

00 00 09

RECEIVED

09 MAR 2010

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE**

Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland

SUBMISSION

from

MT ALFORD RURAL FIRE BRIGADE

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

From Mt Alford Rural Fire Brigade
 Secretary Ms Barbara Snelling
 1298 Mt Alford Rd
 Mt Alford
 Qld 4309
 Telephone: 07 5463 0207

SUMMARY

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

The current model of Rural Fire Brigades is out-moded, out-dated and out of touch with reality. The role of the volunteer needs to be reconsidered.

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

This brigade does not know what the current model is. Funding is inconsistent across the state and decisions appear to be made without understanding of local conditions.

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

The increase in rural residential population has a greater influence on this brigade than urban encroachment. It is already causing increase in demand, activity and cost.

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

QFRS needs to supply consistent guidance and support to brigades, with personal attendance at training sessions and group and brigade meetings, and assistance to office bearers to meet financial and operational requirements.

5. Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

Current accountability measures are frequently not complied with. It is necessary for QFRS to ensure consistency with brigades' preparation of accounts, and auditing, and to help where needed.

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

There should be a fee for a landowner to obtain a permit, and fire wardens should be remunerated.

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

Training

Communication

PPE

Unwillingness within QFRS to address difficult or fundamental issues.

SUBMISSION

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

The current model is not suitable. It is unrealistic and is out of touch with conditions on the ground.

The rural fire brigades began with volunteers, in effect the local landowners grouping together to protect their families and farms. Now a greater level of skills and management is required.

1.1 Volunteers

There is increasing fragmentation of communities with the increased mobility of residents. The model of community based, self help, partly self funding brigades is no longer appropriate.

1.1.1 Demands on volunteers have grown and are too great. Volunteers have to earn a living.

Active members now require ever-increasing commitment with

- i. Time to devote beyond calls of work and family.
- ii. More and more training demands.
- iii. Availability . Many residents now work far from home and cannot attend at short notice.
- iv. Willingness to bear increasing personal costs to attend fires and training, possible reduction in pay because of absence from work, possible loss of leave days and possible child-minding costs.
- v. New and increasing calls to join a task force intra- and inter-state.
- vi. Management skills are needed for office bearers and crew leaders.
- vii Computer and office-type skills are needed for office bearers.

1.1.2 Fire-fighters should be paid for call-outs to 000 emergencies on level 3 days. This should be at an hourly rate based on the level for an auxiliary fire-fighter. This would remove the current anomaly of a voluntary rural fire-fighter working side by side with a paid auxiliary fire- fighter.

Secretaries and secretary/treasurers should receive a payment starting at \$200 per year to help with the increasing expenses that they currently bear.

The efforts of these members would then be better valued.

There should also be a one-off payment for members when they achieve training module qualifications. This would provide an incentive to undertake training courses.

1.1.3 QFRS needs to supply more support to reduce the load on volunteers.

2.

1.2 Fire- fighting Strength

A figure has been given of approximately 35,000 volunteers in Queensland. Every brigade member knows that this figure may be correct according to the data-base, but the number of **active** members (firefighter or support) is a fraction of that number. As an example, Mt Alford brigade has a member list of 73 but only approximately 20 active members.
QFRS does not know what the real firefighting strength is.

1.3 Brigade boundaries in our area are inappropriate.

Boundaries are drawn on a map without regard to terrain, access or demography. For example, one side of Bunjurgan Rd is in the area of Allandale RFB, and the other side is in the area of Mt Alford RFB. This is inappropriate from a fire-fighting point of view, a creek or other natural barrier to vehicle access would be suitable.

1.4 Brigade isolation.

Mt Alford Brigade feels isolated, that QFRS is not interested in them and that they receive only token support. Other brigades have expressed to us a similar belief. The current number of brigades is unmanageable and if there were fewer brigades it would be easier for QFRS to provide support.

3.

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

This brigade does not know what the funding model is. No information on how QFRS funding is managed is provided to us. Quantum of funding appears to vary greatly around the state.

2.1. Sources of funding

2.1.1 Levy

For this Brigade the only significant and regular source of funds is the levy which is raised by the Scenic Rim Regional Council by a levy on rate notices. It is envisaged by QFRS as a sum to be used for operating expenses. The amount is recommended to Council by Boonah Rural Fire Brigade Group and this is decided by vote at a Group meeting. It is totally affected by the particular interests of the delegates who attend the meeting. Council may or may not accept the recommendation of Group.

