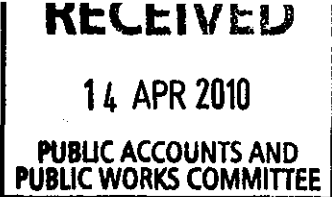


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Response to



Public Accounts and Public Works
Committee

Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland Discussion
Paper Nov 2009

Submission made by:

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Introduction:

I make this submission as an individual landholder and ratepayer. Although I am the 1st Officer of a Rural Fire Brigade and former Treasurer of that Brigade, the comments are not necessarily those of that brigade.

Let us look at the origin of the Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland their roots and the evolution that has occurred with development in the real estate sector and the technological sector.

Rural Fire Brigades were established by communities getting together when bushfires threatened their lands. Each had their own items of choice weather it be a truck with pump or just a wet bag and a load of determination. Combined forces of these concerned farmers made up a formidable army of volunteers that faded back into the woodwork when the job was done. They had no Chairperson, Treasurer, Secretary or fund raising committee. They were just there when the chips were down.

Today's Rural Fire Brigade has evolved into a following of a very few dedicated persons that put in for the community much more than they are ever recognised for doing. They are essentially running a small (or large in some cases) business albeit a non-profit one. They have assets that they are responsible for both maintaining and funding. They have a staff of volunteer workers that they have to train, equip and assume responsibility for their safety. They are also then responsible for raising the funds that finance this business, either through Local Government levies or fundraising efforts of the Brigade members. After this funding is raised, the Brigade is then legally bound to account for the use of these monies and put forward Profit and Loss statements to justify their accomplishments.

Many of these people are farmers and farm workers that just wanted a good reliable source of equipment on hand to fight fires with, not to become accounts clerks for the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service.

What can change?

For a start, to remove the burden of 'running another business', the responsibility of funding and financing the Rural Fire Brigade be delegated to the Queensland Fire & Rescue Service (QFRS), a major stumbling block would be removed from the brigade. If the worrbersome task of financing new sheds vehicles and equipment was bourne by QFRS , then individual brigades could concentrate on the tasks of :-

- Fire suppression in rural areas
- Community awareness of fire hazards
- Training
- Management of hazard reduction burns
- Management of prescribed burning

The 'fire' side (operations) of running the brigade could be accomplished with a lesser degree of inconvenience to the brigade due to the 'finance' side being alleviated.

The Urban fire fighters who are paid for what they do, don't have to worry about the financing of the equipment they use. They don't have to worry about funding for the supply or maintenance of their trucks, stations or equipment. All done by the QFRS.

For what benefit?

The benefit would be that smaller brigades would have a better chance of getting appliances and shed than on the existing system where they are under financed through the levy system due to lower rate payer properties in that region thus lower levy incomes.

Brigades whom now have multi tasking for positions such as Treasurer, Secretary, Chairperson and officer positions can have lighter workloads within the Brigade framework and possibly last longer in those positions. People tend to last one or two terms in the Executive positions, especially if they are multi tasking fire fighting and administrative roles.

What needs to change?

Rural Brigade Levies are gathered from the rural and semi rural landowners within the region that the brigade covers.

When fires encroach townships boundaries, the rural fire brigades are requested to help with these fires as well, although they receive no financial benefit from those urban areas.

IF the ratepayers in the whole of Queensland, Urban, Rural and commercial, were to pay a fire levy and that combined levy were to be distributed throughout the QFRS Urban and Rural brigades, a more equitable financing policy could be adopted. The urban sector would be catered for as it is now with the "red trucks" and a larger dividend of funding could be directed towards rural brigade funding. The possibility of a dollar rate / hectare with a risk assessment, for the amount of rural land covered by that brigade, could be implemented.

The QFRS would be required to substantially increase personnel to cover this change, due to the increase in workload proposed.

What roles would each have?

