

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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Endorsed by the following member brigades:
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13th April 2010

Introduction:

This Brigade recognises that we form part of QFRS and that we are accountable to QFRS for all our actions. We acknowledge that the brigade and local community receive many benefits from this membership and that there are further benefits to the community from the limited autonomy of local brigades.

We also acknowledge that we have accountability to Local Government who collect and distribute the Rural Fire Levy to our Brigade. We understand that QFRS Rural Office coordinates our information for Local Government as a standard procedure since the amalgamation of Councils in our area. Prior to the amalgamation our Brigade successfully liaised directly with Livingstone Shire Council.

We also acknowledge accountability to our local community, from which the Fire Levy is drawn.

The Discussion paper refers to the Auditor General's report No 3 for 2008 – Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland. Brigade members express their disappointment that this report was drawn from a very small sample of rural brigades. We feel that the report therefore does not adequately represent the majority of Brigades in this region, their concerns and the factors affecting them.

This report was used as the basis of proposed sweeping changes in the financing of Rural Brigades within the Rockhampton district early in 2009. The changes proposed may have met some obligations of QFRS regarding accountability of Brigade funds but they did not consider the people involved in the Brigades and the sense of local identity that is inherent in the present Brigade system. The result was a threatened mass walk out of local volunteers (Refer The Morning Bulletin 16 Feb 2009 Appendix A.)

The sweeping changes that were proposed severely damaged the trust of the volunteers in the very organisation that is there to support them – the Rural Office in Rockhampton; and to some degree, the QFRS. As a local Brigade we wish to repair this damage.

The sweeping changes also set challenges for local brigades, to discuss what was happening and why, to their local communities. Communities didn't understand nor necessarily support the new model. The local Rural Fire Brigades were placed in very difficult situations to explain the changes; with limited information being made available to local Brigades at the time. Again, we wish to repair this damage.

These matters highlight the fact that any changes will need to be done in full consultation with local Brigades and communities. Only changes acceptable to ALL parties should then be developed, allowing adequate time for implementation so that the changes can be implemented in an orderly and systematic manner.

The opportunity to make a response to this discussion paper is one small step in this consultative process and we welcome the opportunity to make a response. We sincerely hope that we will be heard and that our suggestions will be seriously considered.

Why do people join their local Brigade?

The responses will vary, but in most cases there is a sense of local identity and community support. The Brigade is a group of local people working in the local area, responsible to the local community members that they meet in day to day situations. This sense of community can only be fostered at this level and our brigade does not wish to see any change to a more centralised model.

People also join because they have the skills and abilities to do the job, and wish to contribute to their community in this way. In this region, many people in Brigades are already Mines Rescue trained or retired Urban Fire Fighters. These people strengthen our responses and come to Brigades knowing they will be great assets to their communities.

People also join because they want to learn more about fire management. This enables communities to respond to local disasters, through active learning in a well established organisation.

People also join the Rural Fire Brigade to be part of the esteem that it enjoys amongst their local communities. In this way, people build a greater sense of belonging to their local community, which in effect, builds happier and healthier communities. Local residents have the local knowledge to assist in controlling any fire incident.

People also join Rural Fire Brigades because there is no alternative protection available. Many rural landholders are also part of their Rural Fire Brigade, to help shore up a response to a disaster should it occur on their land. By being part of their local Brigade, they can ensure that a response will occur if needed. They see their responsibility in being an active member of the very Brigade that is likely to save their land.

Notes to the 7 listed issues follow.

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

YES. The present system has worked well 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 (Ver 1.1 2007 edition), has been suitable, but with changing community involvement some changes may be needed for the future.

It is imperative that local brigades must maintain and strengthen interest at the community level.

- However with increasing rural 'lifestyle' choices, many residents work out of the area and have little commitment to the community. It may be necessary to set up some sort of SES style brigade in the city to support the rural brigades.
- Brigade forward planning needs to consider the ageing workforce with few young members joining.

