

My Background:

I am a 22 year old female university student, as well as a volunteer Rural Fire Fighter. Although I have only been with my Brigade for the last year and a half, I have lived within the community all my life and seen it change dramatically as large properties have been subdivided to allow for rural-residential developments.

Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?

The current model of Rural Fire Brigades is mostly suitable, although a few issues do require attention. These will be discussed in this submission.

The whole concept of Rural Brigades is that they are self-reliant community based organizations, manned by volunteers who have the appropriate training and experience, and who are motivated to protect their communities. Rural Brigades are diverse in terms of their location-specific requirements, their volunteer demographic and the types of situations that they respond to. They are also distinctly different from their Urban counterparts, in terms of the volunteer work-force, the available methods of suppressing fires (reticulated water is rare in rural areas, thus four-wheel drive appliances with a large water capacity are a necessity etc), the size and duration of wildfires, and the hazard reduction and public education roles that are played. This means that there is a real danger in trying to conform all Brigades into a rigid system, especially if that system is designed from an Urban point of reference.

While it is important that Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) has access to Rural Brigade accountability information, it is vital that this process does not cripple the Rural Brigades. This means limiting any unnecessary paperwork, and making sure that reporting procedures are as streamline as possible. It is also important that Brigades are able to maintain their sense of ownership, which greatly contributes to their ability to be self-reliant. This means allowing Brigades to manage their own funds as is required for their situation. A reporting role is required, so that QFSR has evidence that Rural Brigades are looking after their funds appropriately. This also means that Rural Brigades in less financially viable situations, such as those that don't receive levies, are visible to QFRS, and thus hopefully receive more funding (such as QFRS grants).

The current model of Rural Fire Brigades has a strong community involvement, which is vital for the success of Rural Fire Brigades. Benefits can be seen in terms of the local-area knowledge of fire-fighters, who are themselves also members of the community. This includes intimate knowledge of fuel loading, niche weather patterns, terrain, access and escape routes (and the condition and suitability of such roads, tracks, fire trails, private property and cross country routes), the available water sources (as reticulated water is rarely available), the location of structures, the

location of potentially hazardous materials that may be casually stored within such structures, the capabilities of home-owners at threatened structures (eg. House #12 may be well prepared to defend against a house fire, where-as House #14 may contain a disabled elderly gentleman and thus have a higher priority of need), and can best take into account external factors such as economic losses that may be incurred by some methods of indirect fire suppression (such as back burning through crops).

There are also financial advantages to training fire-fighters from the local community. These fire fighters are motivated by more than an hourly wage. They are protecting their community – that is, their friends and their families, their property and that of their neighbours. Because large wild fires can involve very large areas of land, they may require suppression and monitoring 24/7, over a period of several days. As a result, it is not uncommon for Rural fire-fighters to take several days off from work to suppress a long-term fire. This is in addition to call-outs that occur in the early hours of the morning, on public holidays or just as you are about to sit down to eat that steaming roast dinner. There are also many, many hours each year that go into strategic hazard reduction burns, community education and public awareness. The cost of trucking-in paid Urban fire fighters to remote areas of Queensland to cover these jobs is not an efficient use of funds, and could result in a less than ideal service. This would detract from the community by decreasing their capability and self-reliance, as well as their preparedness for fire related events.

As is currently the case, local issues like hazard reduction, recruitment and training are managed by individual Rural Brigades. This system works well, as it is the local brigades that are aware of factors that relate to these issues. During hazard reduction burns, local brigades are aware of localised weather conditions, topography, fuel loading etc. They have probably been burning the same area for the past 30 years or so, which assists in their planning. It is completely unsuitable for a management body that is far removed from the situation to be trying to direct such events. Likewise, recruitment should be left up to the local brigades, as the necessity or even benefit of new recruits depends on the availability of current members, the ratio of experienced members to newer members, training and turn-out capabilities of individual Brigades. Recruitment information has been made available through the Volunteer Portal, which is greatly beneficial, as it provides the necessary support that Brigades can access as it is required. With regards to training, the life skills and knowledge base of individual members varies greatly, and this directs the necessity, types and frequency of training in particular areas. This is not the type of information that lends itself easily to being captured in a system, and a system does not give an accurate representation of the actual skills base that is possessed by the members. The problem with implementing a rigid system, is that training time is lost (followed by member's interest) as brigades are required to do 'tick the box' sets of training to show that members are qualified in a particular skill, rather than teaching skills that are necessary for those individuals.

