

Dear Sir/Madam,

please find attached a submission made on behalf of the Ripley Valley Rural Fire Brigade which was fully endorsed at our recent general meeting.

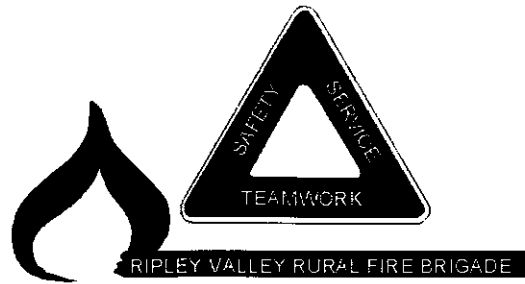
regards

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If you require any further information, please contact me via mobile.



Submission to the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

“Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland”

This submission is made on behalf of the members of the Ripley Valley Rural Fire Brigade. We are a relatively new Brigade situated between Springfield and Amberley near Ipswich. We were formed in 1995 but have steadily grown into a progressive Brigade with an I-Zone Classification striving for professionalism and constant improvement. Members of the Brigade are proud residents of Ipswich and proud to be part of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. With a membership of 8 officers and 40 other members we are a relatively large Brigade and maintain an active program right through-out the year that includes fire awareness / fire prevention activities as well as a structured training program. Our largest concerns with regards to the Rural Fire Service include, the evolving operational model for I-Zone Brigades as urban sprawl encroaches onto traditional rural land, strategies for ongoing funding and sustainability in the team of trained rural firefighters.

An underlying concern is that there is insufficient consultation with Rural Volunteers and in places an Urban culture that appears to be both arrogant and ignorant at senior levels which has not allowed the Rural Fire Service to develop into a professional complimentary fire service that can work side by side in confidence with Urban Firefighters. Examples which will be elaborated on further in later sections include the approach to the development and implementation of new systems such as Escad as well as the generally poor funding strategies of the service as a whole that has led to pettiness and competitiveness in various QFRS / RFS relationships.

To those members who have previously served in the Army Reserve; it was a similar situation between the Regular and Reserve Forces in the early 1980's but improved training, funding and structure led to improved conditions and capabilities of the reserves with some amalgamated units eventually operating successfully. We recognize that the level of training, professionalism and commitment of many Rural firefighters is inconsistent but is through a coordinated and holistic management approach by QFRS including true respect of all QFRS team members, especially in times of change, that the Rural Fire Service can step up and become the partner within QFRS that they should be. We only have to look at our brethren firefighters south of the border to understand where we could potentially strive towards and as interstate firefighting efforts become more frequent, more lessons and benchmarking of processes will occur whether in a planned or ad hoc manner.

Recommendation:

That a strategy be articulated, communicated and enacted to guide the Rural Fire Service to be fully integrated within QFRS as a valued part of, yet a distinct operational division with a full review of equipment and training to enable both branches of the one service to cooperate and compliment each other in a professional manner with mutual respect. The strategy needs to focus on the services complimenting each other; not the competitive nature often seen in areas at present. QFRS also needs to make sure they have the most suitable personnel involved with the development of these strategies and a truly collaborative effort between parties is achieved.

Operational Model

Rural Fire Brigades around the state are as diverse as the individual members that make up the Brigades. The influence of QFRS via local area offices is starting to reshape many of Brigades; especially those closer to towns. The introduction of the new Brigade classifications was a good step in identifying and grouping these different types of Brigades. Another good step forward is the targeted training and criteria based roles such as crew leaders, officers, first officers etc. This step approach to Brigades and firefighter development enables a structured training program as well as an incident management process in fire fighting situations that accommodates escalation that is consistent and clearly understood. It will also improve the current election process by enabling only qualified members to be elected to higher positions. This is vitally important for Rural Brigade's in I-Zone areas such as ours.

It is in this area that a lot of work has happened behind the scenes but much work remains. Our desire is to see a complimentary team arrangement with the Urban/Auxiliary branches of the Service. There needs to be a clear allocation of primary tasks and an area of supplementary tasks where Rurals can support Urbans at certain types of incidents. This work load could be independent of the actual Brigade's location; for example, qualified Rural Brigades could be considered to assist with vegetation fires in suburbs if required to minimize the load on Urban stations. This does happen with us from time to time but is as a result of certain local Urban officers having confidence in our Brigade.

