
18 March 2010

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

Dear Sir,

Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland

This submission is made by Greg Hoyes, 118 Lochinvar Road, Upper Kedron Qld 4055. Daytime telephone numbers (07) 3838 1234 or 0418 717 428. I am an officer in the Samford Rural Fire Brigade. As such, I am not in a position to make a global, top down assessment of the "issues for consideration" set out in the committee's discussion paper. Rather, I have set out various comments on my perception of QFRS and some particular issues which the committee should consider when seeking solutions to the Auditor-General's concerns.

Volunteer Ethos

Understanding that Rural Firefighters are volunteers and the consequences of this is vital to a successful Rural Fire Service. My observations suggest that this understanding has been lost by QFRS bureaucracy in recent years.

Volunteers are motivated by the following things:

- Service to community
- Social aspects of the brigade
- Learning additional skills
- Adventure aspect

Volunteers are not motivated by:

- Monetary reward
- The threat of being fired if they fail to comply with directions
- Loyalty to QFRS
- Being a QFRS "back office". Whilst the Auditor-General's comments on improved accountability are appropriate, volunteer time should be utilized where it is most effective – on the fire-ground.

QFRS therefore needs a different management style for volunteers (versus professional fire-fighters) if it is to retain them. QFRS initiatives need to be "sold" to volunteers to gain their commitment rather than just issued. This is not occurring.

Equipment

Recently, QFRS has done large-scale personal equipment issues to volunteers as follows:

- Blue "station" uniforms.
- Green Rural Fire kit bags
- Yellow Pacific helmets for volunteers who have completed crew leader courses

From a volunteer perspective, these have an element of a clumsy attempt to buy the loyalty of the volunteers. The station uniforms are of minimal use to volunteers and were perceived to be a way of clearing excess stock of the blue uniforms prior to introduction of a new uniform for professional staff. The boots issued were elastic sided boots which were widely rejected as turnout boots by volunteers because of fit issues. The yellow helmets will create confusion in the field where a yellow helmet has traditionally signified an officer as compared to a white helmet for other firefighters. (When wearing goggles and respirators, identifying individuals is often difficult and the need to locate a person in authority is often urgent).

Volunteers see this as money wasted which could be used for areas of real need with better consultation. It does not correlate with being told that QFRS budget pressures do not allow for issue of equipment actually requested by brigades. For example, issue of turnout boots has been taking as long as three months from order date.

Training

QFRS has expended considerable effort in recent years on improving and formalising training for volunteers. Whilst this is admirable, it needs to be recognised that excessive training rigidity is not appropriate in the rural environment. Brigades are having difficulty doing in-house training and getting it "signed off" due to lack of access to an accredited trainer. The RPL system is excessively complex. Because volunteers come from a wide variety of social backgrounds and skill-sets, a rigid training system is tedious for some and too shallow for others.

Financial

For the rural fire brigade system to continue to work, it is vital that brigades continue to control their own finances. If it is perceived that this causes accountability risks, the solution must be to improve systems, not to centralise funding. In particular, it is vital that rate levy monies continue to be paid direct to rural brigades. Rural brigades are community organisations and an essential element is that communities see a direct correlation between the local support they provide (rate levies and donations) and the quality of their local brigade. Many brigades expend considerable effort to raise their own funds. Volunteers will not continue to do so if monies raised are not controlled by their brigade. Having these funds go in to a central pool is inappropriate.

I would expect that many rural brigades would lack the business skills to properly manage their finances to an appropriate standard. QFRS should seek to identify these brigades and provide training or administrative assistance without removing their autonomy. No intervention should occur for brigades which do have these skills.

Local Knowledge

At any serious bush fire, a critical person on the scene is the long-standing local firefighter with local area knowledge. This person can provide critical information on the behaviour of earlier fires in the areas, tracks to access the fire, escape routes, structures which will be threatened, etc. QFRS needs to understand and recognise this and nurture these people. Improvement in this area is needed.

This is also a key strength of the rural fire brigade system. Brigades with a core of such people are more effective than paid fire fighters who do not have local knowledge and are frequently transferred.

