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February 28, 2010.

The Research Director,
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee,
Parliament House,
George Street,
Brisbane, Qld., 4000.

Dear Sir,

I enclose my submission to the Committee in response to the Discussion Paper,
Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland, November 2009.

As a Rural Firefighter with 38 years experience both in the field and the organization I have a deep interest in the future and direction of the Rural Fire service. I was an adviser to The Commission of Review of Fire Services (1988-9), Co-founder of the Rural Fire Brigades Association (1989), Rural Fire Board Chairman 1990 and Presiding Officer of The Rural Fire Council 1990-93).

I firmly believe that the current model of Rural Fire Brigades with their control of levies and a reasonable degree of freedom to service their own area without undue incursions by Urban appliances is the best.

From the Auditor Generals Report, it is apparent that reporting upwards from District to Head Office needs some help probably in the form of improved computer systems. Brigades already send in audited accounts and safety certificates.

The task of Fire Wardens and Rural Brigades becomes more difficult as society moves from viewing fire as a tool for land management to seeing it as something to be kept away at all costs.

Details of these and other points are dealt with in the Summary and my detailed Submission enclosed.

If I can be of further assistance I can be contacted by email at daphanddon@bigpond.com or by SMS on the mobile.

Yours sincerely,

Don Greenhalgh, AFSM, B.Comm.

Submission to Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

Re :- Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.
From – Don Greenhalgh AFSM, B.Comm.

Summary

The following summary of this submission is presented in the order of the panel “**Issues to consider**” as shown on page 3 of the discussion paper. The body of the submission follows the “Issues for consideration” on pages 2 and 3.

1. Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?

Right from the start it is important to reinforce the Director General’s comment that the Rural Fire Brigades are “*community based organizations*” and that they are “*self-help organizations with Brigades expected to assist with funding their own operations, purchases and expenses*”.

The current model has been in existence since 1948 and has served our State well. It is not only climate difference that has kept us free of the disasters that have swept southern States.

Despite being drawn closer to the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) over the past 20 years, Rural Brigades are still staffed from within their own area of responsibility, they still see their prime responsibility being to their own area and they tailor their training and capabilities to the needs of their own area. However, they are mostly eager to help other Brigades, other areas and even other States when called to do so.

2. Is the existing funding model, including resource allocation, appropriate?

Being community based, Brigades provide their services without the additional costs that come with the administration of a large organization. Our Officers, Management Committee and Firefighters are all unpaid (volunteers).

Levies and before that donations, meant that Brigades could develop their capabilities beyond the resources of the poorly funded Rural Fires Service. Having to go to some authority outside our Brigade with a begging bowl when cash is needed would be so degrading that many if not all volunteers would leave the service.

Perhaps the QFRS or the State Treasurer would like to draw all Rural Brigades into the area covered by the urban levies thus charging our property owners about six times the amount they now pay as a levy.

BUT without a huge increase in Urban staff we cannot be replaced. Urban Brigades are suppression agencies not hazard mitigation and suppression agencies as we are. The cost of mitigation in the form of hazard reduction burning would be enormous if the hours worked by volunteers were transferred to the Urban service. Volunteers stick at the task until it is done and do not get replaced by a new shift or go onto penalty rates.

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3. What effect is urban encroachment within Brigade areas having on Rural Fire Brigades?

Perhaps the Panel Members could imagine themselves in our place if, in their electorate, the Premier or Treasurer rushed in to answer all of the enquiries made by constituents and as the member picked up the phone to help he or she was told that the enquiry was in hand and they were not needed or indeed not wanted.

- That is the effect of being constantly turned back or even not being called by Firecom to incidents in our area.
- Another point of contention is the decision to send a red truck to grass fires if someone decides that structural property is threatened. Fires in our area have always been near structures and up till now no houses have been lost while we were on the job.
- Add to that the decision that Rural Brigades must not do traffic control.
- And recently, we were told that lights and sirens were not to be used by Rural Brigades when responding to an incident.
- Another strange decision is not to allow Rural Brigades to have blue lights on their units. At a motor vehicle accident at night it is often difficult to see our vehicles because of the number of tow truck lights. Other states do not have this restriction.
- And recently, Brigades with Breathing Apparatus (CABA) have been told that due to cost considerations, Brigades which have been so equipped, trained and serviced for 20 years or more will not be allowed to continue in this role.

