

**TALLEBUDGERA VALLEY RURAL FIRE BRIGADE**

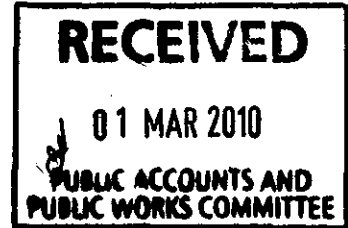
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The Chair

Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

Parliament House

Brisbane.

Dear Mr Wendt

RE: Inquiry into Management of RFS

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into the management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

In our attached submission we have tried to express our concerns as a Rural Fire Brigade with the management of the service going into the future and to express a management philosophy that places a greater emphasis on the responsibility of local communities for their own protection.

We wish you every success with your inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Jon Jessen ( First Officer)

## **Qld Public Accounts & Public Works Committee Enquiry**

Q. Is the current model of RFB's Suitable?

We see that in effect there are several "models" of Rural Fire Brigade's in Qld. from very rural (primary producer) Brigades, small town/rural brigades to I Zone Brigades. Our Brigade is an I Zone Brigade with its territory based on rural areas adjoining a large I Zone area on the edge of the heavily urbanised city.

The current financial model enables a degree of independence for all Brigades allowing them to determine through local knowledge how to use their funding and direct their resources towards meeting the needs of their particular area. The ability of Brigades to determine their own priorities is important in fostering "ownership" by the local community and should be retained.

Problems are being experienced in the Service with getting enough volunteers, retaining them, and supplying sufficient volunteers for "task-forces". This reflects the "big-ask" being made of volunteers. A more locally focused model that requires a lower level of commitment from volunteers may address these issues

Q. Is the existing Funding model appropriate?

Gold Coast City Council collects a rural fire levy and passes these funds onto the Brigade in whose area the funds are collected. With a medium size rateable base this system works well for us as a Brigade but we are well aware that for smaller Brigades in the Gold Coast Rural Fire Brigade Group this system does not deliver adequate operational income.

We support the fund raising model but not the current distribution system. We feel that a better model would be for all Brigades to receive a base operating amount from the levy pool and for the remaining funds to be distributed on the basis of number of rateable properties per Brigade area. We strongly feel that this should be a decision taken democratically by the GCRFB Group and then supported by QFRS.

Our current Group rateable base is fluctuating from year to year. As new urban stations come on line in the City and projected urbanization is reached the rateable base for Rural Fire Brigade's in the City will drop. The limitations on development under the SEQ Regional Plan in rural areas will guarantee this. Unless rural levies are simply allowed to rise to meet urban levy rates there will not be sufficient funds available to run Rural Brigades in the future.

Q. Effect of Urban Encroachment?

This issue is of major importance to our Brigade and Group. The I Zone is Qld. Fire & Rescue Service's focal point for rural/urban cooperation and the **biggest** source of work for Brigades in the GCRFB Group yet the Rural Brigades receive NO funding from these areas. With this system, the expansion of urban services to Nerang has resulted in four Brigades becoming unviable at a point when their services are needed more than ever. The QFRS clearly recognises the need for dual services in these areas but directs all levy money from I Zone areas to urban funds. Rural levy payers are effectively subsidising urban areas under the current system.

We propose that a percentage of levy money ( say \$40 from \$110) raised in designated I Zone areas should be credited to the responsible local Rural Fire Brigade. These funds would then go into the levy money pool and be distributed under the system proposed above. This system would fund the work of Rural Brigades in I Zone areas and address the ongoing issue of loss of funding base to urban encroachment. The SE Qld Regional Plan ensures that there will be little or no growth in rateable rural property numbers in the future. The encroachment of urban areas and proposed new urban Stations can only mean an ongoing reduction of funding for Rural Brigades in an era when their services will be required more and more. The fund distribution system proposed by QFRS can only mean a smaller pie being cut ever smaller. A fundamental change in the funding base and distribution system has to be seriously addressed.

Under the current system Rural Brigades are not allowed to charge the Urban service for expenses incurred when called to work in Urban areas. Urban services directed to rural properties bill the land owner for their services. There is a clear inequity in this arrangement which should be addressed.

#### Q. Management of Increased Demands?

The “top-down” management model of the QFRS results in their being little consultation with Brigades. Management decisions come by directive. There seems little recognition or understanding of volunteer memberships willingness and ability to contribute. When too much is asked of volunteers they tend to leave as recruitment retention numbers clearly indicate. There is no input into policy and direction from Brigades and Group. The direction and “philosophy” are not clearly expressed to Brigades and membership.

There has been an “explosion” in bureaucracy in training, Health& Safety, maintenance and administration. Volunteer officers and members don’t join to be administrators but to be firefighters. The appointment of a number of funded administrators to the Group whose role was to take on much of the administrative role of Brigades could help address this issue. In addition, support in areas such as Health and Safety reporting, fire extinguisher servicing, vehicle servicing and inspection would enable the volunteer’s role to be more focused on their core functions. Training support at Brigade level needs much more support and investment. Reducing the work load on senior Brigade officers is crucial. Unless this is addressed it will become increasingly difficult to find people able and willing to commit to these roles.

Many new recruits are lost early on. Recruitment procedures take far too long. Training should be greatly streamlined so that a new member can join a crew after a short introduction course ( say 2 hours at Brigade level) FM1 training should be basic. Training for senior roles is appropriate but Brigades must have the ability to choose their Officers themselves whether they have the “qualifications” or not. Only the local Brigade can recognise leadership ability and experience. This does not only come from attaining certificates.

**Q. Role of Fire Wardens?**

We support the current model as, in our experience, it works well. We have had some experience that would suggest that an improved capacity to adjust boundaries of Fire Warden's districts would be of benefit.

**Summary:**

In our view the QFRS seems to view the RFS as an auxiliary to the Urban service. In our region this translates to the perception that the RFS's main purpose is to prevent life and property loss in the IZone by providing an unpaid reserve of manpower and equipment for the Urban service to utilize.

This model directs Brigades away from individual community responsibility and towards "group" action in areas away from their local community. Levy payers see the taskforces and helicopters and feel that paying their levy absolves them from the need for any further activity.

Those who do volunteer are increasingly asked to respond away from their immediate community and to commit to serving under protocols to which they have had no input. The level of commitment and training is daunting to most and this clearly reflected in recruitment and retention issues.

The current model will lead, in our view, to further "professionalization" of the RFS. The future could well see the creation of paid, "A team" rural services, backed up by a second tier volunteer body that struggles to recruit.

We feel that there should be a model that places greater emphasis on the local community for its fire safety.