

# **Cooberrie Rural Fire Brigade**

## **Submission**

**In Response to Public Accounts and Public Works Committee  
'Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland Discussion Paper,  
November 2009'**

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Cooberrie Rural Fire Brigade is located to the north of Yeppoon and as well as the approximate 300 landholders is also responsible for fires on the Iwasaki Property.

**Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?**

The current model of Rural Fire Brigades is suitable provided the Rural Fire Manual is followed. Our Brigade has witnessed instances when paid Rural Operations Staff have had their own interpretation of the Manual and or shown little knowledge of the Manual.

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

If the procedures of the Manual are followed with Brigade finances Audited by an accredited auditor, a twelve month budget and a three year operational plan submitted to the relevant Area Director the use of the levee system works very well.

The system is let down when the Area Director has made little or no effort to record the details of each Brigade with reference to the information sent to him. A simple data base could record this information and be then transparent to QFRS and Government.

Brigades need to plan well for replacement of appliances with 20% of the cost coming from Brigade funds. The difficulty arises when the cost to Brigades of replacement is not actually known until the appliance is ready for delivery, the need for a Crystal Ball through lack of communication.

The need to have a central supply store is rapidly disappearing with Brigades having to outsource items that two years ago were available at a subsidised cost to Brigades by ordering from Rural Operation QFRS. This apparently is due to cost incurred by Rural Operations to store these items.

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

With the growing Urban areas the Brigade area is reduced minimally but the increase in fire activity is increased, especially where larger urban blocks are not maintained and become a risk to the surrounding residents. Many of these Urban interface blocks reduce the access of appliances to contain and extinguish fires if they occur.

To alleviant this problem Local Government needs to take action to create and maintain clear access to the rear of this type of property.

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

The change to Rural Operations when Rural Regions were aligned with Urban Regions, a dramatic increase in paid staff was evident.

Rural Operations went from two Regional Managers to seven, the addition of Brigade Training and Support Officers (BTSO).

In the Rockhampton Office there was a District Inspector, a Training officer and a half time administration assistant.

Today the same office has a Regional Office consisting of a Regional Manager, a Administration Assistant and recently a Mitigation and Education Officer.

The District Office has a Area Director, a Area Training and Support Officer (ATSO) two Brigade Training and Support Officers (BTSO) and two Administration Assistants.

This change has increased the work load and demands on Brigades by approximately the same percentage. The increase in staff has not helped Brigades, but simply increased the demands with more hoops to jump through.

With the amount of staff in the Regional Offices and the District Offices, managing to record the amount of information and forms collected from Brigades could surely be streamlined and checks made and communicated back to Brigades with the simple use of technology. For example our brigade has always had Safety Certificates / Inspections done on Appliances and then forwarded to the Rockhampton Office where the information should be entered onto a data base so that an easy check can be made and transparent to QFRS.

What does happen to this information we send to the District Office?

### **Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?**

The current need for a Brigade that collects a Levee to have the Financial Records audited by an accredited auditor, the production of a twelve month Budget and a three year operational plan we believe is appropriate to show transparency to QFRS and Government. This system works very well, except where some of the Rural Operations Staff are vindictive and want to hold grudges with particular Brigades.

Our Brigade was demanded in 2009 by the Regional Manager and the then Area Director to produce the previous five years of Financial Bookwork to be re Audited (*which took six months*) as they both stated that our Brigade was **Fraudulent** and needed to be looked into.

The Audit found no problems and showed the Brigade to be acting as it should and the budgets were correct. We have a detailed report on the reaudit.

This fiasco has meant that through the actions of the then Area Director, who has since left the service, and the Regional Manager our Brigade has lost eighteen months of Levee Money. The first six months were frozen, somewhere never to be seen again and the next the twelve months, where the Area Director did not pass on to the Local Government the need to collect a Levee for our Brigade as he was still having the accounts reaudited.

This will inturn affects the Brigade when Appliances need to be replaced and any other major repairs to appliances.

### **What should be the role of Fire Wardens within the Rural Fire services model?**

The Fire Warden needs to be part of the Rural Fire Brigade and not a separate entity.

The Fire Warden needs to have local knowledge of the topography, weather, fuel loads and fire behaviour of the area. Without this knowledge a true and accurate permit to light fire is not possible as specific conditions cannot be included.

Our Brigade works alongside the Fire Warden. The First Officers contact details are added to the permit so that the Brigade is contacted and knows a permit has been issued before the fire is lit. This is a condition on the permit similarly to the permit holder notifying Fire Com before the fire is lit.

**Are there any other relevant matters the committee needs to address?**

- The ability for some Rural Operations paid Staff to actually do the job they are employed to do?
- Do Rural Operations paid Staff possess the ability to work with volunteers or should they stay behind closed doors propping up a desk wasting tax payer money?
- What selection criteria is used to show that staff have had a good working relationship with volunteers prior to employment with Rural Operations and what checks are done to show this?
- Is correct policies and procedures always followed by Rural Operations Staff or do they follow there own interpretation of the policies and procedures, especially the Code of Conduct?

When a comment is received from a staff member *"that he does not have to know the volunteers in his area, they are just employees of QFRS"*. (Area Director) It makes volunteers wonder if any respect is received from the paid staff.

- We believe that Volunteers need recognition from paid staff for what they do and the time that is spent for the service and not to be treated with contempt, distrust and the lack of skills. (*This is the message conveyed from the Central Region Office*)

The excellent skills of Rural Volunteers in the Rockhampton Area were shown during the October fires of 2009.

- After fires such as the Mount Archer Fires (Rockhampton) October 2009 we feel that a debrief **must** be held and include all involved parties. Our Brigade is still waiting for the time, date and location of the debrief. **TOO LATE!**

**From the Rural Fire Bulletin, March 2010. page 23**  
**Region Snapshots**  
**Central Region**

*Debriefs for this period of fire activity have been undertaken and the results and lessons learned are being incorporated into a Major Incident Report.*

How can an accurate report be compiled if all parties involved were not notified of the debrief.

- There needs to be an improvement in the communication between Rural Operations Staff and Brigades / Volunteers. The office staff need to be reminded that fire may be their career, where as volunteers have lives, families and jobs outside of fire and are **volunteers**.  
This is one reason why it is becoming more difficult to encourage community members to join as volunteers, when they see the way present volunteers are treated by QFRS.
- How much correct information is passed onto the Minister, Director-General, Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner and so on down the chain? It appears that

they are told what they want to hear and not what is actually happening on the rural fire ground.