My three major concerns with the current model are that:

- 1) QFRS does not support Rural Brigades acting in a traffic control capacity. This may be because QFRS does not fully appreciate the requirements and benefits of traffic control in Rural areas. An accident scene without properly controlled traffic is unnecessarily putting the lives of the emergency workers (including fire-fighters, paramedics, State Emergency Service members etc) and casualties at risk. Current

policy is to either close the road entirely, or let the traffic flow as normal. Unlike urban situations where a closed road may cause a driver to navigate around an extra few kilometres, many rural arterials have no other near-by detours. Traffic may have to sit for the few hours it takes to deal with the scene, or take a significant detour which can also mean a few extra hours of driving. While this is understandable if the crash actually requires the road to be completely closed, many accidents result in a vehicle that is on the shoulder of the road, or even off the road entirely (but emergency personnel are still moving around the scene). A closed road in this situation can result in agitated drivers (who are more likely to do something dangerous), or unnecessarily inconvenienced drivers, which negatively impacts on public relations with the community. In many situations, the traffic risk can easily be mitigated by allowing alternating traffic flow to occur in one lane in a controlled manner, while the other lane is closed for the safety of those on the scene. This procedure also slows cars down to a safer speed of travel, which is very important when emergency workers are moving around an accident scene. This is far less dangerous than working at a vehicle accident where traffic is uncontrolled.

2) QFRS has recently decided to discontinue their support of Breathing Apparatus (BA) capabilities of Rural Brigades in the interface zones (Izones). This is a great loss to the community, and jeopardises the safety of fire-fighters. The justification for such a change is that activities that require BA (which could include structural fires, vehicle fires (as toxic gases are released), some smoky grass fires or entering into low oxygen spaces such as a rain-water tank) are not deemed to fall under the 'primary' role of Rural Brigades. However, primary role or not, if it is an activity that rural fire-fighters may participate in, then they require the appropriate safety equipment. Other reasoning includes that 'near-by' Urban fire brigades can respond with the required BA. Even in the perfect situation where the nearest Urban vehicle is sitting around at the station waiting for a call-out (which is regularly not the case), the reality is that the rural community is unprotected and Rural fire-fighters are ill-prepared either to act in an Urban-support role, or as the first response when the Urban appliances are not available. This is a particular shame for communities or individuals that live outside of a reasonable Urban response time (even assuming appliance availability), and for those in rural areas with driveways that are in accessible to the two-wheel drive Urban appliances. It also means that the water carrying capacity of rural appliances (which greatly exceeds that of Urban trucks that rely on a reticulated water supply) cannot be utilised in BA situations. QFRS's duty of care to Rural fire-fighters suggests that BA equipment should either be supplied, or perhaps more fairly for all involved, be available at a subsidised cost. If BA is not supplied or subsidised, a number of Rural Brigades will not be able to justify purchasing this safety equipment.

3) Generally, there appears to be a lack of Rural experience at the RFS management level, as well as within QFRS managerial positions as a whole. Unfortunately, this is probably hard to avoid, as most Rural Fire fighters tend to have other livelihoods that they pursue. It would be beneficial to try and convey a better understanding of the differences in Rural and Urban capacities, so that both the services can better complement each other.

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

Finance:

Experience with my Brigade suggests that this system can work quite well, however some Brigades out there are still doing it really tough. Income for our Brigade includes the Rural Fire Levy (\$25 per house) from the community, in addition to our own fundraising activities. Other Brigades, especially those in areas where the population is sparse or those who do not receive the levy, have a much harder time making ends meet. It is these Brigades that really need the assistance from QFRS grants and third party grants. As the Brigades are made up of volunteers with lives, families and other commitments, the focus needs to be on making QFRS grants as simple and straightforward as possible to apply for. While it comes down to Brigade responsibility to find out about third party grants it would be a great assistance if QFRS could make Brigades (especially the smaller ones with fewer members to go and actively seek this information) aware of the existence of grants that are provided by third party organizations.

