

22 MAR 2010

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

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26th February 2010

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

Re Management of Rural Fire services in Queensland

This submission is offered on behalf of the 47 members of the Turkey Beach Rural Fire Brigade, and will address Questions 1, 2, 4, and 5 of the issues listed in the Discussion paper dated November 2009.

The Author is Graham David Luck – Brigade First Officer/Treasurer*Mailing and Residential Address:- 61 Michael St., Turkey Beach Qld 4678**Telephone 07 4974 2040 – email graham@grahamluck.com***Q 1. Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?**

- A. We believe yes. Brigades need to continue to be community based and semi autonomous. Any move to remove community involvement and participation will, in the opinion of the Brigade, alienate public support both socially and financially.

There is however, a need to review QFRS resource allocation to Izone and Village brigades in particular. These brigades usually have 2 or more fire appliances, but no suitable vehicle for use as either a command or admin support vehicle.

These brigades are usually in remote areas and are often turned out by Firecom to attend fires needing 5 or more appliances, drawn from adjoining brigades. In these circumstances, an Incident control point needs to be established, which currently means that a needed fire appliance is taken off the fireground to act as the command and communications centre both back to firecom and to units on the fireground.

Some brigades/RFB Groups have received offers of financial support from the Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland, Inc., by way of grants, to either fully or partly fund suitable vehicle acquisitions.

Questions then arise as to whether or not these vehicles will be accepted as part of the QFRS fleet, which, if accepted into the fleet, then relieves brigades/group of the financial burdens of vehicle registration and insurance.

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There does not appear to be a clear QFRS policy regarding either supply of, or insurance and registration issues for these command vehicles.

Insofar as these comments apply to the current RF Brigade model, **Our Brigade recommendation is that the existing model/s be modified to clarify the issues stated.**

Q 2. Is existing funding model, incl resource allocation, appropriate?

A. 2(1) Where brigade funding is provided via local authority, there needs to be consistency across the state, ie is it a levy or a "donation" from general revenue, and not either or, at the whim of a local authority CEO.

Rockhampton area is a typical example of the tensions that have arisen since council amalgamations, when Regional councils have proposed (in the case of Rockhampton Regional Council) or implemented (in the case of Gladstone Regional Council) change from levy collection to an allocation from general revenue.

Gladstone area ratepayers now have no idea how much is allocated for brigade funding from general revenue, whereas if an agreed levy is collected, the amount of the levy appeared on property owners' rate notices.

Under this system, ratepayers do not know and cannot easily ascertain whether all the councils' budgeted amount for fire brigade funding is in fact being allocated and distributed for the benefit of brigades.

Where allocations from general revenue occurs, the arrangement appears to be open to abuse, with insufficient accountability to ratepayers.

Some 18 months after its introduction by Gladstone Regional council, specific guidelines are still to be issued to brigades by Rural Operations area office, and endorsed by council, explaining in detail how the "donation" system is intended to work. This has lead to a good deal of uncertainty and dissatisfaction at brigade level.

Recommendation

Our recommendation is that where brigades are funded by "donations" from general rates, funding guidelines approved by Rural Ops and endorsed by council be prepared and issued to brigades as a matter of priority, and that the amount allocated by councils to Rural Fire brigades be easily identified in council budgets and annual accounts, **and on a per rateable property basis.**

Details should include the amount/s held in capital account and contingency fund reserves, and carried forward annually.

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A.2 (2) Resource allocation to Rural Operations office funding and staffing appears inadequate.

Again using Rockhampton Area office as an example, this area has 130 brigades and 4 RFB groups to oversee/support, and the office is staffed by 1 x Area Director, 1 x Area Training and Support Officer (ATSO), 2 x Brigade Training and Support Officers (BTSO), 1x Full time admin officer, and 1 x Part time Admin Officer.

In the last 6 months there have been 2 acting ADs, 1 BTSO has been absent for at least 3 months relieving elsewhere, the other BTSO has accepted a position in the Rural Ops District Manager's office and we are left with 2 Temp/Acting BTSOs.

The ATSO is being seconded in March to relief duty elsewhere for at least 3 months, and his position will be filled by a relatively inexperienced BTSO, returning from relief duty.

The full time Admin Officer position has been filled for 3 months or more by the part time staff member, who now goes back to part time, with the full time position finally being resumed by the person who was appointed 6 months ago, and employed elsewhere in the department for obscure reasons.

With the best will in the world, the people filling these positions in an acting capacity do not have the experience and local knowledge to effectively support the area. Handovers to Acting Area Directors (Inspectors) in particular, appear to have been either very brief or non existent, with many electronic and hard copy files either misplaced or lost.

It is patently obvious that the Rockhampton Area needs the services of 2 full time admin officers, however we believe that a submission to Head office (Kedron) was rejected on the basis of no funds available.

Staff constantly seem to be needed for relief duties elsewhere, which seems to indicate that the Rural Ops side of QFRS is inadequately staffed and underfunded. The constant chopping and changing of Rural Ops staff we have experienced in the last 6 months or more does not lend itself to office efficiency, or continuity of service to brigades.

Whilst it is readily acknowledged that giant strides have been made in recent years to improve staffing levels, it appears that whilst the organisation chart may be in place, QFRS is experiencing difficulty in providing/recruiting the permanent staff required to effectively staff the newly created positions. This difficulty is exacerbated during times of staff leave.

Recommendation

We believe a case could reasonably be advanced to divide the existing Rockhampton area into 2 – one based on Rockhampton and the other based on Gladstone, with perhaps Gladstone as a sub office overseen by Rockhampton.