Is this a subterfuge to make us so dispirited that we quit or just allow the Urban truck takeover.

4. How can the increasing demands on Rural Fire Brigades be managed effectively?

Several things stand out here. The first is to reduce the training demands on new members. The current system demands a lot of time by both the recruit and Brigade Officers. Allow First Officers more latitude to judge the competence of recruits. The aim of the system to train all members to a tertiary certificate level is wasteful. When has a fire ever asked to see a certificate of competence?

An aim of the Committee should be to keep all paperwork to a minimum.

The main aim will be to let Rural Brigades get on with the job they are formed to do

5. Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place adequate?

It is my feeling (a belief shared by many others) that the current system is the correct model but as the Auditor General pointed out, reporting needs to be improved. For instance, he states that *"there is a lack of an appropriate system to monitor the condition and safety of Rural Fire Brigade equipment"*. However, for several years now Rural Brigades have been required to provide a safety certificate for each vehicle they own (at Brigade expense).

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These safety certificates are forwarded to District Office where we believe they are placed on the Brigade file. **It is the upward reporting within QFRS that needs improving.**

A similar set of circumstances applies to the reporting of cash receipts, expenditure and assets. Audited annual account statements are forwarded to the District Office where they are again noted and filed. The cost of audit is also borne by the Brigade. Again it is the upward reporting that needs improving. Brigades are also required to provide five or six year budgets to the Council that collects their levies.

I believe that this reporting follow up should not be done by the simple and expensive expedient of adding more staff. Rather it should be done by relocating some of the rapidly expanding staff from offices and assigning them to field duties. They should be charged with contacting Brigades regularly and ensuring reporting takes place. If possible they should have Rural Brigade experience.

Improved computer systems may also be needed to forward the data already submitted by Brigades to District Office to Head Office.

Since the duties of 'Inspectors' changed from being the QFRS contact with Brigades to managing an office in the late 1990's, contact with Brigades has been almost zero. In past years an Inspector was able to form his own opinion of the safety of vehicles and equipment because he visited Brigades and met and talked with members.

6. What should be the role of Fire Wardens within the Rural Fire services model?

In the past, the Fire Warden and Brigade Officers knew one another well and integration was achieved in this way. Perhaps Brigades and Wardens should meet on a quarterly basis together with the staff member who will be given the responsibility mentioned in Section 5 above.

At this meeting, fuel conditions, weather forecasts and district conditions should be discussed as well as a full and frank discussion of permits issued, Brigade involvement and problems such as permit holders lighting up without advising Firecom or the Brigade. An area strategy should evolve from these meetings. The Fire Wardens role should stay the same as it has been in the past –

- Assess the fuel situation;
- Assess the risk situation;
- Assess the landholders ability to burn without Brigade involvement;
- Determine when the burn should take place (after dark burning should not be ruled out);
- Issue the permit with whatever conditions are relevant;
- Ensure the permit holder receives a copy of the permit;
- Ensure neighbours receive notice of the burn;
- Immediately FAX a copy of the permit to the Brigade;

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This may require QFRS to install FAX machines in Wardens homes and Brigade offices.

7. Are there any other relevant matters the committee needs to address?

Matters that should receive the attention of the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee are the very high charges made for:-

- Training in Senior First Aid by the Queensland Ambulance Service. Because EAR and CPR require a refresher every year and the course itself every three years this is a very significant ongoing cost;
- The cost of chainsaw user certification;
- Driver training for light and heavy rigid vehicles which are necessary for transporting more water but also in twin-cab versions for carrying up to seven firefighters in safety.