It is inappropriate for a Council to have final say as to what the levy should be. Councillors do not know what Brigades need, and there is a risk of a political decision. There should be a standard method of funding across the State, which is based on a rating of brigade needs, taking account of risk, area, terrain, local population and number of call-outs.

2.1.2 Capital Grants

Brigades may apply for grants from a number sources to purchase capital items. This is often not an easy process, and places a big demand on members, probably secretaries, and some lack the necessary skills to achieve success. QFRS does not assist and may decline to support the application.

2.1.3 Donations

Small sums may be obtained from landowners as a result of assistance with hazard reduction burns. This is not a reliable nor substantial source.

2.1.4 Fund Raising

We note that the Director-General advised the Auditor General that Rural Fire Brigades are community self-help organisations expected to help with funding their operations, purchases and expenses.

The Director-General has clearly not left his desk and is living in a totally unreal world. Volunteer fire-fighters should not be required to raise funds when they volunteered to be fire-fighters, and are already giving so much of their own money, time and energy.

This brigade does not beg nor conduct chook raffles any more.

The concept of community mentioned by the Director-General has disappeared in semi-rural areas as residents travel elsewhere for work and entertainment. Many residents believe that by paying a miniscule levy they are absolved from all responsibility or care for fire in their area or on their own property.

2.2 Costs

Costs continue to increase and future planning should take this into consideration. Increased fuel costs may be expected to continue and vehicle costs are significant, particularly as safety requirements multiply.

2.3 Funds allocation

At the brigade level it appears that funding allocation by QFRS is carried out without adequate fact-finding, monitoring, review or responsible decision making. Why are there **nine** trucks stationed in the north and west of the old Boonah Shire and **two** in the much larger and very vulnerable area of the south and east?

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

3.1. Mt Alford does not expect overwhelming urban growth in the next decade.

3.2. Mt Alford area is experiencing growth in **rural residential** population which we expect to continue.

3.3. Newcomers frequently have little experience of rural living and need help to understand the necessity to prepare for the possibility of fire and learn about its likely behaviour. Brigade members attempt to address this, but do not have the time or resources to conduct a thorough education programme. QFRS should undertake this role and Council should ensure that weeds and excessive grass growth are controlled and that hazard reduction burns are conducted where and when appropriate.

3.4. Developers of rural residential sites should be required to provide fire-fighting infrastructure.

3.5. Our brigade must expect increased risks and increased demands as more dwellings, sheds, fences, pastoral land and tree plantations are vulnerable.

3.6. Costs to brigades will increase.

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

4.1 Management model

A new management model is needed to include processes to ensure **consistency** across all brigades in resource allocation, training, monitoring of brigade operations and review of results. This will require much more effort from QFRS to communicate with brigades, and provide guidance and assistance to brigades that struggle to meet modern requirements of operation and administration. There will need to be QFRS participation in brigade and group meetings and training sessions. Brigade liaison officers should begin to act as liaison officers.

4.2 Shed

As part of resource allocation brigades should be provided with a standardised shed/building. This would ensure that trucks and equipment are properly housed and not kept in private hands. It also would provide a visible focus for the brigade, and help members to develop a sense of belonging to a brigade that is valued.

4.3 Recruitment

A recruitment programme is needed to attract new active, trained members. Current members are getting old, and many people leave the area for work opportunities. Brigades cannot add such a programme in the time available to them. QFRS should work with brigades, particularly to ensure that potential members are not lost from cadet programmes. Cadets should be introduced to brigades, probably on training days. Now would be a good time as fires have been much in the news.

4.4 Reduction in the number of brigades

There are 13 brigades in the Boonah Rural Fire Brigade Group, which covers the area of the old Boonah Shire. This means that resources are spread too thinly. Some small brigades are almost dysfunctional with few active members, little equipment, low management skills and little support from QFRS.

The current number and distribution of brigades, with their areas, are based on a past concept of communities. QFRS now needs to replace this arrangement with fewer brigades, with their location and areas taking account of operational requirements. These requirements include expected risk and expected response times, and appropriate vehicle allocation should follow. Amalgamations should take place to form four or possibly five larger brigades, which would allow economies of scale. There then could be one brigade in each of the north, south, east and west of the Boonah area.