Clear rules need to be adopted on job allocation. In theory they are there but in practice it is a different story. Erroneous dispatching is sometimes a result of new systems not knowing real boundaries, sometimes it is misinterpretation of incoming 000 calls. As a broad solution; Rurals should be responded in the first instance to vegetation fires. Urbans and Rurals should be responded to vegetation fires threatening houses. For a remote structure fire; the Urbans obviously would be the primary response service but they should be confident in calling on Rurals for water supply and supplementary help. Unfortunately the Rural Fire Service as a whole is not quite there yet at present when it comes to complimentary equipment, suitable training, or respect from our Urban team mates. Our Brigade is fortunate to have good relations with neighboring Urban station crews. It will however take time and training with the right attitude to get a broader acceptance of Rurals by the Urban service but it will happen.

The first operational problem area all Brigades encounter today is the despatch/job systems that are being utilized by Firecom. The Escad system is designed for the Urban environment by Urbans. Data integrity from the old system was not efficiently brought across to the new system. This includes errors in contact details, street names and primary response appliances for different streets. The only reason we became aware of the errors was because we asked for a print-out of the Brigade's details. Errors reported through Area Office have taken months to correct.

Recommendation: The Firecom systems need to be audited for accuracy for Rural Brigade's contact details, appliance fleet etc. A list should be sent to all first officers and any corrections should be made in a timely manner. The roads, streets etc in I-Zone areas need to have agreed 'ownership' by either of the services via a consultative process between the respective Rural first officers and the Urban I-Zone Officers.

The new system in conjunction with the Wild Fire Alert (WAL) process treats each Rural Brigade equally to one Urban pumper. This becomes extraordinarily wasteful at WAL 3 where two full Brigades are responded to a fire call where two appliances should only be needed. The system assumes a Brigade only has one vehicle as per an Urban station but in effect, some like ourselves have 4 vehicles or more which means technically we are supposed to activate at least 10 of our people plus the neighboring Brigades crews away from their private lives every time a fire call is received. This could be a common occurrence during a busy fire season. At WAL 4 multiple Brigades are asked to respond and so the total volunteer commitment, along with other costs such as catering etc could be quite significant. This does have the effect of dramatically eroding member reserves and could strain resources if a large fire does eventuate. Another reported problem with the system is that apparently at elevated WAL levels, once a Brigade has been responded, then if another fire is reported in the area, then Firecom would assume the whole Brigade is engaged. They may not be aware of other available appliances coming on line and will call out the neighboring Brigade. Volunteer crews take time to activate, especially in working hours through the week. It may take up to two hours to get a full Brigade turn-out and so as crews come on line; the first officer normally manages them and then consults with Firecom.

Recommendation: The Firecom systems need to be updated so that individual appliances, whether Urban or Rural are managed. They need to understand which appliance is a dedicated 'first response' appliance, usually a medium. The WAL system needs to escalate the number of appliances, not just grouped as Brigades. Eg WAL3 call outs should be two appliances at least, WAL 4 should be full Brigade or at least four appliances. If the system managed individual appliances, then that would deliver the most efficient use of resources for a given incident and increase the service capacity as a whole to tackle multiple incidents.

It is not clearly articulated nor has it been included in formal training exactly how Rural Brigades should work in conjunction with our Urban counterparts. It is generally up to the individual Brigade's to organize training activities with local Urban crews. There is a significant difference in the levels of incident management training between Rural Brigades and this is a critical element of working collaboratively with Urbans at an

incident. We also have different appliances but the real problem area is the different plumbing. The Rural Fire Brigade Groups are also quite different around the state and their roles in training seem ad hoc and dependent on their individual members. The Rural Fire Service does not always provide essential training to Brigades, eg Chainsaws or first aid. It is generally left to the Brigades to organize with outside training firms.

The types of rural vehicles around state still vary considerably due to age but new standard appliances are a distinct improvement for operational use and greatly assist where crew swapping is required at large incidents. However the level and consistency of vehicle maintenance between Brigades is poor at times and potentially dangerous. This was quite evident over the past few months when crews were sent on deployment around the state and manned various local appliances.

