

To PUBLIC ACCOUNTS and PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

Re – MANAGEMENT of RURAL FIRE SERVICES in QUEENSLAND

Discussion Paper. Considerations.

The current Community based Rural Fire Brigades are suitable.

Funding. Escalating costs, particularly the reduction in available subsidised equipment, rapidly rising fuel costs, and the maintenance of equipment and vehicles, is making it harder to balance the budget, particularly in bad fire years. The need to fund raise to pay for special projects – e.g. buildings, etc. Is a nuisance and cuts into valuable family time, training time and fire-fighting, particularly to the dedicated few who always seem to be the ones to do it.

The current levy system in the Woodlea Brigade area seems to be working fairly well in NORMAL fire seasons.

Resource Allocation. Rural Brigades seem to be the “poor cousins” to other Q.F.R.S. units, particularly in regards to the current vehicles as supplied

Re the Nissan Patrols - The water capacity (600 litres) is insufficient; inadequate warning lights; plastic internal and external parts that melt or give off toxic fumes when burning. No built in Fire protection screens, sprinkler systems, etc. and 2 person crews. These are all risks to the crews trying to do the best that they can, at times under difficult circumstances.

Inadequate capacity petrol powered pumps and inadequate equipment supplied for some uses.

The vehicles have been fitted with upgraded suspension to carry a heavier load, but this does not seem to assist with other STANDARD components as supplied with the original vehicles – the Clutch and Steering Stabilizers, etc., which do not last as long as they should.

Woodlea Brigade does not have a Medium Attack unit, but when working with other brigades, have noted again, plastic parts, some poor design flaws – e.g. spare tyre placement, filler caps on the water tank, inadequate petrol powered pumps, and no fire protection systems.

Driver Training. If you have an open licence to drive on the bitumen in a particular vehicle, you are supposed to be able to drive these vehicles off road at a fire, sometimes in extremely rugged terrain! Unfortunately there are people who do not realize that driving a 4WD in these circumstances in NO WAY even vaguely equates with regular road driving.

Reconnaissance assets (air surveillance, etc) at large incidents particularly, are practically non-existent, leading to guesswork, wasted time, and sometimes poor decision making on the part of Control Officers. Training and current Fire Management Skills is not enough, but current PRACTICAL training is being left up to the individual brigades, and has no consistency, and leads to fire fighters of different abilities being placed on the fire ground together. Just because someone knows things from a book, it does not mean that they are capable of putting it automatically into practice.

Advanced Training. Incident Management Skills is not enough = once you have done the course, there is no follow-up, revision, etc.

Speciality Training. First Aid, Competent use of Chainsaws, and other special courses –it is up to the brigades to pay for them

Current Issue Personal Protection Equipment. The situation has improved with some items viz. Boots and Gloves, but the current issue of 2 piece coveralls is too light, and do not adequately protect against radiated heat, especially in some bush fire fighting situations. We have been told that, “You are too close to the fire!!” There are many times when this is unavoidable, and we, the fire fighters, need to know that we are not putting ourselves at unnecessary risk because the coveralls are not adequate. The plastic helmets have a limited lifespan, and at times of suspect protection. They burn very readily. The Bushranger helmets are currently available to members at a 50% subsidy. These are much more sturdy, have a much longer lifespan, and generally, a much superior product. Whether the brigade or the individual fire fighter purchases these, it is either another cost to the member for the privilege of volunteering his time, or cutting into brigade operations funds. A long term view of the cost should be looked at by Q.F.R.S.

Urban Encroachment. In Woodlea area this has led to two very noticeable changes – The reduction in rural people in the brigade and the supplement by urban and rural residential personnel; and the increase in the structural protection role, even in traditional rural areas, because of the larger number of people looking to live in the bush – particularly those persons from larger urban areas who have no idea what fire, flood, drought, etc. means, but they still expect the same protection that they received in the past in urban areas.

Demands on Rural Fire Brigades. The biggest problem seems to be getting adequate numbers of personnel and equipment for continuous operational demands. Recruitment of suitable personnel is a problem and needs to be addressed urgently. Equipment is budget related at government level and is not adequate. It is also a problem getting volunteers, especially during the working day as employers do not like losing the services of their employees if they are called out to fight a fire. Also, as a result, the fire fighter will lose pay IF his boss allows him to turn out, or else given the option of, “The fire brigade or your job!” As a result, especially during the day, the only personnel available are the unemployed or pensioners. If employees go out, they are restricted to the hours that they can give. Most of these fire fighters give as much as they can, but have to make sure that they do not get over-tired for their job the next day.

Accountability. The current levels are adequate, even if some of the decisions made by brigades on purchases are unwise. Any increase would just lead to a rise in Bureaucratic Staff demands and costs which would have to be drawn from the taxpayer or the ever shrinking Q.F.R.S. budget.

Fire Wardens. The Fire Warden’s role is to issue permits to burn, and as such, are the **Pre-fire Authority** in their area of responsibility. Most Fire Wardens take this responsibility seriously. In some cases, communication to their local Rural Fire Brigade is inadequate. A few do not take the job seriously, but Wardens of inadequate standard are easily seen and should be replaced as required. The position in

general is being fulfilled properly. Why change something for the sake of change that has worked well for so long.

Relevant Matters. The protected species (paid staff) – a small number would not be employed outside the bureaucracy. Some of these persons are so incompetent that their actions border on the criminally negligent, but seemingly any attempt to complain falls on deaf ears.

The attitude from some persons is that Rural Fire Brigade volunteers should drop everything to fight fires. OK – guarantee jobs; compensate for lost wages and mortgage protection. The perception of a large number of the general public is that Rural Fire Brigade personnel are paid, and that the Fire Service is responsible for protecting them and their property from fire instead of them taking adequate precautions against “normal” condition fires. Advertising and public education need to be addressed on a state-wide level.

The old antagonism of “paid v voluntary” (Red v Yellow trucks) seems to have dispersed for the time being, at least in this area. In fact we find that we are working reasonably well together for the most part. But human beings being human, the old state could reappear at any time, if not watched.

The biggest problem in any Rural Fire Brigade is the egos of some of the members leading to politics and bickering which usually leads to good fire-fighters getting out of the rat race, placing unnecessary pressure on the remaining personnel, and in some cases, the collapse of a Brigade.

Quite often senior paid personnel are aware of the problem, but for some reason, will not intervene in a timely manner, or fob the problem off until it is too late. Usually a visit or discussion with the protagonists should be sufficient to solve most problems early on.

The Anti-burn Lobby is usually well meaning, but totally misinformed. Persons who sprout figures and (?)facts that are usually wrong. Even in extreme conditions, **fuel reduced areas** are a big advantage and do not have to be burnt, but must be maintained. Government controlled areas – local and State (road easements, parks, reserves, etc.) are usually just wicks to carry wildfire further on to private land.

FROM W. MULLER

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