Volunteer Portal

The recently launched volunteer portal is an excellent initiative, but there are indications that its place as a management tool needs refining. An attitude seems to be gaining ground in QFRS that, if it is on the portal, all volunteers will be fully conversant with it. The volunteer portal will work as an aid to face-to-

face training, not a substitute. It will work as a reference source for new material and policies that have been properly launched, not as a launch mechanism.

QFRS Management Style

An increasing issue for rural brigades seems to be difficulty extracting information from QFRS. This is not just extracting the reason for a decision, but the decision itself. Elsewhere in this submission, I have discussed some of the following issues:

- **Call outs** – brigade statistics clearly demonstrate this changed callout policy yet QFRS will not confirm this.
- **Lights & Siren Response** – it is unclear whether this is a new policy or clarification of existing policy. It is unclear whether QFRS is happy with this situation or seeking to have the legislation changed.
- **Breathing Apparatus** – a small number of rural brigades in izone areas are equipped with breathing apparatus. These brigades have put in this apparatus on their own initiative but have been supported by QFRS for training, maintenance, etc. Recently these brigades have been advised that “the Commissioner does support the use of BA by rural brigades”. Questions to which answers have not been forthcoming are:
 - Is this a ban, or can rural brigades continue BA use provide they do not draw on QFRS resources?
 - If it is the latter, how will QFRS ensure standards continue to be met?
 - Does the lack of BA in izone areas create Zero Harm issues?
- **Traffic management** – QFRS have indicated that rural brigades should not undertake traffic management. Instead they should simply close the road. The need for traffic management occurs at motor vehicle accidents and also bush fires. Questions to which answers have not been forthcoming are:
 - In many rural areas, a closed road results in an alternate route which is extremely long.
 - Police will often ask rural brigades to assist with traffic management. Does this override QFRS policy?
- **Fire Danger Rating** – subsequent to the 2009 Victorian fires, QFRS adopted the new fire danger rating index recommended by the Victorian enquiry. This was simply announced. Issues which remain unaddressed are:
 - Current fire danger rating signs throughout Qld are now non-compliant. No new design has been issued – consistent design state-wide is obviously appropriate. No funding for the new signs has been mentioned.
 - No community or brigade education program has been launched. Because the 2 new ratings sit on top of the highest level on the old scale, the danger is that members of the public will regard what was previously a top level danger as now only 75%.
- **Lack of Follow Up** – In a number of instances, QFRS have indicated that an issue will be followed up and the outcome communicated back to the brigade, yet nothing more is ever heard. If the QFRS decision is “no action”, it is important that this is communicated to the brigade and that reasons are supplied.

Lights & Siren Response

QFRS have recently clarified that, unlike urban brigades, rural brigades must obey all traffic regulations at all times. This makes the concept of responding under lights and siren not just non-sensical but potentially dangerous. For example, if a member of the public attempts to give way to a rural appliance stopped at a Give Way sign under lights and siren, the rural appliance cannot proceed. The result is confusion and potential accidents. This issue requires urgent clarification.

Call Outs

A clear (albeit uncommunicated) change has occurred in QFRS callout policy in recent years. The policy has gone from rural brigades being the primary response in their geographic area to one where urban brigades are called out first to rural brigade areas if possible. In part, this approach seems to lean towards road accidents although it is also evident for fires.

It needs to be conceded that rural brigades in izone areas are having increasing difficulty responding during business hours.

However, this policy is detrimental to both preparedness and motivation of rural brigades. To remain prepared, volunteers need regular callouts. Regular training is, of course, essential but the serious training occurs on a genuine callout. To remain motivated, volunteers need to feel that the service they are providing is necessary.

Zero Harm

QFRS is currently strongly pushing the Zero Harm principle. Whilst safe work practices are laudable, the message in a fire fighting capacity is an oxymoron and should be modified. Fire fighting has an inherent element of risk. A literal interpretation of zero harm would mean never approaching a fire.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Hoyes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Greg Hoyes