Recommendations:

Training for fighting wildfire, structure protection etc (all I-Zone tasks) should be developed that is consistent and joint training between Urbans and Rurals should be introduced.

Joint Incident Management Training Courses should be introduced. This will also build networks between Rural and Urban officers opening the way to other service improvements and conflict resolution.

The role of Groups in Brigade Training needs to be confirmed. It is unclear who will coordinate training across Brigades at a local level; either the Groups or Area Office. If it is the Groups, then they need to be supported better with clear guidelines and expectations.

QFRS needs to accept and enable Rural brigades to carry out training in all operational fields including chainsaws and first aid.

An auditing procedure and resources for all Brigade vehicles and equipment needs to be introduced to ensure that they are in good operational condition.

Appliances for Strike Team selection especially need to be in A1 condition of a standardized format.

As urban sprawl encroaches on Brigades; there are a number of changes that impact on the Brigades. Obviously the fear of having our Station that we have diligently built up over many years being closed is of concern but we have been told that Brigade closures won't be happening. So a new model of co-existence is essential. The financial aspect will be discussed in a latter section.

As the area around a Rural Brigade is developed, we have found that the membership base transitions from local land owners who are primarily concerned about protecting the property in their area to members who often living outside of the immediate area, join because they want to serve in the broader QFRS and help communities where ever required.

Brigades like ours strive to improve their training, equipment and overall professional standing. As the population growth expands, Brigades can ask to be transitioned into I-Zone Brigades which at present brings about new training expectations but that is about it. The escalation of Brigades through the new classification system also needs to encompass many facets of fire fighting. Training has been mentioned but there should also include a review of equipment and transition to more complimentary formats to Urban appliances. For example, in the current RFS appliance fleet there exists a great deal of variety in the plumbing and equipment, primarily due to age but also wealth / proactiveness of the Brigade. This can be challenging when asked to crew another Brigade's vehicle in the heat of an incident. Another example of QFRS diversity is that the Urban service have a 4WD medium appliance format established for I-Zone areas. Usually a Mitsubishi Canter with a dual cab, standard hose reel plus a high pressure pump, standard Urban plumbing etc. There should be joint training on the equipment and we are fortunate enough to have done so with the Ipswich Urbans on their appliance.

Recommendations:

Rural appliances should have new standardized plumbing so that interaction with Urban appliances as well as other Rural Brigades does not require handmade adaptors and specific brigade experience to fully utilize each vehicle. An I-Zone appliance should be the same whether red for Urban or yellow for Rurals. The QFRS should develop a mutually agreeable I-Zone medium appliance design in collaboration between Rural and Urban representatives; taking into account lessons learnt in the NSW RFS for their similar Cat 7 appliances. Ideally these I-Zone appliances should be run by Rural I-Zone Brigades as often the Urban stations with them do not have the staffing levels to run them as well as their pumpers. This should be the standard moving forward and represent the collaboration and complementary nature of a unified QFRS.

It needs to be understood also that as an I-Zone Brigade does become more proficient and builds a greater capacity, that a greater proportion of the call-outs will be out of area assisting other Rural Brigades or Urbans and so Brigades need to plan to operate more flexibly and making greater allowance for sustainability within their membership base. It is quite possible to burn out a Brigade's reserves of volunteers if over stretched and poorly managed. Member morale, pride and respect are key issues to be considered. Volunteers are obviously not chasing payment for services but they do require recognition of their efforts, respect for their professionalism and a sense of being supported by a broader parent organization and that is where QFRS needs to continue to step up. There have been some great initiatives such as the Volunteer Portal and these need to be complimented through operational processes and structures. It takes roughly two years to train up a volunteer firefighter and be exposed to different operational experiences. It is a great loss when those members walk away from a Brigade, especially if it was a result of poor management or support from QFRS. There are many aspects of Brigade life where inadequacies / inconsistencies such as Station Uniform availability or the absence of red/blue beacons act as a de-motivator to some members as they see these as QFRS excluding Rurals from 'full team membership'.

We acknowledge and all Rural Firefighters need to acknowledge the significant challenges, training and experiences required by Urban firefighters in their day to day roles with mutual respect being a two way street which needs to be reinforced with a clearly articulated and understood rank / specialization structure as illustrated by appropriate epiphettes etc.

