

Durong Rural Fire Brigade
C/- Tom Seiler (Chairman)

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The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
George St 4000

Dear Sirs/Madams,

Please see enclosed Submission made on behalf of the Durong Rural Fire Brigade to the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee regarding the management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

If there is any further clarification required please contact myself on email or phone.

Regards

Tom Seiler

**SUBMISSION TO PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND PUBLIC WORKS
COMMITTEE
RE Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland**

Introduction

We are a Rural Fire Brigade located at Durong, 100km west of Kingaroy in the South Burnett Regional Council (old Wondai Shire). We are administered from the Sunshine coast and Maryborough. Attitudes from Maryborough office and above are focussed on a more urban environment (lots more risk to property because of closer settlement and less public knowledge of fire). To further complicate things we are also on the edge of an area of 'peri-urban' lifestylers who often control their fires in a less than diligent manner, often simply as a result of ineptitude.

We submit this discourse to your committee because we are concerned with the new directions that Qld fire authorities appear to be taking. Simply put they are making it drastically more difficult for us to achieve our cool season management fires. We believe that this not only will result in more dangerous wildfires and limit our ability to deal with them but also have a significant impact on the financial viability of our businesses.

I would like to define the following terms for use in this submission:

Producer is a person who makes his/her living from working the land, either growing crops or running livestock.

Lifestyler (aka peri-urban) is someone who lives in the bush but doesn't derive their income from it. They typically live on small blocks and work from home or commute to town.

We propose four suggestions pertaining to the administration of Rural Fire Qld...

1. Let "producers" manage fire risk.
2. Recognise the difference in attitude and skill level between "producers" and "lifestylers" and redraw the fire warden boundaries accordingly, to reflect the dominant land usage and population density.
3. Let the local fire wardens use their local knowledge to make decisions based on local conditions.
4. Respect that the brigades are staffed by volunteers.

Let Producers Manage the Fire Risk

Burning to manage fuel load and grass production and grass quality is absolutely critical to our grazing operations in open eucalyptus woodland. This cool season burning (typically every 4 years) is often part of the reason why we do not see the destructive bushfires that are seen down south: there is simply not the same high fuel loads. It is our opinion that management of Rural Fire should see it as absolutely imperative that we are given encouragement to achieve our cool season burning where possible. In our view this is not the current attitude of Rural Fire (and Firecom etc).

To give an example, last year during the month of August, when the nights were cool enough for any fire to stop every night, and the days only just hot enough to get a fire burning, we were told there was a total fire ban. The crazy part about this is that not only were local fire wardens not consulted, but the directive was allegedly issued from above even our Area Director who is based in Maryborough.

With a large volume of dry grass due to a better than average summer, it was critical that we seize our chance to burn during these favourable conditions. As it turned out the opportunity was lost and there was no rain until the end of November. The consequences of this should be obvious to anyone acquainted with fires: it turned a manageable fire risk into a tinder dry ticking time bomb, all the while temperatures were getting higher and higher.

As a result of incidents such as the above, there is now a groundswell of anger and frustration in this community which has seen responsible producers turn their back on our brigade and the misguided bureaucracy that it appears to represent.

Our first suggestion is therefore that producers be allowed to manage the fire risk on our properties. It is what we have done for decades and it is one of the reasons why we have not seen destructive bushfires on the scale of those in Victoria and Canberra.

Urban Encroachment

We believe that there needs to be distinction made between peri-urban lifestylers and producers. These differences are on three levels...

- Burning requirements. Livestock producers in our area must have regular (every 4 years) cool burns to keep pasture fresh and avoid build up of dangerous fuel loads, preventing accidental fires from being too hot. Fire as a management tool is an absolute necessity for maintaining financial viability of a farming enterprise in our area.

- Skill level and knowledge. It is fair to say that most of us who make our livings from farming, by the nature of our business know a fair bit about fire, the dangers and necessity thereof, and how to manage it and fight it. By contrast those who move from the city to a small block of bushland, and often continue to work in town, mostly do not have the same level of knowledge and experience.
- Fire fighting methods (population density). A fire that gets away from a producer usually risks burning his neighbour's grass, not his house. Therefore the best way to stop such a fire is actually to let it burn back to an appropriate break. Mostly a back burn would be done in the cooler evening/night in order to beef up the break. A dozer may be used to make a new break if the existing roads are too far away. Thus with a fire appropriately contained, what appears to the uninitiated as an active fire front with no one in attendance, is the random burnoff within the wider containment lines. This method of fighting fires also has the advantage of mostly removing people from close proximity to a dangerous fire front.

This means in our eyes that there needs to be two standards. To facilitate the administration of this the fire warden areas need to be redrawn on the boundaries of these land use changes (mostly designated by block size). This should be done every 5 years as necessary. What this means is that a fire warden can be consistent in his decision making because his constituency will be made of people with similar skills and needs.

real life example ...