QFRS

- Administer the collection of and distribution of funding with regard to the risk assessment carried out on each brigade area, and the actual amount of rural land covered. All in consultation with the brigades.
- Distribute funding for the running expenses of each brigade to which they have the autonomy to use at their discretion. ie fuels, oils, tyres and maintenance of small appliances.
- Supply appliances, sheds, PPE, training, administrative help and auditing facilities for the brigades.
- Supply a mechanical repair facility for appliances such as trucks, pumping equipment and radio communications equipment
- Tender out supply and erection contracts for the buildings either through local suppliers or through Q Build.
- Have auditors in staff positions that can facilitate the book keeping requirements of the individual brigades.

Rural Fire Brigade

- Fire suppression in rural areas
- Community awareness of fire hazards
- Training
- Management of hazard reduction burns
- Management of prescribed burning
- Maintain a register of equipment and servicing requirements
- Maintain a training register
- Fundraising or donations used for social activities for the brigade members
- Develop a rural (SES style) service for the rural areas during times of severe weather conditions such as flooding and cyclones. The SES will, due to population concentrations, look after the urban areas before the rural ones.
- Develop 'hands-on' training exercises for young members to encourage them to be members of brigades. These training sessions can be done with the supervision of experienced fire fighters prior to any formal training that is required by members of brigades. These activities can be advertised in the urban areas for a recreational exercise as well as hazard reduction burns.

1. Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?

NO. The present system has worked well in the past with local brigades able to sustain the volunteers' interest by making local decisions on:

- operations
- fire risk management
- training
- long term planning and -
- funding with particular reference to the Rural Fire Levy

The model, using directions as laid out in the manual, has been suitable, but with changing community involvement, changes are needed for the future.

With the increase in rural settlement due to development of rural and semi rural estates, the number of residents entering the rural areas is increasing. However, the number of volunteers is not growing at a proportional rate. This is due to the dispersal of interests and employment that these people have.

The training factor has had an adverse effect on recruitment as well. The younger volunteers lose interest quickly if they do not get 'hands on' experience.

Meeting procedures have a detrimental effect on volunteer numbers as well. Although a regimented record of proceedings is required, a lot of volunteers simply drop out due to the 'weary' repetitiveness of meetings.

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

NO. The current system has served some Brigades well. However there are problems:

- A small ratepayer base for some brigades means limited funding while others have funds that they could have done without if they had not required to save for the future purchases of appliances, sheds and facilities.
- The present funding model allows for semi rural brigades with a large ratepayer base to accumulate funding on the basis that they have more houses in that area to look after. However, when the number of houses in the area increases (as does the levy) the amount of rural land that is prone to fire attack is reduced at a somewhat proportional rate.
- The ideal of a brigade having to conserve and fundraise for the necessities to keep the brigade, and therefore the brigade area, with facilities while another brigade looking after a very much reduced area of rural land with more facilities, is most inappropriate.
- Capital expenditure and operational costs based on budget requirements should be the liability of QFRS, levies should be collected and allocated by QFRS.

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

Urban encroachment into brigade areas is having a devastating effect on the land, as these new areas are taking over rural properties that are not being burnt on an annual or biannual basis for both fodder production and hazard reduction.

The small acreage properties that are developing this land tend to have a 'green' objectivity towards hazard reduction and refuse to participate.

As was pointed out in the Victorian Bushfires Commission, this extract should be submitted and actioned by local authorities approving rural subdivisions.

By Jane Cowan (ABC News The Drum)

Updated Wed Mar 31, 2010 3:23pm AEDT

There was a lot of agreement in the hearing room during the six days of evidence on fuel reduction burning in the Victorian Bushfires Commission.

For a topic so seemingly controversial up until now, there was surprisingly a lot of agreement in the hearing room during the six days of evidence on fuel reduction burning in the Victorian Bushfires Commission.

