

18 MAR 2010

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE**

Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee

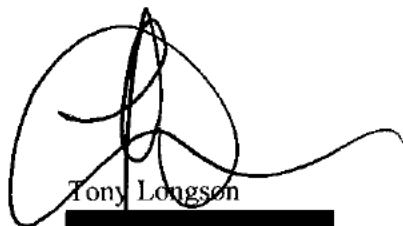
MANAGEMENT OF RURAL FIRE SERVICES IN QUEENSLAND

The following is submitted by an active brigade member and fire warden:


- The current model for Rural Fire Brigades needs to be changed. Over recent years there have been changes to the way Rural Fire Brigades operate. The majority of active and effective members of those brigades all hold full time employment and any time spent on brigade activities is time that the person is unable to spend with their family or for recreation. This situation could be leading to the lack of long term brigade members. Administrative tasks within brigades are on the increase and taking up more of the member's time. There needs to be assistance to brigades with administrative tasks. Why is there no computer software available from RFS to assist Brigade Secretaries with the management of Brigade membership? Another area is with servicing, maintenance and inspection of vehicles. Rather than leaving it to brigades to find someone available to move vehicles, Area Office staff should be available to move the vehicles during normal working hours. As all vehicles belong to the QFRS it may now be time to have all those vehicles identified as belonging to a Area Office rather than various brigades. This may require the alteration to what is considered current brigade boundaries to something based on local government boundaries. Why is it necessary for a brigade to submit an RF14 concerning an incident that a Fire Communication centre dispatches them to? The information could be sent to all relevant sections almost immediately, rather than days or weeks later.
- The existing funding model and resource allocation for Rural Fire Brigades needs change. Where Brigade funds come from a levy collected from ratepayers this has eliminated the time that brigade members have to spend shaking the can for donations. However some brigades do not receive any levy money and in areas where the two types of brigades operate in close proximity to each other it has been left to each brigade to cover their own costs. Effectively those property owners who do not contribute to a brigade levy are not paying but getting the same protection and it is only time before rate payers who are funding a brigade start to complain about their funds being used outside their brigade area. To resolve this situation Area Offices need to receive all levy money collected equally across the district and directly fund the expenses of brigades. This could assist in increasing the information available to the Auditor General to capture, analyse and report on the level of brigade funding required. This could also reduce the requirement of a brigade to have a detailed audit report completed every 12 months, which although given to the Area Office appears to go no further.
- Urban encroachment within brigade areas is increasing the number of fires started at the side of roads or on land accessible from outer suburbs, thus increasing the workload of rural brigades. More brigades are being utilised to attend fires in areas for which they receive no levy assistance and are expected to meet the cost of attending without refund.
- The financial accountability mechanisms currently in place appear to be appropriate, when considered with risk assessment. Not knowing the total number of dishonest situations that are occurring across the State makes it difficult to comment on this one. Those that have occurred and were identified in this region have been dealt with. The

only other way would be to use competent audit teams to train and physically check each brigade financial records. If the Area Office was responsible for all payments then this should assist in reducing the locations that need checking.

- Fire Wardens should be able to identify hazards and commence action to eliminate them. This should be by way of advising the Area Office of the situation so that the remedial action come from that office. This model would eliminate the problem of an unpaid volunteer being seen as being responsible for policing the Act. The relevant Area Office should be sending to all properties in the Fire Wardens area some of the brochures that are currently available for educating the public. This should be via mail or council rates notice, rather than a letter box drop, with other material or "junk mail" that goes straight into the garbage. Some of the brochures have a space that can be utilised for including the name and phone contact for the Fire Warden.



Tony Longson



16 March 2010