make sure that we encourage the appropriate use of fire in the landscape in Queensland. When we look at our colleagues in southern states and their lack of ability to carry out hazard reduction burns, the consequences of that are just too enormous to consider. We have a fairly good regime in Queensland. The service itself, supported by RFBAQ, AgForce and others, will do everything possible to make sure that the fire management regimes in Queensland and the use of fire both for agriculture and for diversity management stay in place. That is something we strongly support.

CHAIR: Thank you, Lee. Steve?

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: I just thought I would mention some training information because it was raised here earlier. Again, QFRS is mindful of the training of volunteers and mindful of their time. We have adopted some different training approaches. We have introduced flexible learning that comprises e-learning DVDs. We also have a volunteer portal. If you have not accessed it, I would encourage you to access the volunteer portal.

CHAIR: We have.

Assistant Commissioner Rothwell: We have some 22 learning bytes on there which are pieces of training that volunteers can do in the comfort of their own home. Training for us is a priority. We now have 10,500 volunteers trained in FMS. Two years ago there were only 6,500 trained. As part of our structure that we put in in 2006, we have actually increased the number of brigade training support officers to 22. I think that is a result of them being out and about, assisting and promoting training. Nearly 1,900 volunteers have done the crew leader training and we are about to release officer training next month. So an officer program is coming out next month. We have a fairly active training department. There are only a few people in it—two researchers and a couple of people who pull curriculum together. But we tailor it to suit the volunteers.

Commissioner Johnson: Sorry, Chair, I just need to add that every firefighter in Queensland—whether they are paid, full-time, part-time or volunteer—undertakes the same curriculum for bushfire fighting.

CHAIR: Thank you. Bob, would you like to give us a few ideas?

Mr Burke: I have outlined my thoughts on having one fire service with one assistant commissioner running the three fire facets within the state and the vehicles having the one colour. But one point we have not raised here today is the role of the fire warden. The organisation I represent firmly believes that this is the most important part of this state's rural fire activities. It is always overlooked and it has been completely overlooked in the last few years. They should account for at least 80 per cent of the organisation's direction to pre-fire side of things. There is not much point in fighting the fires, spending millions and millions of dollars on fire suppression, when you do not know who is lighting the fires. Our answer to this is to pay the fire warden something like \$100 per annum. In receipt of that, the fire warden would report monthly back to the assistant commissioner on permits issues, permits refused, the state of his particular area—be it fire problems on crown or private land, and bear in mind that the commissioner has enormous powers to abate fire hazards on crown or private land. So we would like to see the fire warden role raised from its current position of near obscurity to where it really should be—at the front of the rural fire system in the state of Queensland.

CHAIR: Thanks, Bob. In fact your submission does go into detail about that issue. We have all read that. It has been picked up at every other public forum we have been involved in, but today we have not had the time to get to it. There are many other issues we would like to have covered. Glen, do you have anything you would like to finish on?

Mr Potter: I think there needs to be certainty of funding—however the organisation is structured going forward—for each budget request coming through to Queensland fire for capital and operational funding, so there is an idea across the board of what is required in each of the areas. I believe that if all the capital purchases were owned by Queensland fire then they would go into their asset database and that would enable asset maintenance, asset replacement and also workplace health and safety to be covered in a more strategic manner.

CHAIR: Agreed. Mike?

Mr Hyde: I will bring it down to a more local issue for us, because we do not have much of a rural fire brigade presence in Redland. We are almost a suburb of Brisbane in many ways. But the southern Moreton Bay island brigades do need the presence of a couple of full-time people on Macleay Island and Russell Island to reflect the risks and the management of the risks inherent in having an increasing population and settlement on those islands in what are very exposed fire situations. This would ensure the adequate harnessing of the horsepower that is inherent in a very willing volunteer presence on the islands. You heard about the multiplier effect you get when you harness good, volunteer efforts.

CHAIR: Thanks, Mike. Greg?

Mr Trost: Thank you for the opportunity to give a quick summary. I believe there should be increased recognition for the Rural Fire Service. The land management skills that are necessary are quite different to those skills that are utilised for managing fires and structures. There should be increased funding for the Rural Fire Service. I do not think there is any doubt about that. In terms of the process though, we believe that local brigades should develop a budget for consultation with local government and the voluntary levy to assist with the funding should actually be used in that local area. Mr Burke talked about identifying risk and user-pays. We have some concerns about all of the funds going to the commissioner unless there are some very clear guidelines that that funding will go back to the rural brigades, because there are other pressures that are imposed upon the commissioner. We are very definite about that view.

There should be greater availability and suitability of equipment that is on offer to rural brigades, taking into account the appropriateness of the equipment. The example that was given was with regard to the cane industry and the management of trash fires. A major issue for the Queensland fire service at the present time is the lack of consultation with regard to levy imposition, even though they know that they are not going to improve the service delivery. That is a major issue that they currently have.

Training is valuable but training demands must take into account the volunteers' work and family commitments. In relation to assistance for planning, if you want rural brigades to develop plans—one- to three-year plans—you have to help them. Also, there needs to be legal protection for rural brigade officers. They are there acting in good faith and sometimes issues happen, so they need to be assured that they are legally protected.

Lastly, Canegrowers supports the current fire permit system. There are wardens who do provide the permits, and our industry has been recognised as having particular fire needs. We believe that that system should continue.

CHAIR: Thanks, Greg. John, lucky last.

Mr Cotter: I thank the committee for taking our comments today. I want to reinforce the issue of understanding the fire management of the broader landscape. I think it is very different from what many of us discuss on a day-to-day basis at these sorts of forums. I would urge the commissioner particularly and

his senior people in fire management to undertake the training from a landscape point of view. There are some of the most knowledgeable people who own and manage the landscape on a day-to-day basis out there. I know that there is an inordinate amount of pressure put on the training of volunteers, but some of those volunteers can offer the senior people in this organisation an enormous amount of information in the management of fire in the broader landscape as well. I would certainly urge that.

The ownership of the fire service in rural communities is absolutely imperative. Unless those communities own that service and see it as their responsibility and see the organisation being there to serve their purpose and not them being servants of the organisation, then that would certainly give the best result in those communities. If local governments, local communities and in many cases large businesses and producers offer all of their equipment at any time to fight fires, that should also be appreciated in preventative maintenance. We heard the gentleman from DERM talk about how we can do much more preventative work.

I think there will always be a challenge where the peri-urban and the rural meet. That is something that will continue in this state as growth right across the state continues. It is occurring not only in the south-east corner but also right across the state. Some of the greatest challenges are in places like the central Darling Downs, where we have huge tracts of peri-urban people plonked in amongst large rural areas. That will also be a challenge. But do not underestimate how far we have come. If we are looking forward and progressing into the future, we will meet communities' demands.

CHAIR: Thank you, John. The time allotted for this session today has expired. If any members of the committee have any additional questions we will write to you seeking that information. Thank you for your attendance today. Is it the wish of the committee that the evidence given here before it is to be authorised for publication pursuant to section 50(2) (a) of the Parliament of Queensland Act? There being no objection, it is so authorised. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned at 12.23 pm