A panel of seven experts assembled by the Commission's legal team came to the consensus view that Victoria should burn between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of its 7.7 million hectares of public forest annually - an ambitious target when you consider 1.7 per cent, or 130 000 hectares, is currently burnt each year. The scientists ranged from the CSIRO fire investigator Phil Cheney and forest ecologist Professor Mark Adams to the more cautious Dr Michael Clarke, an associate professor and head of the Zoology Department at Latrobe University, with expertise in conservation biology and Dr Malcolm Gill, a scientist concentrating on plant diversity. No-one was suggesting burning would prevent bushfires altogether but all agreed it would reduce the number of fires that broke out and lessen the spread and intensity of those that did ignite, making them easier to extinguish. Cheney said a good enough, large enough prescribed burn would "stop a fire" in a eucalypt forest for one or two years after the burn and still have an effect on flame heights, ember production and rates of spread for as long as two decades.

The opposition previously attributed to "green" groups fell away - or at least did not make it into the hearing room. The evidence of Jerry Williams, who's worked a lifetime in the US Forest Service, cut through the argument that burning was somehow bad for the bush. He pointed out the irony of refusing to burn forests in a planned manner only to later lose whole ecosystems in massive out-of-control infernos.

The recommendations of the Victorian Bushfires Commission should also be a guideline for Queensland National Parks & Wildlife Service, EPA and Queensland Forestry.

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

Communication

- Between brigades and QFRS
- Between brigades
- Between brigades and landowners
- Between brigades and Fire Wardens

Financial Management

- Uniform funding guidelines and allocation to brigades
- Capital & operational funding management services
- Auditing and financial advice services

Manning QFRS

- 'On the Ground ' Rural operations staff
- Training and risk assessors
- Financial services

Commitment

- Rural Operations more accessible
- Rural Operations consultation with brigade risk assessments
- Rural Operations having a greater interaction with individual brigades rather than with Brigade Groups
- Brigade input into Rural Operations procedures and policies

5. Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

YES. However, the commitment of those brigade members to meet the requirement is an ever increasing campaign to keep up. We have to remember that the majority of smaller brigades are made up of farmers and their workers, who know the land, the ways to fight fires and to protect what is theirs, but are sometimes challenged in the ways of accounting software and Profit & Loss Statements.

The accountability of brigades was brought into question with the Auditor Generals Report

The Auditor-General tabled Auditor-General Report No 3 for 2008 – Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland in the Parliament on 15th May 2008. The report deals with the results of the performance management systems (PMS) audit on whether suitable systems were operating to ensure the efficient and effective management of Rural Fire Brigades.

and we have to remember that the individual Rural Fire Brigades are manned by volunteers predominately looking after their own assets. They took exception to the report not for the report itself, but by the way it was presented to the brigades.

The whole idea was rejected out of hand as an assault on their integrity. If the whole business had been 'sold' to the brigades without the Auditor Generals report being mentioned, a reform may well have been implemented by now.

6. What should be the role of Fire Wardens within the Rural Fire services model?

The Fire Warden holds a strategic role in any Rural Fire Brigade. The warden should

- Be an integral part of the Brigade
- Be an executive member of the brigade
- Have a reasonable knowledge of the brigade area
- Have a minimum Rural Fire Brigade experience of 2 years
- Have an inspection regime and management plan for the brigade area
- Be financially compensated for the travelling and inspection regime that he or she has committed to.
- Be either an active fire fighter or trained as an incident controller

7. Other points noted.

- I do not feel that Rural Fire Brigade members need to be financially rewarded for their efforts in protecting their own land. Financial reward for attending an incident could lead to the incentive for that incident to occur.
- I do feel that some form of financial compensation must be offered to Fire Wardens for travel costs if they are to do their jobs correctly and inspect each property they have issued a 'permit to burn.'
- I do feel that Brigade members that leave their brigade area to attend fires in other areas, should not be out of pocket or otherwise financially disadvantaged.
- I do believe that the permit to burn must remain in place as a matter of litigation against those persons who cause large scale losses of property and or life.
- I do believe that a funding reform would be widely accepted if properly presented as a time saving tool and as a benefit to individual brigades.