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Submission by John Thomson, Cairns Peninsula Rep. RFBAQ. 148 Speewah Rd. MSI 1039. Kuranda 4881. (07) 40930211

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

Submission to Queensland Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

John Thomson,
Speewah Warden and
Cairns Peninsula Representative
Rural Fire Association Queensland

148 Speewah Road
MSI 1039
KURANDA Queensland 4881

(07) 4093 0211
speewah@iig.com.au

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The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane, Queensland, 4000.

Ms Deborah Jeffrey,

I have given due consideration to the Queensland Public Accounts and Public Works Committee Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland Report and hereby offer my submission.

The original Rural Fire Brigade model was a Community-based body of volunteers residing in that Community. It existed to protect lives, property and surrounding bushland from the ravages of wild fires in that particular area. This model was a working one. Most of these Brigades have raised funds, bought equipment and built sheds to house that equipment. Some of the equipment and sheds will have been subsidized by both Local and State bodies. These Brigades have a loyal following of supporters who need not necessarily be members but will assist in an emergency situation. The Brigade is part of the Community. Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) are taking the Community ownership from these Brigades.

Brigades that manage their own finances and also strike a levy at a Public Meeting and have their own Local Councils collect those levies within Rates at no additional costs, should be well funded, provided they follow the guidelines in the Brigade Manual. These Brigades would be Class 4 village; iZone and Class 2 and will generally be in a position to purchase equipment and appliances that they require. Many of these Brigades enlist the assistance of Gaming Funds and the Rural Fire Brigade Association of Queensland (RFBAQ). There is an unacceptable waiting period for vehicles and also equipment. Orders placed are not filled. Budgets of District Offices have been relocated to Brisbane QFRS and even Gaming Funds are only accessible through QFRS Brisbane Office.

Cane farm and other agricultural and pastoral Brigades would probably not require a levy, provided adequate equipment remains available and also subsidized. The list of subsidized equipment has been reduced dramatically and RFBAQ representatives are continually requesting items to be reinstated for purchase.

Urban encroachment is having a massive effect in some areas where 40 to 50, two hectare blocks appear in a short space of time with one property development concluded. They do not pay a levy for service but expect one from Rural Brigades. A great number of these residents know very little if anything about bushfires and have a reluctance to use hazard reduction burns as a method of mitigating major wildfires. Regional Councils are still permitting subdivisions to progress without due thought to possible fire problems. Fire appliances need access to the rear of properties, especially those that border on bushland. There have been incidences where Rural Fire Brigades have been called upon to assist Urban Brigades with a fire in an Urban Levied area, because it was inaccessible to the Urban pumpers. Rural Brigades provided a service, free of charge, to residents who had previously paid a levy to the Urban Brigade.

Demands might be lessened by Councils conferring with Rural Brigade Officers who have a vast local knowledge of their areas. Some of these points of interest would include access, water, power and fire breaks before subdivision is approved. Councils need to take an active role in educating new residents of new subdivisions. Many of these residents have never lived in a fire prone rural area previously. In the event of Rural Fire Brigades being made redundant, will Council take on the responsibility of hazard reduction to prevent wild fires? Rural Fire Brigades require the active support of Councils.



The Area Director's budget is now allocated from Brisbane and needs to be reinstated. Our Directors know what we require and should not have to go 'cap in hand' with every small request. Brigades are required to follow procedures set out in the Brigade Manual and if this is adhered to accountability should not be a problem. Finance must be left with Brigades. QFRS must NOT take control of finances of Rural Brigade Areas. These Brigades have ownership of their areas and will relinquish their roles should this happen. There are many more personnel being employed in Regional offices but are the Brigade Volunteers any better off? The money available to Rural Fire Operations is being syphoned off and very little ends up benefiting the fire fighter on the fire front. We now have our own Volunteer Brigade and Group Trainers. A number of Officers have taken up higher duties elsewhere, probably as a step in their career paths, but in doing so leave Regional Offices understaffed. Fire Wardens should remain in the Brigade Areas, with an Area Director as Chief Warden. They know the area, understand the conditions of that area and know when to say no to permits. The proposed system, designed by someone with very little knowledge of the bush, for the whole of Queensland and signed off by the Commissioner to look into is a joke. One rule does not fit all circumstances. Would someone in Brisbane know local conditions on a day to day basis? I myself have a situation where one side of a roadway is rainforest and the other side of that same road is open forest. The rainforest residents may have permits issued almost 12 months of the year, but not so for residents of the open forest side of the roadway.