The Committee should examine the fact that the number of office staff servicing Rural Division has grown rapidly eating away the budget increases allowed for equipping Brigades. Many are ex-Urban staff with little or no knowledge of Rural Brigades. Despite these increases Brigades see little forthcoming to assist with day to day operation of the Brigade or their area.

There has also become a fixation with providing Rural Firefighters with qualifications at a tertiary level. While the teaching materials have improved enormously, an instructor needs to get a teaching qualification first before the material can be delivered. This is a waste of resources. Brigade trainers previously gave instruction based on supplied material, allowing more members to train recruits and cut the time necessary to get new recruits out on the fire ground fully trained.

Submission to the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

Re the Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

From Don Greenhalgh, AFSM, B. Comm.

March 2010

Submission to Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

Re :- Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

From – Don Greenhalgh AFSM, B.Comm.

Preamble.

The Author of this Submission.

My name is Don Greenhalgh, AFSM, B.Comm (Acctg). I have been a rural firefighter for 38 years and am still a member of the Samford Rural Fire Brigade. In 1988 I was awarded the first Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) awarded to a volunteer. I was an adviser to The Commission of Review of Fire Services (1988-9), Co-founder of the Rural Fire Brigades Association (1989), Rural Fire Board Chairman 1990 and Presiding Officer of The Rural Fire Council 1990-93).

It was also my privilege to co-author the history of the Rural Fires Board & Brigades to 1990 – “*Beaters to Bambi Buckets*” (2001) and the history of the Samford Rural Fire Brigade – “*Fifty Flamin Years*” (2002).

The Background Situation.

From my point of view and experience, climate change has only a very slight effect on the work of the Rural Fire Service. We have had droughts before and will again. Each time the job will test the Rural Fire Brigades and their members.

Probably the greatest change has been brought about by changing demographics. The farmers and their stock move out and the rural resident moves in. With no stock grazing the grass, scrub and heavily mulched planted trees growing on what was open grazing land, houses quickly become surrounded by fuel. This is the iZone.

We in Samford have been coping with this change since 1970 but in recent years the change has been taken up as a point which the Urban Service could use to displace Rural Brigades or to marginalize them. Urban trucks are sent to grass fires in our area on the excuse that there is a threat to property. We do not have diminished efficiency – we are more capable than we have ever been before. However, someone decrees that the Urban truck is needed. Usually, the command of a fire is taken away from the Rural Officer in Charge.

Further, in recent years it has been decreed that Rural Brigades should not do traffic control at road accidents even though we had been doing it for years and even have letters of thanks from the Police Department.

The most recent example of skilling down the Rural Fire Service is an announcement that due to cost considerations, Brigades with Compressed Air Breathing Apparatus (BA) will no longer be able to continue doing this when new equipment is taken into the QFRS in a couple of years time. This effects only six Rural Brigades but these are some of the top

Brigades in the Service. The cost consideration must be only trifling in the budget of the QFRS. However, the cost to individual Brigades would be too great to meet themselves.

Another recent directive that Rural Brigades must not use flashing lights or sirens is not logical and is downright dangerous, exposing Rural crews to increased traffic hazards and larger fires when they arrive. The key to extinguishing most fires is to arrive quickly while the fire is relatively small.

Another inexplicable ruling is that Rural Brigades must not display flashing blue lights. In my experience, the Rural Brigades of all other States have these lights which distinguish them from the multitude of tow trucks attending road traffic crashes.

Adding to some areas' problems are the parks demanded by Councils from developers. Unfortunately, these are often the scrubby gullies and the unusable blocks too steep or too marshy to mow (or just too much trouble) and the problem grows steadily worse. A poorly staffed National Parks Service looking after more and more areas may also be forced to allow their areas to go too long between hazard reduction events. Then nature will take matters into its own hands and burn as it did in southern States.