Recommendations:

QFRS needs to continue supporting its volunteers through good initiatives such as the Volunteer Portal. It needs to firm up a strategy on uniforms and supply Station Blues to all firefighters once they complete their advanced firefighter training modules. This will act to reinforce the culture of one uniform, one service as well as motivate members to improve their skills.

QFRS needs to revamp the QFRS website to include the RFS pages; not have a separate and stagnant RFS website. Some new training movies and Brigade success story movies would also be a good idea. There are many Brigades out there in isolation developing new processes and member reward initiatives that should be shared around to help boost the sustainability of the volunteer membership base within QFRS. For example Ripley Valley RFB as developed a "Fire Buys" program where members earn points for attendance at various Brigade activities that can be redeemed for items such as first aid packs, torches, flints etc to assist them with their firefighting efforts.

With regards to Red/Blue Lights for Appliances, this could be resolved through suitable driver training for Urban and Rural drivers starting with those in I-Zone brigades. It is poorly worded and discriminatory policy that keeps this issue alive. It breeds the poisonous 'Us and Them' concern. It needs to be recognized that Rural vehicles proceed with Priority driving now through traffic. We park in the smoke on roadways. Rural appliances should have red and blue lights as per any other fire fighting appliance for safety. However, Brigades must ensure they have their drivers of sufficient numbers and qualified to drive Priority and the QFRS must supply the training.

Finances

The current financial arrangements for Rural Brigades do require considerable attention. The current Levy Funding Models around the state appear to be ad hoc, do not support some Brigades and yet are very generous for other Brigades. Our Brigade receives only \$8000 p.a. in levy disbursement allocation via an Ipswich City Council / Ipswich Group arrangement even though we need approx. \$28,000 p.a. to operate with the shortfall being met through generous donations from the community with support from local companies such as the RSL and Bunnings. This 'begging for money' is however becoming a serious problem for our member's motivation and so we try and raise additional funds through corporate services such as charging land developers for hazard reduction burns.

There exists plans to transition Brigades to a business model where they operate to an agreed budget managed by their local council. Whilst we will be actively pursuing this new approach; we feel that it is a transitional step because the financial modeling for the Rural Fire Service needs to be holistic as part of the broader QFRS budgeting model. In that manner; the QFRS can actually manage all of its resources and assets efficiently. At present; it is up to a Brigade if it wishes to expand, to find funds, to purchase new equipment etc. If the Rural Fire Service was managed effectively; then QFRS could better determine where Rural Stations were situated, how many appliances it needs, how many members and how broadly trained. This modeling needs to be transparent and based on identified risks and historical frequency of incidents. The modeling needs to take away emotion in the decisions as much as possible. The model also needs to take into account the historical community connection with rural fire brigades. This 'traditional' thought currently exists in many Brigades to the point where they are against change, against interference and isolationist at times. This problem can be quite destabilizing at Group level where polarization between some Brigades is created. This requires good management from QFRS via representatives with empathy and experience of the local issues and personalities. This transition from traditional rural fire brigades to a professional fire service integrated within QFRS will be one of the biggest challenges for QFRS over the coming few years. A big part of this change management is for rural Brigades to start acting as a business internally and manage their financial arrangements in a professional and transparent manner.

Another problem with the current method of collecting a state fire levy for the Urban service different to the rural fire levy is in the encroachment of urban levy boundaries. As rural areas start to become more populated, the rural levy pool does build initially but then as new Urban levy boundaries come in; rural levy areas shrink and the potential for a council to fund the separate levy is greatly reduced. This will put considerable pressure on Councils such as Ipswich to generate sufficient funds to maintain the required Rural Brigades as well as the growing Urban levies.

Recommendation:

If the RFS was fully integrated into the QFRS; then the state should be able to ask all local councils for a standard fire levy. This levy should cover all Urban/Auxiliary stations plus a proportion of all Rural Brigades expenses at a standardized formula. The rural formula should cover operational costs based on a standard value per appliance / station and traditional activity level for the Brigade as per an agreed budget. Any blow-out in operational costs due to a busy fire season could be covered through a supplementary funds allocation. Any new projects and support equipment requirements can be funded through fund raising by the Brigades. In this manner; the QFRS would manage the size and disposition of its Rural resources; partially fund them to minimize levy revenue requirements and still maintain some self-management and community interface aspects of traditional Brigade life. All residents across the state could contribute equally to providing the states fire fighting service and disparities between areas of different population density could be better serviced by either branch of the service.