Give us back our Rural Fire Service autonomy, run by Rural Fires personnel, not Urban, for Volunteers who understand what a bushfire is. Understand hazard reduction and know when to leave it burn and when to stop it. As I look at the situation now, we are following America step by step and these people are beginning to say "stop any fire at all costs" may not be the right way. Are we to make the same mistakes and learn the hard way? (Roger Underwood's Aust. Bushfire Management: a case study in wisdom verses folly")

The Government's Blue Print for the Bush says that no services would be curtailed. We now have Rural Areas not staffed and other Areas combined to reduce staff.

Regards,



John C Thomson
Cairns Peninsula Representative
Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland

GLOSSARY:

Fire Management Groups: To my knowledge Groups were formed to support Brigades in the event of emergencies. These Groups were not formed to distribute fire levy funds. A Fire Management Group which is working well in conjunction with the Tablelands Regional Council (TRC) includes representatives of all major stakeholders in the management of fire in the Tablelands Region. Two areas of the TRC have been working well for the past four years.

For a detailed explanation please contact -

Marj Nix

CEO Minute Secretary and HR Administration Support
Human Resources Group, Corporate and Community Services
Tablelands Regional Council

Phone: 07 4043 4000 | Direct: 07 4043 4406 | Fax: 07 4092 3323
Email: marjorien@trc.qld.gov.au | Website: www.trc.qld.gov.au
65 Rankin Street | PO Box 154, Mareeba, Queensland, Australia, 4880

Rural Fire Levy: This is correct. This is what happens in the Northern Part of Queensland – Funding for equipment, is collected by Local Councils and forwarded to the Brigade in each Division in which it is collected. Provided the Brigade follows the guidelines laid out in the Manual, the process is beneficial to all parties.

iZone: No mention of distance from Urban or Auxiliary Stations (This would be at the Area Director's discretion)

SECTION 1 Executive summary:

I notice in the Executive Summary that the QFRS is responsible for the RFS. When did this happen? The RFS has lost any say in what happens to the Rural Brigades. We were promised autonomy by Premier Beattie for the Rural Fire Service (an Election Promise, Min. Emergency & Min. Assist. Premier, 7 Aug 2002 – see enclosed appendix)

The Audit Committee needs to realize that Rural Fire Brigades are manned by Volunteers. These Brigades were formed as a local self help for people and Communities where they were responsible for their own fire safety.

Fire starts – Brigade is called – fire controlled, left to burn out or is extinguished if required – Brigade members go home.

Brigades need to control their own finances. Brigades need to adhere to the rules in the Brigade Manual. Brigades do not need interference from QFRS personnel on how to run their Brigades.

1.3 Key findings

Forward planning: Most working Brigades do forward planning. They don't sit down and conference for hours. The planning is done by Brigade Officers as weather conditions improve or deteriorate. Probably 6 to 12 months in advance. The Volunteers will do hazard reduction when the conditions and members are available. NOT TO A TIME TABLE.

Risk management: Land holders manage fire risk to their properties. The RF Brigade helps. The Brigade is not there to provide information and planning for QFRS.

Training: Volunteers will attend when they can or when they want to. They are not on the payroll. Most training should be done at night and weekends because most volunteers are in the workforce or own their own businesses. It is difficult enough to have time off during work days to fight fires let alone have to take time off to go to training. Very often this training is offered by paid staff during their working days and when there is poor attendance, it is seen to be as a lack of interest by Volunteers.

1.4 Recommendations

Forward planning:

Once again we have QFRS this and QFRS that, instead of RFS. Since 2006 a lot of Area Managers, Area Training Officers and Brigade Training Officers have been replaced by either Inter-State or Urban personnel. Good people in their own right, but how many understand the RFS and its Volunteers? The need to formulate and measure is for the Government bean-counters. Little will be achieved by demanding that Volunteers "fit the QFRS mould".

1.5 Department of Emergency Services response

Rural Fire Service started in 1947. Last year we had our 60 year Calendar. We have come a long way without QFRS involvement.

What have we achieved since 2006?

Are we happy?

