

Adelaide Park 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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Background

The Adelaide Park Rural Fire Brigade (APRFB) is an organisation of volunteers who service a rural residential and rural area adjacent the town of Yeppoon in Central Queensland. The brigade is managed by a Committee of 5 people including operational and non operational personnel. Each Committee member has experience in one or more areas of business, personnel, land, and finance management.

The Operational team consists of 20 trained volunteer fire-fighters who have a sound knowledge of local topography. The topography is hills to undulating grasslands interspersed with sub tropical forests and open grass country used for primary production.

The APRFB area is classified by QFRS as “I” zone or an intermediate zone between rural and urban brigades. The area has become more densely populated over recent years with smaller acreages being developed from older development approvals which allowed unsealed road accesses. We believe with this mix of semi rural and rural properties, adjacent to the town, the risks have increased as the population & infrastructure has increased.

Summary

It is the view of this Committee that the checks and balances in place now are transparent and accountable and provide a clear audit trail. The Brigade Constitution and the Brigade Manual quite clearly define the requirements for the management (particularly financial management) for Rural Fire Brigades and the APRFB adhere to those requirements. Our decision making is recorded in detail and QFRS, the Area Group, and the community are involved in the process. Forward planning, by means of an Annual and a 3 year Operational Plan are developed and forwarded to QFRS as required by the Constitution.

The APRFB has a levy in place which is voted upon at a public meeting annually by ratepayers and forwarded to Local Government and QFRS for approval. There has been no difficulty with this arrangement. It is an arrangement that allows a community to provide and budget for its own particular needs. It is fair and equitable for all ratepayers. It allows the Brigade to concentrate on the more important issues of operational readiness.

The Auditor General’s Report 3 to Parliament 2008, Audit Opinion, stated;

“Within QFRS there is a lack of comprehensive forward planning and risk management processes as well as inadequate systems to effectively assess funding and resource requirements of the Brigades”

Another issue The Auditor General maintains requiring “urgent clarification is the financial accountability framework of rural fire brigades”

The problem from this Committee's perspective rests with QFRS's inability to analyse and process the information that is provided to them in accordance with the Constitutional requirement of running a Rural Fire Brigade. There is no disagreement that Rural Fire brigades are part of the QFRS structure. Rural fire brigades are managed as separate entities as defined by Constitution but they are not operating independently of QFRS. QFRS may be responsible for the liabilities of the Brigades but sufficient financial and operational detail is provided for QFRS to do the checks and balances necessary to identify and correct any problems.

It is considered by this Committee that QFRS does not have the ability currently, or the resources to undertake this task effectively now, let alone if the system was changed to add to the QFRS workload. Unless resources were increased to manage any change, then those inefficiencies would be compounded. If resources were to be increased, the current procedures are considered sufficient to achieve accountability and transparency. Any change to the current structure of Community involvement and accountability would have a disastrous affect on morale in the volunteer force and the sense of 'community ownership'.

Public Accounts Committee Issues:

- **Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigade suitable**

The current model is considered suitable if managed IAW the rules and Constitution. Community knowledge and involvement is essential for successful management both administratively and operationally of Rural Fire Brigades. It has the spin offs of providing community reliance, discipline, the feeling of giving something back. In short, it sets a good example to younger generations; it reduces the cost to the Government through a volunteer force, and through the local knowledge the best outcomes are achieved for operations.

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

No one knows better than the community of what the risks are, or what resources are needed for a particular area. The existing One year and Five year operational Plans and the annual requirement for audited financial accounts to be submitted to QFRS is a sufficient check for QFRS to assess the needs and/or processes. In the view of this Committee these processes have not been managed in detail by QFRS in the past, which has caused some of the problems being addressed today. If managed properly all accountability and transparency requirements would be met and areas of deficiencies identified.

- **What effect is urban encroachment within brigade areas having on rural fire brigades?**

There is a higher workload and call out for both the urban and rural brigades in these areas. There is closer cooperation and team building and respect between the urban and rural Brigades and there are clear lines of responsibilities and management which seem to be working well between the town brigade and the rural Brigades. Experience has shown that when the regional QFRS managers become involved in an incident tensions rise. Neither the urban nor the rural can service such an area on their own because difficulties in both terrain

and access. Different types of equipment are needed in semi rural “I” zone areas and full rural areas.

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

The reason the current model is functioning as well as it is, is the fact that volunteers feel part of a local community organisation and are giving something back. Most volunteers do not know, nor need to know and do not care whether the local Brigade is part of QFRS by legislation. The important thing at this level is the local chain of command, the level of efficiency through sound training, and the fact that the brigade is seen as a central activity of the community. If changes are implemented that affect those responsibilities and attitudes, volunteers will leave in droves. Volunteers need to be encouraged and recruited. One identified problem is employers will not release a willing volunteer to attend a fire at his/her cost. Similarly self employed people cannot always afford to drop tools to attend. Consideration should be given to compensating (at least key personnel) for time spent away from employment.

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

The problem, from this Committee’s perspective, rests with QFRS’s inability to analyse and process the information that is provided to them in accordance with the Constitutional requirement of running a Rural Fire Brigade. There is no disagreement that Rural Fire brigades are part of the QFRS structure. Rural fire brigades are managed as separate entities as defined by Constitution but they are not operating independently of QFRS. QFRS may be responsible for the liabilities of the Brigades but sufficient financial and operational detail is provided for QFRS to do the checks and balances necessary to identify any problems.

It is considered by this Committee that QFRS does not have the ability or resources to undertake this task effectively now, let alone if the system was change to add to those inefficiencies. Any change to the current structure of Community involvement and accountability would have a serious affect on morale and the volunteer pool and would add significantly to costs and budgets.

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

The fire Warden must be an experienced member of the community with sound local knowledge of topography and weather conditions. He should be supported and legally backed by QFRS structure and be given clear and precise information to support his actions. He should be trained to become an educator and be able to explain the reasons/ need for issuing fire permits. It is important that the Fire Warden is a respected and experienced member of the community and has the local knowledge to undertake the task.

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

The important issue here is that Rural Fire Brigades should remain rural “owned”. Costs, morale and mass exiting of volunteers would occur if the current model is drastically changed. It may be a little damaged in places, as identified by the Auditor General, but it is repairable and communities and volunteers are willing to take on responsibilities if treated with respect and trust. It is considered this has not occurred in this region in the past. To support this statement one claim by a regional manager referred to a volunteer as “an

employee of QFRS” which was grossly inflammatory. The last 2 years **have been a very testing time both for QFRS** management and voluntary operations in our region. What are needed now are stability, good leadership, and accountability practices which are acceptable. Any change should seriously consider the impact on the enthusiasm and future availability of the volunteer force and the involvement of the community.

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