Rural Brigades are serious about managing their funds and using them wisely. The careful management of our finances over the history of our Brigade means that our Brigade has achieved a solid nest-egg. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of having a sustainable brigade for subsequent generations. In the current system, Brigades are responsible for their own running costs and making necessary purchases. This system makes a lot of sense. Not only does it give the Brigade members ownership and responsibility, but each Brigade has diverse needs. It is the individual Brigades that are in the best position to recognise these needs and obtain the equipment that is required to best protect themselves and their communities. This also means that money is not wasted on purchases that are not relevant to a particular Brigade and can be used on what is actually required.

These funds can also be used to purchase necessary safety equipment when there are delays in obtaining these items through QFRS. For example, a member of our brigade is regularly available for turn-outs, has the necessary skills and a wealth of experience. This member's boots began to fail, and an order was placed. Due to the back-order on the system, it took several months for the boots to actually arrive. During this time, the member's boots did not meet the PPE standards required for the fireground. Our brigade purchased the member a pair of boots so that he was not bench-lined for several months. Over the years, our Brigade has also contributed to the purchase of vehicles, as well as safety items such as helmet torches and hydration packs which contribute to the success and efficiency of our Brigade.

Our Brigade keeps excellent financial records. If QFRS is not aware of these records, perhaps it is not the record keeping, but the actual system of communicating the records that requires improvement. In saying this, it is also important to make sure that any procedures are as simplified as possible, so that unnecessary paperwork does not take up the volunteer's precious time.

The Rural levy system appears to work well. There is talk of extending the Urban levy into what are currently Rural areas. This would result in a drastic price hike paid by the community, with no advantage in the service offered (as the allowable Urban response time has been increased, rather than the response time actually improving). Not only would the community be paying more, they would be receiving less as capabilities like BA and traffic control are removed from Rural Brigades.

Monitoring equipment:

Our lives depend on this equipment, and as such, it is a high priority of each member to keep equipment in good order. I would be very surprised to find that more than a few individuals would neglect to look after their equipment. As such, it makes sense that the responsibility of ensuring equipment is safe and well maintained falls to individual Brigades, rather than to the QFRS who is removed from the situation. I do not believe that a system is required where QFRS needs to monitor the safety of equipment. If a problem has been identified with the maintenance of equipment, perhaps this is a reflection of limited funds at the brigades level. Rather than a system for monitoring equipment, it may be more beneficial to investigate a system through which Brigades get financial or other assistance to achieve the required level of competency in equipment maintenance.

What effect is urban encroachment within Brigade areas having on Rural Fire Brigades?

Large parcels of land are being subdivided into smaller housing plots and areas that were once kept clear and well maintained as grazing land are now often encouraged to revert to bush and scrub. Many home-owners want to live amidst nature and alter their environment as little as possible, which means that they build within woods, forests and on top of ridge-lines. As a result, hazard reduction and pre-fire-season planning has become even more important. As Rural brigades now tackle bush fires and grass fires that have a closer proximity to structures, Rural and Urban brigades need to work well together, to best utilise the Urban's expertise with structural fires, and the Rural's expertise with grass and bush fires.

An increased awareness of Global Warming, a dislike of smoke (and possibly an increase in respiratory ailments within the population?) are factors that can make hazard reduction burns less than popular. On the other hand, with the previous bushfire seasons that occurred in the Southern States, there is a heightened awareness of the dangers of bushfires. As a result, public education becomes very important in making sure that people understand the risks and what they can do to prepare for the bushfire season.

Despite the urban encroachment into rural areas, the challenges of rural fires remain distinct from those in urban environments. Driveways and access routes often require the vehicle to have a four-wheel drive capacity. Reticulated water is not available, which means that a knowledge of alternative water sources becomes very important, as does the ability to transport large quantities of water to the fire ground. Due to the large size of some wildfires in rural areas, a sound local knowledge of the area remains very important in strategically combating the fire.

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

By improving, not removing, the capabilities of Rural Brigades to alleviate pressures. This would include supporting the BA capabilities of Rural Izone Brigades, and supporting safe practises such as Rural Brigade Traffic Control.