All Rural Fire Brigades need to take greater responsibility for measuring their time and activity levels as well as submission of RF14 documentation. That is because before you can manage any organization or process; you need to have measured it and documented critical volumetric data. It is through the use of actual data in the management of Rural Brigades that much of the emotion that clouds decision making can be avoided. For example, Ripley Valley RFB has introduced a new SharePoint Member system that logs activities and member participation. This is also connected to the 'Fire Buys' program as mentioned previously.

All Rural Fire Brigades should have their financial data audited by an accountant and this data used in the preparation of annual and three year budgets. The current QFRS budget preparation process for Rurals is totally inadequate and needs a full revamp. We are asked to use a very basic MS Excel spreadsheet with poorly worded data requirements. Rural Budgets should be modeled as per the standard format from Audited Statements to bring about standardization of financial reporting as soon as possible.

QFRS needs to actively participate where Brigades have to formalise their financial arrangements and transition to a new service model. Through Area Office involvement; local competitiveness, pettiness and general emotion can be minimized and greater accountability can be achieved. The role of Treasurer within a Brigade is generally the hardest to fill for volunteers and yet will be critical in the new financial models being implemented. QFRS needs to urgently develop a standardized process and software package with training for Treasurers. QFRS should also consider a paid position at Area Office level to actually manage the finances of Brigades as well as Group financial matters in the future.

Fire Wardens

Fire Wardens are a critical part of the broader Rural Fire Service Team. Both the Fire Warden and Deputy Fire Warden for Ripley Valley are members of the Brigade which makes cooperation between the functions seamless. For other areas; it would be highly desirable for fire wardens to have the same basic fire fighting training as RFS volunteers, the same understanding of how fires would be managed if wild fire eventuated and an understanding of the capability and capacity of the Brigade management team.

Other Issues Affecting the Rural Fire Service

Problem Avoidance and Conflict Resolution

There are many topical issues that inflame situations and relations between some individuals within both the Urban and Rural Fire Services from time to time. These controversial issues/incidents have not always been addressed in a professional and timely manner by Brigades, Groups, Urban Officers or the service. Therefore the problem grows as it festers. QFRS has started to address issues through 'official' channels more vigorously in recent times but further actions are required.

The ongoing strategic management of the service could be enhanced through the recruitment of experienced rural firefighters who just happen to be successful senior corporate managers and strategic thinkers in their primary occupation. The perception is

out there that promotion from within Urban Station Officer ranks to senior management sometimes creates 'functional silos' or the appearance of arrogance. There are some excellent Urban officers within QFRS and so it would be ideal to compliment their skills and experiences with rural service experiences plus broad corporate management skills.

A more vigorous Code of Conduct needs to be introduced to all branches of the service and firefighters managed accordingly. Police checks are a good initial filter for Rural membership but some basic form of psychological testing should also be introduced. It is most distressing to Brigades when the unfortunate unsatisfactory actions of an individual can ruin a Brigades reputation and generally negatively impact on all Rural firefighters in a area.

The wild and at times irresponsible use of the media by individuals and Rural Brigades needs to be curbed also through practical grievance escalation procedures and media policies. There exists considerable mistrust between some 'traditional' rural brigades and QFRS which needs to be addressed through tact, patience and transparency of information, especially with change management. This work is underway slowly and the appointment of experienced and respected Rural Officers to paid positions such as Brigade Training and Support Officers at Area Office level has produced some positive changes to administrative and operational effectiveness.

The Urban service has an active union. However, there has not been a unified RFS collaboration body to negotiate with the QFRS on issues. Even today, there are multiple 'organisations' claiming to represent volunteer rural fire fighters but most members in our area have never seen nor have they ever been influenced by any such organization. The RFBAQ appear to be collaboration partners of choice at present with the QFRS as evidenced by the Conference but a lot more needs to be done before they can accurately claim they represent the interest of members.