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Effectively, a Gladstone area office should also be staffed with 1 x AD, 1 X ATSO, 2 x BTSO, and 1 x Full time Admin officer, with the flexibility to appoint a part time Admin Officer as the need arises. .

AD ranks we suggest, should be at 2 levels, with a senior AD wearing Crown Rank, and the Junior AD, 3 Pips.

It seems evident that District Managers and Area Directors have wide ranging responsibilities, but the capacity to make decisions rests largely with Head office, thus defeating the first principle of management, where responsibilities cannot be effectively discharged without delegation of appropriate authority. –

Too many decisions appear to be reserved for the Head Office hierarchy. - Eg - funding applications by brigades for grants to Gambling community benefits funds are now lodged electronically, presumably for the convenience of the Community services unit.

These now have to be prepared in hard copy, and sent via Area offices for AD, and DM endorsement, THEN sent to Kedron and approved by the Assist. Commissioner who THEN submits applications approved by him electronically.

We do not understand why this approval authority cannot be delegated at least to District Managers or Senior Area Directors. (if we had any), with copies sent to Head office for record purposes

This is just one example of decisions requiring Head office approval, which does not portray the image of a vibrant and dynamic organization, which volunteers expect of the service. Decisions seem to take forever!!!

Recommendation

Our recommendation is that full time Rural Operations staff be brought to full strength, and that Area Directors and District Managers be delegated the necessary authority to responsibly discharge their duties, without having to refer what should be routine decisions to Head office for approval.

A.2 (3) Training funding appears to have been seriously curtailed. The Commissioner's model of brigade staffing cannot be achieved (even if we agreed with it).

If sufficient funds are not provided to enable the crew leader and officer training to be delivered, model brigade staffing levels are impossible of achievement.

At the 2008 Volunteer conference, brochures were presented extolling the virtues of enhanced training, incl officer training. 2 Years later, the Officer training modules are still not readily available, and candidates completing Crew leader level 1 are now classed as Officers, but don't carry the rank!!

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Revised badges of rank were published in the March 2008 issue of the Rural Fires bulletin. These are still largely not available? Why??? Promises of things to come which fail on delivery, do nothing to enhance the image of the service and its service delivery to the volunteers.

The training emphasis appears to be centred on delivery of the Fire Fighter Minimum skills course. This is a bottom up approach, which was not adequate in the past. It defines logic why higher levels of training have not continued.

In today's world, despite the fact that Firefighters and Officers in the Rural Fire service are all volunteers, the responsibilities placed on Rural Fire brigade officers is quite demanding, but little or no training to fit these officers to efficiently discharge these responsibilities is available, other than Crew leader level 1.

Recommendation

We recommend that the service adopt a top down approach to training, by developing and making available as a priority, the Officer training modules that were flagged in 2008. This can only improve brigade efficiency and professionalism.

Delivery of FMS to new recruits should continue in parallel with the officer training programme, with this training being delivered by Brigade training officers where possible, and assessments conducted by qualified BTSOs or the ATSO, thus more efficiently utilising full time staff resources.

Q.4 How can the increasing demands on RFBs be managed effectively?

A.4 Encourage recruitment by offering payment when volunteers are called out to attend wildfires. Auxiliary Firepersons are paid to attend training and when called out by Firecom. **Are volunteers less important??**

Recommendation

We should at least be paid to attend wildfire callouts on a tax free basis similar to those joining the army reserve.

Alternatively, if payment to attend wildfires compromises Volunteer status, payment to attend authorised training activities should be considered.

Q.5 Are Accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

A.5(1) The Rural Fire Brigade Manual – 2007 provides a simple model of a financial report and budget. Comments have been made by Area Directors that the standard of financial reports received from brigades varies widely. The Secretary/Treasurers handbook is a step in the right direction, but does not go far enough.

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Recommendation

If consistency and better accountability is desired, then an accredited and recognized training course for secretaries and treasurers needs to be developed at state level. Currently, Rockhampton area office is offering locally developed treasurer training.

This needs to be standardized and adopted state wide, and assistance on a one on one basis provided by BTSOs where the need is identified – Current BTSO commitments make this a pipe dream.

- A. 5(2) The Rural Fire brigade manual issued in 2007 was issued on the basis that updates would be provided annually on CD. To date, this does not appear to have occurred. This is another example of broken Rural Ops promises.

Recommendation

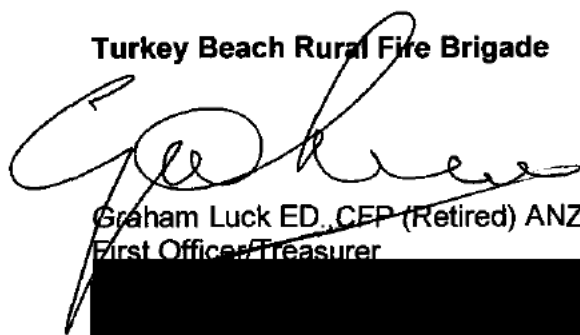
The manual needs to be expanded to include copies of, or reference to, the appropriate acts and regulations including Incident Action Guides (IAGs) and Incident Directives (INCDIRS) governing Rural Ops that volunteers are expected to know and adhere to. –

otherwise, how can ordinary members (Active members in particular) be expected to know what is expected of them? -AND BE ACCOUNTABLE!! (Particularly those who may not have access to computers and the internet, or the computer illiterate?

Submission ends.

Signed for and on behalf of the committee and members of the

Turkey Beach Rural Fire Brigade



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First Officer/Treasurer

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