And here and there in the areas that should be burned, an unusual animal was supposedly once seen, an unusual plant and people who are allergic to smoke and the problem compounds itself. This sometimes makes it impossible to burn-off at the optimum time when 'cool' burns are possible, but we do our best. Cool burns have lower flame heights and cause less damage to trees, grasses and their roots, allowing quicker regeneration and lower wildlife losses.

And add a smattering of rules such as no burning after dark (which in many areas is the safest time to do a hazard reduction burnoff) or that the burnoff must be extinguished before dark (rules obviously drawn up by someone who has never had to do the job) and you compound the job of the Fire Warden and the Rural Fire Brigade even more.

In contrast, country areas are beset by a problem that is somewhat different. The population has fallen because properties, struggling to survive, can not afford to employ the numbers of men that they used to and so use contractors when needed. . Often the family on the property will be the aging parents who remain after the children have gone away to school and university and, finding an easier life, decide not to return to the "bush". So fire fighting falls to fewer but hopefully more mechanized firefighters.

While you are deliberating in Committee, please bear in mind that our people are volunteers. Most have jobs and families. It is only a dedication to our civic service that keeps them interested.

We must not extinguish that dedication by making the task too onerous. Whatever the accountants think, Rural Brigades like Samford cannot be replaced operationally or economically by paid firefighters.

Issues For Consideration.

A. Brigade Funding.

In my submission, I will draw heavily on my experiences with and the systems of the Samford Rural Fire Brigade. However, I am sure that the facts that I put forward will be common to many, if not most, of the Brigades now receiving levy monies. This section is answered in the order of "*Issues for consideration*" Page 2 of the Discussion Paper.

A1. "*lack of adequate Systems Brigade funding*" (reference to "Issues for Consideration" in PAPWC Committee's Discussion Paper.)

Several checks and balances are in place to ensure that the public funds sourced by way of levies are accounted for correctly.

- a. Brigades are required to provide budgets to the Council imposing the levy.
- b. Brigades must have their annual accounts audited.
- c. Audited accounts are forwarded to District Office.
- d. Expenditure is monitored at regular Brigade meetings where vigorous debate often accompanies proposals for expenditure.

The "problem" of Brigades having control of their levy monies is a recurring theme throughout the Auditor General's report. I wonder if they have asked the question "where would those Brigades who receive levies be if they had not received levies". I suspect that Samford would be one of a few advanced Brigades with larger, safer, crew cab trucks. We would have had to divert all money received from the Army burns into vehicles. Our training and emergency centre and its equipment would not exist. Other levied Brigades can probably make similar claims.

Samford has collected subscriptions since the 1970's at least. In 1974 we asked for voluntary subscriptions at the rate of \$10. In 1977 that rose to \$15, in 1984 to \$20 and in 1988 to \$25. When Pine Shire Council started collecting levies for us in 1998, it was kept at \$25 and remains at that level today. **TWENTY TWO YEARS!** What other charge from a Government or Council still remains at 1988 levels.

A2. "*Brigade resource levels and needs unknown*"

Because Brigades are community based organizations, needs will be perceived differently by Brigades in different areas. I believe that any attempt to impose uniform expenditure and equipment patterns will lead to a falling away of our volunteer base and efficiency.

Further, attempts to reallocate levies between Brigade areas would be seen by the donor community as an additional tax on their area.

An appealing aspect of the Rural Fire movement is that the community through its Brigade can manage itself. If more QFRS control is to be imposed it should come from people who are Rural Fire trained not Urban staff. Any control should be by way of advice rather than direction except where poor or illegal practices are proven.

Some of the staff who service Rural Brigades have come to their positions through advancement from the Urban service and have little knowledge of the psyche of the Rural Brigade. The job is looked on as a step to promotion.

Another problem is the absence of staff for prolonged periods at conferences, training or filling in for others who are on leave, training, etc.

A3. *"Lack of systems to monitor condition and safety of Rural Fire Brigade equipment"*
As in the rest of QFRS, the safety of our members is paramount. That is why most Brigades welcomed the instruction that we were to provide safety certificates for each of our mobile units.