From our Brigade's perspective, we have gradually built a good and collaborative working relationship with our Area Office, our neighbouring Brigades and local Urban station crews. We continually strive to be as professional and responsive as we can be and our aim with respect to strategic change is for the Brigade to remain relevant to the decision making process.

Brigade Closures and Changes.

As urban sprawl consumes rural areas, there needs to be a mechanism to rearrange the location and composition of Rural Brigades to meet the changing community's needs. This process needs to use actual activity data and form part of 10 year community plans. The primary measurement would be the number of local incidents attended but also the turn-out times. For Urban stations, a 14 minute turn out is required. For Rurals, there should be a 20 minute travel time limit. Taking onto account turn out times from a home; this could typically translate into a 45 minutes delay from activation to arrival at scene. Therefore distance to rural interface would factor in the validity of a Brigade location.

Any changes to a Rural Brigade or amalgamation of Brigades needs to be driven by a clearly communicated and understood strategy to minimize the emotions generated. Representatives from QFRS need to understand that even though all stations and

appliances are owned by the service; considerable personal time and money by volunteers have gone into the funding or creation of those assets. Therefore if a Rural Brigade(s) are required to be moved in the future; the QFRS has to have strategies in place to fund the change/move.

Even in areas within a cities boundary that have been declared 'Urban', there remains a number of functions that Rural Brigades are required for. For example, the suburbs around Redbank Plains and Bellbird Park have been an Urban responsibility for over a decade and yet still have significant bushland. These 'services' such as hazard reduction burns and fire track mapping can be developed into formal income streams for Brigades. Current Urban funding and resources can not accommodate large scale hazard reduction burns. This is an area where Rural Brigades can be coordinated to manage these services and charge for the service.

The use of computers with GPS and mapping software are relatively new technologies being utilized by proactive Brigades in fire management. These same technologies and services could be utilized to assist councils and developers to establish fire trials, map nature reserves etc, once again as a revenue source. QFRS has these systems documented because they were donated by a team of Rural Fire Brigades and are planning for the roll out of the technology.

Therefore QFRS will have to develop strategies to transition fire service delivery models as regions develop. The strategies will be dependant on the specifics of the location, the community expectations, the council views, the support of rural volunteers and the rate of change. The strategy will need to handle the potential transition of Rural Brigades through to I-Zone Brigades, a period of co-existence and then repositioning. These strategies need to take into account other services being supplied by Rural brigades such as SES support following storms and floods. For example, our Brigade sent multiple crews over many days to The Gap in Brisbane in November 2008.

Once the QFRS address training, equipment, funding and volunteer issues better; the service as a whole right down to Brigade level will find an improvement in the proficiency levels and sustainability levels of the volunteer membership base. As more Brigades attract more members who wish to serve where ever a community is in need; a Brigade will have greater capacity to support QFRS both in local and 'out of area' activities. Unfortunately due to the ad hoc nature of these large events; they are hard to plan and manage but standardization of training and equipment will greatly assist this process. As demonstrated at the fires around Rockhampton in October 2009; in times of need; firefighters from Urban and Rural services can come together, can work on the same appliances and can overcome challenging fire situations. It just takes commitment, training and respect.

Submitted by:

The Management Team

Ripley Valley Rural Fire Brigade

Summary of the Brigade Situation and Membership

Membership: 8 Officers and approx. 40 members who donate on average nearly 8000 volunteer hours per annum for all of our activities.

Area: Approx 170 sq kilometers from Springfield to Amberley

- Urban / Rural residential interface
- White Rock and Goolman Conservation Parks

Operations: QFRS "I-Zone" Brigade Classification

- Established Station with IMT Facilities
- 2 medium and 1 light appliance (RV51, RV52 and RV41)
- Dual Cab General Purpose Vehicle RV81, ISU Trailer and a Slip-on Unit.
- Computer aided mapping / GPS IMT Support
- Operational expenditure of ~\$28,000 p.a.
- Averaging over 32 call-outs per year, predominantly vegetation fires plus numerous Strike Team / Deployments out of area.

Functions:

- Protecting The Community
- Community Involvement (Fund Raising, Recruitment, Membership Pride)
- Community Awareness Sessions (Education and Service Responsibility)

