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**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE**

Tomewin Rural Fire Brigade
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Telephone 0414180513

The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Q 4000

000007

Dear Sir,

**Re: Queensland Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland**

I am submitting a proposal on behalf of the Tomewin Rural Fire Brigade for consideration in your review.

Regards,

Steven Dalton

1st Officer
Tomewin Rural Fire Brigade

In this proposal I will respond to some of the questions posed in your covering letter.

Background.

The responses submitted are from the perspective of a Rural Fire Brigade classified as a type "Rural Brigade" operating in the hinterland of the City of Gold Coast. The brigade is a member of the Gold Coast Rural Fire Brigade Group and participates in local and larger "Group type" fires. The local government authority, the Gold Coast City Council is very supportive of the Gold Coast Rural Fire Brigade Group.

The Rural Fire Service across Queensland has about 35,000 volunteers. If these volunteers left the fire service and were replaced by permanent full time firefighters and officers then the people of Queensland would be looking at a wages bill of approximately \$2,450,000,000. (35,000 x \$70,000 per year wages on costed).

The current volunteer framework needs to be supported with adequate resources and funding to ensure Queensland maintains a firefighting force to meet current and future fire risks.

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

For the Gold Coast area the answer is yes. There are a scattering of Rural, Izone and village classification areas that meet the geographical and village requirements of the hinterland areas. These are based on hazard and risk assessments. We are lucky to be in close proximity to urban brigades for structural and road crash response. Working together both Rural and Urban brigades can provide adequate responses provided cooperation, resources and clear lines of communication are maintained.

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

In general, no. With the growing requirements of increased safety, more training to provide a duty of care and a greater expectation of the local community, funding, particularly for resource allocation and maintenance is inadequate.

Wild fires, by their nature, will always do more damage and cause more destruction and loss of life than other fires. This has been demonstrated again and again in recent years. Why then is the rural funding and resource allocation second rate?

The fire season last year saw a need to move resources from areas of lesser risk to those of need. Resources in terms of human and equipment.

Rural Fire appliances were deployed with owner brigade crews and without owner brigade crews. There was reluctance to send appliances without crews as brigades claimed ownership of the appliances as they fundraised to chip in their

contribution to pay for appliances. The volunteers offered their time free of charge to the community while many left their jobs on paid or unpaid leave.

To provide a better resource tasking the fire service should provide appliances free of charge to brigades and contribute to full running costs and maintenance of the appliances and communications equipment. This will provide the following benefits to the community:

- A. Fire appliances maintained to an acceptable safe operating level,
- B. The culture of ownership of appliances be reduced,
- C. With full ownership of appliances by the Fire Services, resources will be able to be tasked for deployments to areas of greatest need. This needs to be done on a well communicated plan so all concerned are aware of expectations.

Other areas for full funding and maintenance considerations are:
Fuel for appliances and pump sets,

Brigade Stations, with minimum design requirements such as communication rooms, kitchens, wash rooms, appliance bays, training areas.

Communication equipment including radio, telephone and internet,
Electricity and Council rates,
Standardised equipment,
Static water tanks,

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

Urban encroachment is reducing brigade funding levels for Rural brigades. This means they become unviable to operate and may close. Current funding models do not allow for rural and urban fire brigades to coexist in the same geographical area. An example of this is the new urban fire station at Nerang on the Gold Coast which will take funds from the rural brigades of Gilston-Advancetown, Clagriaba and Guanaba. Levy systems need a new classification of Izone levy to fund both types of brigades.

The geographical area around Nerang cannot alone be serviced by urban appliances. The terrain dictates rural type trucks. This was clearly seen last year at the fire at Smith Street on the Gold Coast where both urban and rural appliances operated under one command to extinguish the fire.

The encroachment needs better management of resources and education of cultures of both rural and urban firefighters, officers and management at all levels to provide a level of service that the community expects.

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

The increasing demand on Rural Fire brigades can be better managed better by providing relevant Nationally recognised training, equipment and resources. Training needs to include shared training between groups of rural and urban firefighters and officers. This will blend the cultures to meld the "One Fire Service" statement made by the Commissioner.

5. Are the accountabilities mechanisms in place appropriate?

Current accountability mechanisms appear adequate. These include.

Firefighter competencies.
Firefighter deployment requirements.
Financial accountabilities.

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

Fire wardens currently provide an arms length involvement in the fire service. Their involvement is before the fire while the Brigade's is after the start of a fire. Good communication between both is important. In many cases the warden is also a member of the brigade. By having an arms length view on a situation a more holistic approach is often achieved.

Summary

There is a need for a different approach to funding for the Rural Fire Service in Queensland. Brigades should be fully funded and maintained by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service which will in turn provide:

1. Appliances maintained to a safe operating standard.
2. Stations built and maintained to current safety requirements,
3. A resource of appliances ready for deployment to areas of need.

In addition to funding for equipment, appropriate training and good lines of communications between paid staff and rural volunteers will strengthen the fire service in Queensland.