A system needs to be put in place to forward the information from District where Brigades send their Certificates to Head Office and to chase up Brigades who do not comply in a timely manner.

It is inconceivable that there are more than a handful of Brigades who would not ensure that pumps and other equipment are in good working order. After all, it is the Brigade member who, when disaster threatens has to rely on their equipment regardless of its sophistication

As in many other areas, it is here that the change to the old Inspectors role of visiting Brigades is being felt.

A4. *"Direct funding"*
Direct funding of Brigades whether by levy, QFRS grant or other grants are monitored through the audit of annual accounts. The exception to this would be where a donation is provided in kind such as the donation of a vehicle. However, the acquisition must be reported to District Office in order to obtain insurance and registration exemption.

Levies allow Brigades to proceed with the purchase of vehicles better suited to their needs than the standard issue vehicles. Samford Brigade has only had one of its vehicles fully subsidized, the rest have been mostly purchased with public subscriptions (before the levy was introduced in 1998) or levies after that date. Larger capacity 4WD, twin-cab vehicles have been purchased in order to provide safer and more sustained working conditions

The action of levied Brigades largely funding their own vehicles has also had benefits for the RFS. The levy funds used by Brigades to provide their own units release RFS funds for providing units to other non-levied Brigades.

Matters needing attention by the Committee.

Some matters that should receive the attention of the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee are the very high charges made for:-

- Training in Senior First Aid by the Queensland Ambulance Service. Because EAR and CPR require a refresher every year and the course itself every three years this is a very significant ongoing cost;
- The cost of chainsaw user certification;
- Driver training for light and heavy rigid vehicles which are necessary for transporting more water but also in twin-cab versions for carrying up to seven firefighters in safety.
- The downgrading of the role of Rural Brigades as mentioned in my covering letter, summary and preamble.

Also, the time involved for new members to obtain their basic training and competency qualifications is turning some members away. Bringing back Brigade Training Officers would cut this time significantly. Place more trust in Brigade First Officers.

The recurring cost of running a Brigade like Samford is more than \$30,000 per annum. To replace a larger tanker could cost up to (and possibly more than) \$300,000. Samford Brigade has an Isuzu FTS 750 twin-cab tanker/striker 4WD unit that is now 16 years old and planning is to take place this year to design its replacement when or even before it reaches the 20 year Fire Service Limit.

Twin-cab 4WD units are seen as essential for safely transporting large crews to the fire scene quickly as much of our hazard area is steeply sloping mountainside.

A5. *“Brigade fundraising activities donations by individuals”.*

Brigades also undertake fundraising in various ways (even the odd chook raffle). Samford Brigade has been involved with hazard reduction burning at the Enoggera Army Base since 1985. During this time enough money was raised to build a Training and Emergency Centre and equip it at a cost of over \$226,000.

Many Brigades accept donations from landholders for hazard reduction burning. This activity provides ideal training for new volunteers as it usually takes place in fairly safe conditions.

Larger items donated, such as vehicles, must be notified to District Office in order to have the vehicle exempted from registration and covered by insurance.

A6. *"QFRS also provides other resources"*

QFRS does indeed provide personal protective equipment to Brigades and the quality and availability of this PPE has improved over the years.

As mentioned above, only one of Samford's four appliances was provided at the full subsidy (now 80%). As early as 1994/5 Samford 61 was built on a twin-cab Isuzu chassis at a cost of almost \$130,000 while subsidized to the extent of \$50,000. Samford 51 was built in 2001/2 at a cost of almost \$167,000 and Samford 41 in 2000/1 for almost \$44,000.

Recently, Samford and six other Brigades have been advised that even though we have been equipped and trained in the use of Compressed Air Breathing Apparatus (CABA) for almost twenty years, we will not be re-equipped with new units when the present sets are replaced in a couple of years time. Even though this is supposed to be done as a cost saving exercise, we regard this as a lowering of the value placed on Rural Brigades. In the overall budget of QFRS, the cost is minimal. However, should a Brigade decide to fund the purchase, training and maintenance themselves the cost would be prohibitive.