Do we need a land manager to run the RFS?

YES ! Some person who understands the land, the bush and a running fire.

We have lost the area budget. Brisbane controls every last cent that we have to literally beg for.

We have more high ranking officers on top pay.

Our net gain in the field, on the fire line is no more than we had before.

Now we have heaps more paperwork to please the high ranking officers, who sit in air-conditioned offices and tell us what we have to do and how to do it to maintain our Brigades.

If our Quarterly Review is not up to standard, will we be sacked?

Perhaps the answer to that will be to employ more highly paid paper pushers.



E Learning: Looks great on the computer, but very different when the wind is 20 knots and the combustible vegetation is 6 tonne per hectare and the flames are 4 metres high.

On the ground training by **experienced** local personnel is a must, or Volunteers will be killed!

Experienced Volunteers are getting a little tired of being "put down" by so called experts, who have theory learning and usually heaps of certificates and epaulets on their shoulders, to back that learning up, but very little on ground experience with a running fire.

Fire Wardens: If the fire wardens' role is so important to the RFS why would the QFRS need major changes to the system. I attended a seminar in Cairns in 2006. Some changes to the Permit form itself were recommended, such as – 3rd copy, more room to write names and addresses and also for the signature of the permittee, showing that he/she understood the conditions on the permit.

Executive Briefing Note: General Ref. 09/15267. "That the Commissioner endorse centralised electronic issue of permits to light fires", WILL NOT WORK from a centralised location.

The Warden must reside in the area of the permittee.

The Warden should be a person who understands fire and knows the location and terrain in question.

The Warden (local) would know how dry it was and put local conditions on the permit.

There is no place for permits to be issued by some person sitting in an office in some far distant place, perhaps 2000 km away, behind a computer.

See last paragraph, page 7 of the PAC Report. Why does QFRS need to know why and when a permit is issued by a Fire Warden? When I issue a permit in Speewah I cross out "it is best to" and insert "You must" notify Cairns Fire Com and also the First Officer of Speewah Brigade before lighting the fire. This was one recommendation made at a Wardens' Seminar in Cairns in 2006 and has not yet happened. The local Warden's job is to ensure that permits fit the situation.

SECTION 2: Audit focus

2.1 Audit Objective: The Government needs to produce a TV Commercial to emphasise to Rural Residential land holders in Rural Fire Districts that –

Rural Brigades will need access for 360 degrees around any infrastructure with a 4 x 4 vehicle.

Any water tank must have a 50mm male Camlock fitting on the bottom of the tank to draw water for emergency fire fighting.

Most rural residential blocks have no water supply when power goes out.

Levies collected in Rural Residential areas by Local Councils is for equipment and does not guarantee a service for a fee, as it does in Urban areas.

This commercial should be planned in a fire prone area, in the dry time and not like the last attempt, where the lawns were emerald green on a 5 degree slope somewhere in Brisbane. Australia has been burning bush for the last five hundred thousand years. Nobody lived in areas permanently so it did not matter. Now it does. Aboriginals first, then white man, now we need to control how, when and where so we have some way of mitigating wild fires. That is the PERMIT SYSTEM as it is and hazard reduction burns at the right time.



2.2 Reasons for the audit: Bushfires are an inherent part of the Australian environment. You got that right! That is the reason Hazard Reduction Burns need to be carried out at the right time of the year to prevent wild fires occurring in the worst time of the year.

Fuel reduction controlled burns save flora and fauna, because they are timed for the cooler time of the day to coincide with a later dew fall that dampens the end of the black out watch.

Wild fires kill flora and fauna because they are hotter, cover larger areas and usually occur at the hottest time of the day and year.

2.3 Audit scope: My understanding is that 8 Brigades were contacted and interviews were carried out with these RFS Brigade members. Is this correct?

If this is correct, out of 1 500 Brigades, it is hardly a thorough coverage for the size of Queensland.

2.3 (2) Risk modification: Urban planning practices do not often consider or understand a wildfire scenario. Councils are still approving subdivisions with only one combined entry and egress point. Canberra fires had deadly consequences and the reports gave warning about this practice.

2.3 (4) Response: Who responds? In most cases RFS responds and with a skeleton crew of Volunteers, usually to do what is necessary and then go home. Either to let it burn itself out safely or to control if needs be. When Urban arrive, their edict seems to be "see a fire, put it out!" That's fine for their structural fires but it is not always the right action in rural area fires.

