



Queensland Fire and Rescue -
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**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE**

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

14 March 2010

Subject: Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland

Dear Sir or Madam

I am writing to you on behalf of the Queensland Fire and Rescue - Senior Officers Union of Employees (SOU). The SOU is a professionally led strategic industrial organisation operating within the industrial relations framework in Queensland. In the interests of its members, the SOU leads and coordinates the direction and profile of senior fire officers, with the key goals of improving and influencing the broader working and industrial environment that impacts its members.

It is our pleasure to provide this submission into the management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland. The SOU represents the vast majority of Senior Fire Officers within QFRS Rural Operations and therefore has a direct interest in the responsibility, accountability, leadership role, workload and out of hours work provided to Queensland communities by our members. In the interest of brevity we have identified the main issues and provided a short synopsis of the problem. That being said, the SOU is willing to provide further detail (if required) either through additional written correspondence or alternately through appearing before the committee.

Issue	Brief Details	Recommendation
Sustainable Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rural Operations is currently substantially funded through the urban fire levy. This 'syphoning off' has hampered and delayed improvements of fire service delivery in metropolitan and regional areas, and is still not meeting the costs of business for volunteer rural fire brigades that rely on donations and grants to operate and respond to incidents. This is also contrary to the intent and description provided to the community of what the 'urban fire levy is for and does not have the capacity to adequately provide equipment and resources to communities to meet the 	Introduce a full funding model for rural operations that provides for rural operations to meet the operational and community safety needs of Queenslanders.

	<p>identified risk.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst we acknowledge that direct comparisons are difficult, the difference in funding between similar rural fire services is obvious. QFRS Rural Operations receives approximately 30 million dollars in funding while the NSW RFS receives 250 million. Even the much smaller SA CFS receives funding of over double what Rural Operations receives (60 million dollars). 	
Appliances and Stations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteer Rural Fire Brigades must contribute 20% of the purchase price for new fire appliances as well as provide all costs associated with maintenance and fuel. This is even though they are an asset of Government. This is inequitable in comparison with urban funding and is at unmanageable for small brigades without support from Council or community grants. Appliances are allocated on the ability for the local brigade to contribute funds not on the risk to an area. Many communities with high risk are not equipped with an appliance to meet the risk as they are unable to fund the purchase of an appliance and meet the ongoing costs of fuel and maintenance. With over 1500 Brigades there are only approximately 500 Stations. Many of these are poorly constructed tin sheds that have had little or no maintenance for many years. The onus is on Brigades to provide suitable funding to maintain these government assets. 	For safety of our volunteers and communities, all resources and infrastructure (fire appliances, equipment and stations) need to be fully owned by the QFRS with purchase costs, maintenance and replacement fully funded.
Rural Fire Service Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With a service of 35,000 volunteers of which 10,000 are active volunteer firefighters there is only approximately 100 permanent staff. It is physically impossible to provide appropriate training, operational management and administrative support to this many people. This was evident in the recent fire season that saw Rural Operations staff stretched beyond limit with staff working extended hours over a protracted period to support volunteers. Career rural staff are extremely dedicated and hard working but the overburden of responsibility and workload is taking its toll. The out of hours work required to meet either operational needs or volunteer availability is excessive and indeed untenable. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> An increase in the staffing model (i.e. appropriate numbers of fulltime operational staff) needs to be introduced to fully support volunteer requirements. Consider integrating the current State Office led Rural Operations into current regional structures.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently, QFRS Rural Operations is managed centrally through a State Office reporting line. It is proposed that increased effectiveness would be achieved by integrating Rural Operations into the current QFRS Regional Office operating structure. This change would see an increased focus on regional ownership of rural fire service delivery matters, and support improved collaboration between all elements of QFRS staff, volunteers and services. 	
Bureaucracy within Queensland Emergency Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whilst it is not openly (and formally) communicated within Government, a common view amongst many emergency service practitioners is that the support services (provided by the current Queensland departmental model) to Queensland emergency service operational agencies is inconsistent and extensively bureaucratic. Additionally, the performance of external services (i.e. Shared Services Agency) provided to the operational agencies is well below par with the concept being considered an expensive failure by practitioners. Currently within the Department of Community Safety, a strong focus (in many cases) is being placed on accountability for following (in many cases) arbitrary bureaucratic rules and practices as opposed to accountability for delivering consistently good emergency services to Queenslanders. It is proposed that significant efficiencies (both fiscal and operational) would be evident in seeking to redress the current accountability focus. 	Review the current impact of bureaucracy on the effective delivery of emergency services (including Rural Fire Service delivery) in Queensland.

In addition, the outcomes of the recent 2009 Victorian fire emergency has seen an increasing emphasis on fire mitigation and community education. The delivery of these services simply cannot be delivered by an already stretched volunteer base and will require either more support or dedicated staff. The provision of government equipment to volunteer brigades without a dedicated maintenance and repair programme is leaving the government exposed to liability where due to a lack of funding in the brigade, poorly or incorrectly maintained equipment may fail and cause injury to volunteers and staff. QFRS at present cannot guarantee that vital equipment is being maintained to the manufacturer's specifications as the responsibility to maintain the equipment is based on the ability of the local brigade to fund the repairs, and in many cases being completed by unskilled and non qualified personal.

While the driver of climate change is still being argued last year's fire season (2009) was the worse Queensland has had on record and challenged all aspects of the QFRS but particularly the Rural Fire Brigades. Over a four month period the QFRS responded to over 7000 wildfire

incidents with rural volunteers being requested to respond frequently outside their Brigade area. In fact, it is not unusual for volunteer firefighters to be responded outside their own region and interstate.

Whilst we recommend that all aspects of rural operations should be state owned and managed we also believe that there should remain a strong partnership with local government. Local government provide support through the provision of land; provide important resources during fire activity periods and they also play an integral role in the collection of the rural fire levy. Therefore we view local government as an invaluable partner in the delivery of rural fire services in Queensland.

The SOU is pleased to have input into this review and would be happy to provide further clarification or detail should you require.

Yours Sincerely



Andrew Short AFSM
State Secretary

Queensland Fire and Rescue – Senior Officers Union of Employees

cc: Commissioner, QFRS