One of our local fire wardens has a predominately peri-urban constituency, including, on the edge of his area, some of my own and a neighbouring producer's broadacre paddocks. Last year he became a bit nervous about issuing permits, because he had a few fires get away. I was called out to help fight one that had got away and was threatening some homes. The permit holder had been burning some piles of sticks. It was a windy but mild august day. There was very minimal volume of grass around the piles and yet it got away. When I arrived on the scene the permit holder was very apologetic but seemed to be drunk.

The point of the above example is not the fire got away, because this can happen to anyone. It impacted on us because the warden could not say no to some people and yes to others. If the warden area was redrawn then the incompetence of some with relation to fire will not impact on those of us for whom efficient fire management is crucial to business survival.

Fire Wardens

Our third suggestion is to return responsibility to the local fire wardens so they can use their local knowledge to make decisions based on local conditions. They are a very important and underappreciated asset in management of fire risk. Obviously they need appropriate support from regional office; eg an assurance that they are not personally liable if things go wrong, and authoritative backup in case of dispute. Experienced and intelligent wardens in our own area have thrown in the towel because of the lack of support they see from head office, particularly in the event of a fire getting away in this age of litigation.

It is simply not tenable to centralise the role of wardens – so much can change from district to district in terms of weather conditions, fuel load, risk to property, terrain, fuel type and ground cover that the decisions need to be made by someone with an intimate familiarity with the local conditions. On top of this the speed with which a permit can be issued can sometimes be critical – there is nothing worse than missing the window of opportunity (sometimes as little as a few days) because you are waiting for a permit to be issued.

Our Time is Money

In your deliberations regarding the operational setup of rural fire brigades please remember that we are all volunteers and, particularly in producer areas, are understaffed in our own operations due to the high cost of labour. While we are more than willing to help fight a real fire that is in need of containment, we most certainly do not appreciate our time being wasted.

real life example ...

in October last year, I was asked by Firecom to take our fire truck up to Brovinia, about 40km to the north of home. They were responding to a motorist notifying them of a fire on the roadside. Luckily I took the precaution of phoning a neighbour to check it before I embarked on the 3hr round trip (the fire truck is located 20km south of home). She reported back that the “fire” that required such urgent attention was a log burning, in the middle of a burnt out paddock!

The point of the above example is that some commonsense could be injected into the operation of Firecom. Some simple checks with the motorist as a first reaction from Firecom would be greatly appreciated. Firecom will make the point that the fire should have been rung in by the permit holder. To the best of my knowledge this fire had been rung in

when it was lit, which was about a week prior to this incident. In the forest country in this area the standard practice is to burn along the edges of a piece and then let it burn itself out. If the edges are done correctly and monitored it cannot jump, but may well continue to start up and burn inside the containment for weeks or even months. It is simply not practical to ring up whenever a fire starts up again.

In the last year we have been called out to enough false alarms or fires that are grossly over-staffed with firefighters that we now treat each callout with a fair amount of scepticism.

Training

The opinion of this brigade is that if it is necessary to have everyone accredited, then there should be more recognition for prior learning. We are confident in our ability to fight fires and simply cannot afford to take 2 days off to travel away.

real life example...

Last year we recognised that as a brigade we lacked familiarity with the workings of the VHF radios so I organised for the training officer from Maryborough to come out to bring us up to speed. He gave us the normal presentation for radio communications which took about an hour. Because all of us use UHF radios in our work there was not one useful piece of information until after the session when he talked specifically about VHF usage and transmit range. The point is that, by virtue of our vocation, we are skilled in a lot of the areas that are covered in the standard training.

Some members of our brigade are about to be “deemed competent” at the culmination of a days worth of parading our skills to a training guy from Maryborough. While none to keen even for this a few members of our brigade have agreed to go through with it. This is absolutely the maximum amount of training that we are prepared to do.

Summary

In summary, while we do not for one minute understate the ferocity of the Black Saturday fires, nor the courageousness of those who fought them, we feel that the reaction from Qld Authorities to these disasters has been to try to stop all burning whenever they deem there to be even a small amount of risk. Policy like this has the likely end result of a very destructive accidental fire because fuel loads become so high. It is ill-advised and damaging to our viability and potentially that of our ecosystems. Therefore when the Commissioner implements his new PAS campaign (Prepare, Act Survive), please make sure he includes appropriate fuel reduction management for all areas.

We also put it to this committee that if the expectations placed on volunteer fire fighters and wardens are too onerous, and if the appropriate support is not given, then more good people are going to be lost from the organisation and Queensland's ability to deal with bushfire will be severely diminished. In blunt terms this means recognising the limitations of time we have to spend, and the amount of bullshit we can put up with.