Amalgamations should be implemented as a matter of urgency.

5 Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

5.1 Accounting measures.

There are currently measures in place for brigades to provide audited accounts, budgets, 3-year plans, and health and workplace audits. Brigades frequently ignore these measures, with no follow up by QFRS.

5.2 Brigade Auditors

The auditors of brigade accounts are frequently careless and inaccurate and there is no follow up. There should be QFRS review and feedback to brigades of all accounts and audits provided by them. As brigades are using public money the audits need to be carried out by the Queensland Audit Office.

5.3 Consistency

There should be consistency in the way that accounts are presented and audited so that expenditure and needs may be reviewed and compared. QFRS should provide a standard format and give assistance to any brigade that has difficulty with its use.

5.4 How money is spent by brigades

There is no review of how brigades spend their money. Are funds used wisely? Are purchases appropriate and of suitable quality? Are the funds used at all? Some brigades have considerable funds in accounts doing nothing.

5.5 Levy distribution

Distribution of levy money in Boonah Group is determined at a group meeting using a formula devised some years ago to take account of needs of different brigades. Variations may be made by vote. There needs to be monitoring of this process by QFRS, so that there is some variation according to performance and a cap should be placed on the amount held by a brigade so that no more money is allocated once the cap is reached.

QFRS should collect a state-wide fire levy and distribute this to brigades using budgets submitted by brigades as per the QFRS urban and auxiliary model.

8.

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

6.1 Communication

Fire wardens need to be actively associated with brigades as a brigade member. Brigade members should know when a permit has been issued so that they are prepared for a possible emergency.

6.2 There should be a fee for a permit.

A landowner may take the matter more seriously if he/she has to pay, but it could increase the number of fires lit without a permit. The landowner should pay an additional fee if an inspection is needed before the permit is issued. Fines need to be applied for non-compliance and legal proceedings for loss caused by escaped fire.

6.3 Remuneration for wardens.

Fire Wardens face considerable risk in giving permits and know they may be called to appear in court in case of a dispute. They also face unpleasantness or abuse if a permit is refused. It is an onerous and often time-consuming task as the terms of the permit often need explanation. They should be adequately remunerated.

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

7.1 Training

There has been great emphasis on training in the last few years and this has resulted in some improvement. **BUT**

7.1.1 Delivery

Delivery of training programmes and assessment has been inconsistent with last minute changes, long distances expected to be travelled by participants and sometimes poor instruction.

7.1.2 Assessment

Assessment for courses completed has been inconsistent, much to the fury of those who attended many training sessions only to find other members were successfully assessed after one brief session or merely over the telephone with no preparation. There have been abuses by QFRS of the process of Recognition of Prior Learning.

7.1.3 Resistance to training

There is much resistance to training particularly on the part of many members who are experienced fire fighters but probably not up to date with *modern communications and operating practices*. They are not prepared to commit time and energy to training. At Mt Alford Brigade there is a small core of members who attend brigade training sessions but all efforts to attract others have failed. This is likely to be the case elsewhere. QFRS should be aware of this and offer support and maybe follow the auxiliary model of compulsory paid attendance at training.

7.2 Communication

There is generally disaffection towards QFRS. Brigade members feel isolated, that no one cares about them. Masses of forms, newsletters, standing orders, notices, memos, calendars arrive, and members ignore them and there is no follow up. We rarely see QFRS personnel, they appear to be largely unconcerned with what the brigade is doing.

7.2 PPE

PPE frequently takes a long time to be supplied, however recently a large consignment of goggles, and respirators of the type not favoured by our members arrived without being ordered. A jacket and trouser set, ordered in October 2009 arrived in January 2010. Three months for a basic item of equipment. What sort of management is this? Who in QFRS is measuring the supply times?

7.3 Fundamental issues

It appears that QFRS does not want to consider fundamental or difficult issues. As examples, the role of the volunteer has been raised with QFRS many times, particularly with respect to personal costs incurred by brigade members, with no reply. A request by Mt Alford brigade to consider the offer from the Mt Alford School of Arts Committee to take over their property was made in May 2009 and there has been no response.

There is also a lack of will to ensure compliance with measures already in place.

In most areas of its responsibilities, QFRS appears slow to think, slow to act, slow to change and slow to respond.