

15 MAR 2010

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE**

LEFTHAND BRANCH RURAL FIRE BRIGADE

Reply to:
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The Research Director
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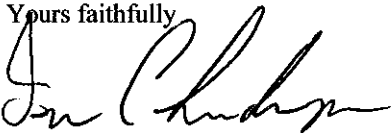
Dear Sir/Madam

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

Attached please find our submission to the Committee in terms of your letter of 26th November 2009.

If you have any queries please direct them to our Secretary at the address shown above.

Yours faithfully



Ian C Lindenmayer
Chairperson

Queensland Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland

Preamble

Left Hand Branch Rural Fire Brigade is located some 30kms from Gatton in the area known as Mount Sylvia. Its area of influence covers a large amount of mountainous area rising to 700 metres as well as an amount of plains country. The brigade also provides services to the Ingoldsby area which lies in an adjacent valley. Brigade personnel number 7 trained and 16 back-up volunteers.

Primary Industries including beef cattle, dairying, vegetable cropping, lucerne growing and piggeries are prominent in the area of influence. These are mostly operated by full time producers but there are also a number of hobby farmers residing in the area.

Responses to the various issues are now outlined.

Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigade suitable?

The current model is seen as being appropriate. The members meet quarterly whilst the committee members are actively engaged in day to day matters.

The Brigade enjoys adequate levels of communication with its Area Office in Ipswich and this includes not only written and electronic advices but also onsite visits initiated by both parties to discuss operational issues as needed. Telephone advice is always readily available.

As well as local callouts, our Brigade also supports neighbouring brigades from time to time. Generally this support is reciprocated as required.

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

The Brigade receives fire levies collected by the Lockyer Valley Regional Council each half-year and these funds are utilised in the day to day running costs of the Brigade including Fuel, Vehicle Maintenance, Power, Equipment Repairs etc.

Our equipment is adequate for our requirements. We have a 4WD vehicle approximately 18 months old housed in a relatively new shed. All vehicle servicing requirements are up to date as are all mandatory audits of fire fighting equipment, first aid resources and shed appliances. In addition all our volunteers are in process of receiving an updated kit which includes jacket, trousers, boots, helmet and goggles as well as face masks.

For our Brigade size and area of influence the levy revenues are seen as being adequate.

What effect is urban encroachment within brigade areas having on Rural Fires Brigades?

Whilst our Brigade is in a fairly remote location and therefore does not experience large urban encroachment, it does have some problems, at times, with people moving into the area from urban areas.

These problems stem largely from a lack of knowledge of fire and more importantly the need for them to take greater care of their properties as far as fire prevention is concerned. There is also conflict in many cases between existing rural producers and the newcomers as far as burn offs where the latter parties often resist the lighting of fires for hazard reduction purposes.

Many rural producers use fire as a tool to control weeds particularly those of a woody nature such as lantana and also to freshen pasture lands on a regular basis. Burning is undertaken at specific times of the year say early Spring and is done on a mosaic basis so that there is generally a quantity of fresh pasture available each year.

Because of the largely mountainous terrain in our area the appearance of smoke can cause some consternation and disagreements have been escalated to higher authorities at times.

We see a solution which lies with the Local Government Authority informing intending property buyers of the need to be more responsible in a fire sense and that a mere call to 000 will not result in a fire vehicle response within say 7 minutes but a rather longer period depending of course on the location. The message should also include the fact that fire is a necessary way of life for some people in the area and that burning regimes will assist in the overall safety of the area because of the reduced fuel levels available over time.

It would be a simple matter for this type of message to be conveyed at the time a Rates Search is being made.

Perhaps this matter could be one you could consider during your review.

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

At this stage and against the background of our present workload, we do not envisage any problems.

Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

Given the size of our budget, financial overview and accountability are believed to be quite robust. Our Treasurer is required to present a quarterly report and an annual independent audit is also undertaken.

In respect to expenditure outside of day to day requirements, all decisions are taken by the Brigade Committee consisting of the Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer, First, Second and Third Officers and the Fire Warden. Purchases need to satisfy hurdle requirements of need, appropriateness and cost relative to market and all care is taken to ensure funds are expended prudently.

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

Fire Wardens are an essential part of the rural fire scene.

Fire is a norm of rural life in many areas for the reasons previously explained. From the Brigade's perspective, a regular burning programme in large parts our area of influence considerably lessens the fire risk and hence the callout rates. Without regular burning taking place and given average seasonal conditions fuel loads can increase to dangerous levels. The ingredients are then ever present for wild fire situations which not only present threats to property but also to human life in the area.

The Fire Warden provides the catalyst for hazard reduction burning to take place and his role is enhanced because he is locally based and:

- He has a sound knowledge of the area he administers.
- He understands the topography.
- He is fully aware of the weather conditions prevailing at the time of issue of a permit, and
- He knows what permit conditions to enforce that will provide both a successful outcome of a burn and a safe environment for the neighbouring properties.

Comment has been made in the briefing papers that there appears to be a lack of integration of the Fire Warden into the QFRS Network and that is so to a large degree. It is our view that this lack of integration stems from:

- Decisions to invoke fire bans are taken at administrative levels rather than seeking any local input from the fire Warden.
- Basic differences in the role of the Fire Warden vs the Fire Officer particularly urban and senior fire personnel. These differences can be summarised as an ability by the Fire Warden to light a fire whereas the average fire officer is trained to put out fires and cannot in many instances accept a proposition that fire may be doing some good if allowed to continue to burn.

We have three (3) Fire Wardens two of whom are also volunteer fire officers and we enjoy excellent interaction within the group. We could not envisage a situation where fire permits for instance were to be issued away from the area at a centralised point. This would be counter-productive, it could lead to unrealistic and ignorant fire permit conditions being required and eventually would inhibit controlled hazard burning to the detriment of the rural community at large.

We fully support the role of the Fire Warden being resident in local community but at the same time we would support greater liaison with the QFRS Administration as required.

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

We believe there is a need to review the laws covering (1) landholder responsibilities and (2) the responsibilities borne by the landholder lighting the fire.

In relation to the former, there are no provisions existing in any legislation that requires landholders to clean up their properties and so provide a measure of fire safety in the event of a fire emergency. Too often we see houses/sheds in the middle of long grass and other rubbish and our volunteers are expected to save these properties often at great risk to their personal safety.

We believe fire/local government legislation needs to recognise these factors accordingly and require each landholder to maintain his/her property in a responsible manner.

As to (2) above, the law as it currently stands provides that the owner of the property, on which a fire is to be lit, has to ensure that the fire will not intrude onto any neighbouring properties unless agreed to by the neighbour/s. In other words that landholder has sole responsibility to ensure the fire does not get out of control.

In some instances particularly in mountainous terrain it is not possible to adequately control a fire because of inaccessibility by earthmoving equipment to construct fire breaks. Usually neighbours agree to burn simultaneously to obviate this requirement. However there are instances where this agreement is not forthcoming and hence if the conditions of the fire permit are to be observed it

becomes impossible to light up. This is not necessarily acceptable particularly as there are usually no alternative options open to the producer in question.

We contend that this law needs to be amended.

In those instances where a suitable fire break cannot be established or where suitable arrangements cannot be negotiated, neighbouring landholders should not be able to merely indicate their unwillingness to burn or indeed have fire on their property.

In our view there should be a commensurate input by both parties to ensure a satisfactory outcome for all concerned rather than the lopsided situation that now exists.

We recommend positive consideration of both these issues.