

Re: Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland**Submission from Quingilli and Behana Gorge Rural Fire Brigades
Classification - Rural Brigades**

As stated in the audit report there are 1525 Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland. They cover a very diverse range of climate and geography, going from Dry Tropics to Wet Tropics to dry western plains to the more temperate south-east. The circumstances and needs of a brigade can be a very individual thing.

The audit raised some issues we would like to comment on:-

BRIGADE FUNDING:- Quingilli and Behana Gorge Brigades do not have a revenue stream and all fire fighting equipment such as tanks, pumps, hoses, etc., are paid for by individual members. The majority of our brigade members are cane farmers or harvesting contractors or both. Because of the inherent fire risk in cane fields and surrounding vegetation during the harvesting season, everyone is very conscious of the need to have reliable fire fighting equipment and consequently units are generally well maintained. The standard unit is a 3000 litre galvanized trailer mounted water tank with motorized pump drawn by a tractor.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION - The tanks referred to above, which have proved to be ideally suited to the conditions under which our brigade operates, have been taken off the subsidized equipment list. While these tanks are still available on special order in restricted numbers, we are concerned that because they are not on the subsidized equipment list, this may be the thin edge of the wedge and in time may be unavailable. The largest water tank now available on the subsidized list is a 1000 litre polytank which is an insufficient volume of water to have on hand in locations in which we have to deal with fires, for example, trash blanket fires in cane paddocks and on rough tracks around the lower slopes of Walsh's Pyramid, Mount Massie and such-like mountainous areas.

We also have concerns about the possible lack of robustness of polytanks for rough terrain and their reliability in close proximity to very hot fires. The 3000 litre steel tanks, drawn by a tractor, carry sufficient volume of water to be effective at the fire front and yet are not too heavy for negotiating rough terrain.

Hose reels are an item of essential equipment that are hard to come by and are not on the subsidized list. We would like to see a basic, well-built hose reel on the subsidized list at a reasonable and affordable price.

FORWARD PLANNING AND RISK MANAGEMENT - The main risks in our brigade areas are trash blanket fires in cane fields and grass and bush fires on Walsh's Pyramid and Mt Massie and their surrounds.

Our Fire Warden and Area Director in consultation and cooperation with National Parks Service, Main Roads Dept and Cairns Regional Council have developed a planning process for the

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management of rural fires in this area of concern by strategic hazard reduction burning. The results of the strategy are assessed for their effectiveness and modified or extended as experience dictates.

A case in point:-

In 2009 a hazard reduction burn of the Pyramid took place in July. However, for various reasons, a strip between the Bruce Highway and the burnt area of the Pyramid was left unburnt. Very dry conditions were experienced for the next four months. During very hot, windy conditions in October, a person or persons unknown set fire to this unburnt strip and a wild fire resulted which burnt rapidly along the unburnt strip towards dwellings at the base of the Pyramid. The fire also jumped the Bruce Highway into trash blanketed cane fields and threatened standing fields of unharvested cane.

Total disaster was prevented by two things:-

- (1) A rapid response by multiple tractor-drawn tanker units from Quingilli and Behana Gorge Rural Fire Brigades controlled the trash fires before they got into standing cane and a similar rapid response from urban units and tractor-drawn tanker units from Behana Gorge Brigade stopped the fire in the unburnt strip.
- (2) The wild fire in the previously unburnt strip was able to be contained because of the July hazard reduction burn on the Pyramid. The absence of fuel on the Pyramid averted a veritable conflagration.

The Pyramid burning strategy will in future be adjusted to include an annual cool season burn of this strip of vegetation beside the Bruce Highway.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FIRE WARDENS - The Fire Warden for Quingilli and Behana Gorge Rural Fire Brigade Districts is very closely integrated with QFRS Rural Operations. He is, in fact, the Chairman of Quingilli and Behana Gorge Brigades and plays a pivotal role in coordinating brigade and fire control activities in the area.

As pointed out earlier, hazard reduction burning is vital to mitigating the effect of bush fires and the powers that be would do well to educate the public in this regard rather than threaten to emasculate the roll of fire wardens and rural fire brigades.

In summary, we would recommend as follows:

- (1) That the fire warden system be left as it presently stands in the hands of local custodians.
- (2) That a survey be done of all rural fire brigades to find out what equipment is most suitable for different areas. For example, in our area a large number of tractor-driven tankers are more appropriate than the yellow trucks with their limited ability to operate in rough terrain and with their limited water carrying capacity. Other items are in demand but not readily available.

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(3) That hazard reduction burning be retained as an essential ingredient in mitigating the effect of bush fires. The Rural Fire Service needs to spend more money on education and the promotion of the role of fire in the rural landscape.

(4) That the CEO of Rural Operations should have a background of experience in rural operations.

Yours faithfully


V K WIENERT

Secretary

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