A7. *"QFRS has a duty of care"*

QFRS does indeed have a duty of care for RFB volunteers. It provides workers compensation and private vehicle insurance and training for volunteers. As Dick Healy, the first Secretary of the Rural Fires Board from 1948 said, his job was *"to get somebody to do something for nothing"*. These things are the cost of that exchange.

B. Resource allocation and communication.

B1. *"level of Brigade activity"*

Brigade activity can be measured in many ways. One method is to take note of the number of fire reports sent in by Brigades. This would not be an absolute measure as some may not be careful with their timely lodgment, others may lodge reports when they probably should not.

Some information could be taken from an analysis of the fire reports in the form of number of members present and the hours spent on each type of incident. Activity in wet years may be very low but these are the very years in which it is difficult to retain members

In some regions of the State, the level of activity is not important. Just the fact that a Brigade exists for the rare occasion that a fire or traffic accident may occur is adequate so long as the Brigade is ready when needed.

Samford Brigade has had a computer system in place since 1994. Currently, members book-on and off at a terminal in the equipment bays. The practice of booking in has become a habit with members and is thus quite accurate.

This system reveals that in 2008, the members of the Samford Rural Brigade provided the community and QFRS with 5,903 hours service and in the 2009 calendar year, 6,594 hours. This time includes all facets of firefighting, training, maintenance, meetings, etc.

B2. *"Lack of an adequate system to monitor condition and safety of RFB equipment"*

Monitoring of the condition and safety of equipment has been touched on earlier. The first step should be to collect all the data now provided by Brigades to District Offices. Then an assessment can be made of that information to see what extra if any needs to be collected.

B3. *"ensuring individual Brigade issues are understood"*

QFRS must be careful with demands for management and operational plans. Volunteer Brigades do not have members sitting in offices waiting for a fire. Most of our members have full time jobs and families. Apart from making sure you have budgets and your equipment is up to par and you have sufficient fully equipped and trained members it is difficult to see what the Auditor General has in mind. Brigade Officers usually have a good understanding of the danger points in their areas. The local area plans being prepared by Brigades also lead to better understanding of danger areas.

B4. *"Brigades manage local issues informal and ad hoc basis"*

Brigade issues such as hazard reduction, equipment and training are always in a state of flux and an attempt to keep a register of these things up to date would be doomed to failure. A bad fire season, a wet year or many other events could throw such schemes into chaos as well as wasting scarce resources.

The best outcome would be expected from placement of staff in the field to "keep in touch" with Brigades. If such staff were of the correct calibre, they could advise Brigades on a course of action where such action is deemed to be needed or to advise against some ill conceived ideas if noted. This method worked well for the old Rural Fires Board, it should work well now.

C. Forward planning and risk management processes.

The increasing demands on RFB's are correctly noted in the paper. However, care must be taken not to further increase the workload on Brigades.

C1. *"lack of comprehensive forward planning processes"*

Most Brigades and their Officers are aware of the major fire stress areas on their patch at any time. These vary from year to year in the case of vegetation, month to month in the case of drought index and day to day in the case of wind, temperature and humidity.

Brigade Officers live in the area and are exposed to day to day changes whether subtle or quite marked. Most are also in daily contact with the RFS Portal and the Bureau of Meteorology website watching weather and fire danger levels.

C2. *"lack of agency strategic planning"*

A matter that could attract the attention of the Auditor General is the constant movement of staff which I have referred to before. The use of the Rural Division as a rung on the Urban Fire Service ladder of promotion has an unsettling effect on the Brigades and Firefighters in those areas. While this may not be able to be stopped perhaps it could be slowed by asking for a reasonable minimum period of several years service in a position.

QFRS should also consult more widely with Brigades before introducing changes that effect the Brigades.

QFRS should be more active in demanding that agencies like National Parks, Forestry, Councils, developers and others conduct hazard reduction burning on a regular basis.