2.3 (5) Field work for PAC was done from January to April. One needs to find out the conditions and what happens in October to December.

Audit procedures: There are 700 to 800 Primary Producer brigades on the Coast and also out West, who look after about 70 percent of Queensland and only one Brigade was interviewed. They are important Rural Fire members.

2.4 Organisational context: Referring to the last paragraph on page 11 which refers to applying for a levy through QFRS Area Director – This has never happened in our Brigade or Group. We have been collecting a levy since 1997 as per the Brigade Manual. This entails an audit of our financial books, drafting a three year proposal plan and budget. These are passed at our AGM and copies of the Minutes, Audited Statement, Three year plan and Budget all forwarded to the local RFS Office.



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Speewah Warden and Cairns Peninsula Representative
Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland

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APPENDIX - Pages 1 & 2**[PROMISES BROKEN]****LOOKING AFTER RURAL FIRE FIGHTERS**

The Rural Fire Service comprises many dedicated volunteers, from all walks of life who donate their time and resources for the protection of the community

Rural Fire Service Officers put their lives on the line every time they are called on to respond to emergencies. Under the Coalition Government, the Rural Fire Service has been subjected to senseless managerialist refocus. Efforts have been directed towards the production of videos and displays rather than fighting fires'..

Returning the Right to Free Speech

Rural Fire Service Officers are dedicated, community members who donate their time to serve their community. They Should not have corporate managerial directives imposed upon, that seek to remove their rights that speak about problems they perceive in the service. Labor believes that the volunteers of the Rural Fire Service should be accorded the respect they deserve.

Getting Rid of Time Wasting Managerialism

Labor will not subject the men and women of the Rural Fire Service to the petty Managerial directives issued by the Coalition government. The volunteers of the Rural Fire Service deserve due recognition and support. Labor will maintain and support the Rural Fire Service, as a distinct organisation and will halt any moves to incorporate the Service with the urban component of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. A Beattie Labor Government will also clean up workers' compensation and Insurance arrangements to ensure that all officers who act in good faith to protect a community against a fire hazard are adequately covered.

Funding

Labor will get back to basics. We will direct budgeted funds to the operational front-line. Funding of \$1 million a year for three years will be spent on purchasing new equipment and appliances rather than frittered away on expensive and unnecessary reviews. Labor will enhance and improve the recurrent base funding of the Rural Fire Service by consolidating its various special grants and programs which are due to expire under the Coalition in the next year.

Equipment

Labor believes that the equipment supplied, to the Rural Fire Service Officers, should meet the requirements of the officers who utilize it. It is unacceptable that Rural Fire Service Officers feel unsafe and under equipped when they go to fight a wildfire or structural fire. Labor recognises that some equipment may not be suitable for particular brigades and will ensure that all new equipment gains the approval of the Rural Fire Services which will use it.

A Beattie labor Government will establish a seven year rolling capital replacement plan for the upgrading of brigade equipment to a satisfactory standard for fire prevention and control. Funding under a Labor Government will not be allocated on the present "first come, best dressed" basis but rather on a needs basis. Equipment purchases will be made after consultation with individual brigades to ensure that money is spent to the best effect.

In particular, Labor believes the present situation involving Brigades with design defects is unacceptable. Through proper consultation with the members of volunteer fire brigades, Labor will ensure that any vehicles purchased match the needs identified by the men and women who will use them.



Training

Labor will improve training for the men and women who dedicate their time to the Rural Fire Service. Training provided to Rural Fire Service volunteers will recognise the distinct needs of firefighting in a rural context. Resources will be reallocated from red-tape to training. Labor will make use of innovative distance education technologies to ensure that the available training dollars are spent to the best effect.

The Rural Fire Service under Labor

The men and women who are willing to risk their lives in the Rural Fire Service to protect the community in the Rural Fire Service deserve more than hollow managerialist directives. These are people who are volunteering to serve the community - they deserve to be asked about the problems and issues facing them in their roles. Labor will ensure that the people of the Rural Service are consulted on all appropriate matters so that these dedicated men and women can be confident that the training and equipment supplied supplements their land management skills and enables them to safely undertake the range of tasks they normally encounter,