In the past, regular and thorough burning of what is now Brisbane Forest Park ensured that Brisbane did not suffer the disastrous fires that swept into what is now suburbia before regular burning commenced in 1965. If regular burning ceases for any reason, the entire western flank of Brisbane will be equally at risk as Canberra or Victoria.

Before 1965, fires swept out of the Brisbane Valley, up over the ranges and into the populated areas. Many of these are catalogued in *"From Beaters to Bambi Buckets, Appendix 9 – Major Fires in Queensland."*

D. Accountability mechanisms.

The Auditor General's observations that Rural Fire Brigades are part of the QFRS is indisputable. However the Director General of the Department of Emergency Services was absolutely correct in that RFB's are self-help community based organizations. They are deemed by most communities to be an integral part of the fabric of that community. Often those volunteers are also in the SES, Ambulance, Rotary, Lions, Apex and other community groups.

RFB's are also manned by volunteers who, in the main, are there to fight fires and assist their community. They are not at all turned on by the prospect of having to prepare plans that most know will not hold true for more than a few weeks.

Keep this planning and reporting to a minimum consistent with good area management.

E. Relationship with Fire Wardens.

E. 1. *"role of the Fire Warden"*

The Auditor General's observation that more integration is needed between the Fire warden and RFB's is correct. The task of issuing permits in the near city areas can be vastly different from broad acre hazard reduction burns on the plains of the west.

AND we are listening to everyone who has a reason for an area not to be burnt – “this plant”, “this frog”, “my asthma” and so on. The land doesn’t care and just accumulates fuel until nature takes things into its own hands and fire roars through like it did in Canberra and Victoria. Result – nothing lives.

Consider the fact that a good Warden can probably inspect a potential burn-off site, assess the dangers involved and set down conditions of burning in an hour or so. If the Brigade is to be involved in the burn-off it may require days of planning and waiting for suitable conditions for just one permit. More cooperation is necessary between the Brigade and the Warden.

Some agreement needs to be reached between Fire Wardens and Brigades about which fires need the attendance of the Brigade and also what conditions should be put on the permit. As in the past, many fires could be conducted by the landholder on his or her own if sound advice is given by the Warden when a Permit is issued. This advice would include equipment and manpower required, suitable weather conditions, special problems that may be encountered and how to resolve them. Above all, notification to the Brigade at the time of writing the permit and before lighting is necessary.

More emphasis should be placed on the notification of neighbours regarding an intended light up time and date. This should also be kept up to date if a burn is delayed.

Too many “cosmetic” burns are conducted by Brigades to the detriment of broad-acre hazard reduction burning. This may not all be the fault of Fire Wardens.

E. 2. “Permit to Light Fire system”

The Auditor General’s comment about complexity is most valid. To get this area sorted out is probably the most pressing task confronting the Fire Service.

. The Fire Wardens role should stay the same as it has been in the past –

- Assess the fuel situation;
- Assess the risk situation;
- Assess the landholders ability to burn without Brigade involvement;
- Determine when the burn should take place (after dark burning should not be ruled out);
- Issue the permit with whatever conditions are relevant;
- Ensure the permit holder receives a copy of the permit;
- Ensure neighbours receive notice of the burn;
- Immediately FAX a copy of the permit to the Brigade;

This latter may require QFRS to install FAX machines in Wardens homes and Brigade offices.

As part of a knee-jerk reaction to the southern fires, it has become customary to cancel permits when “someone” believes that conditions are not suitable. This is done over a wide area when only part of the area may be dangerous. We should take extreme care that we don’t choke our systems in response to bad outcomes in other areas.

Having been both a Warden and a First Officer I dread the possibility that the complexities of their job may bring the process of hazard reduction to a halt. That would mean that Firefighters generally will be in peril more and more from out of control fires fed by fuels allowed accumulate because the job just becomes too difficult.

In contrast it should be a criminal offence for any landowner (government or private) to allow fuel conditions like those in Victoria to occur. Reports have it that some areas were not burned in living memory.