The current model is suitable for Rural Fire Brigades in our region; as well as our rural communities. Given the changing political climate, the continued rise of 'Risk Aversion', and the Auditor General's report; there possibly are elements of the current model that require some change to appease the concerns of the Auditor General; however, this should not result in disempowerment of communities and their Rural Fire Brigades; as was inherent in the Local Area Consultative Committee structure proposed for our region. Rather, there needs to be further investigation of the role of Local Government in the management of funds that belongs to Brigades. As they are the authority that collects and distributes the Fire Levy according to the Local Government Act, why are they so silent in all of this? Why can't we have Local Government more involved with Rural Brigades; rather than having all our funds and self direction usurped by a blanket model that doesn't work for this region? We have a great Local Government who, over the years, has proven a strong history of working with local Rural Fire Brigades to ensure accountability and professionalism of the management of public funds. Why can't we investigate the model used by the Livingstone Shire Council that was in place prior to amalgamation of Councils?

Whichever model is proposed for the Rural Fire Brigades, it needs to be sensitive to the fact that it is volunteers that do the work of the Department. To continually centralise and disempower such people could lead to a reduction in morale and esteem and consequently, a drop in volunteers to run the service. People in rural communities are more likely to return to worrying about their own patch, rather than put in the additional effort to navigate some huge bureaucratic machine. The success of Rural Fire Brigades in this region is that they are local and locally driven.

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

YES. The current system has served our member Brigades well. However there are problems:

- A small ratepayer base for some brigades means limited funding. (other sources of funding are available).
- The number of brigades receiving a levy over the whole state is only 25% of the total number of brigades. With the likelihood of increasing fire danger from climate change, the present system could be seen as inadequate. Our member brigades do not wish to see any change to the present levy system.
- The volunteers supply their time and labour for fire-fighting duties, maintenance of equipment and administration of their unit. Therefore we believe;
 - a) Capital expenditure on vehicles, equipment and sheds should be the responsibility of QFRS and
 - b) levies from the local ratepayers be used for operations.
- Capital expenditure on vehicles, equipment and sheds should be coming from QFRS and levies from the local ratepayers be used for operations. The volunteers supply their time for fire-fighting duties, QFRS should be able to supply the equipment.
- The removal of subsidised items from the QFRS equipment catalogue places an increasing strain on brigade resources and should be reinstated as a priority.

The current funding system is very inefficient. There is an unnecessary time taken in negotiating with Rural Office in Rockhampton, largely due to the low number of staff available to assist. There needs to be greater resources (people) put into this region, to support Brigades in the vital work they do. For example, for a region with a huge number of Rural Fire Brigades, our Rural Office is only funded for 1.5 administration officers who are responsible to process training records, budget collation, and general correspondence from Brigades including collating requests for equipment and updating of volunteer records; as well as supporting the running of the Rural Office itself. An example of the impact this has on Brigades is that often it takes years – yes years! – to get a certificate for any training attended that has been run by the Rural Office. There just isn't the number of people in this regional Rural Office to handle the workload. Resourcing the Rural Office in Rockhampton better would be a great way to value local volunteers.

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

Urban encroachment is evident in the subdivision of large blocks into small acreage house blocks. We have more blocks in the area, with more owners but with less communication between the landowners. The fire risk increases with more buildings in the area and with increased fuel loads resulting from less controlled burning.

With the growth of the urban areas, many of the rural brigades are decreasing in area and may ultimately close or merge with an adjacent area.

However, there is an opportunity to strengthen both Rural and Urban brigades from the ever increasing encroachment. Rural Brigades have definite skills and abilities in fighting grass and other outdoor fires, and in protecting property until an Urban Brigade is on scene. As a first response, the importance of Rural Fire Brigades cannot be underestimated. Some Rural Brigades remain some 30 minutes from their Urban Brigades (under siren). For these, there is an opportunity for some of the larger Rural Brigades to be up skilled in Road Accident Rescue, First Response for Structural Fires, etc; to limit the risk of harm or further harm to people involved in an incident – which DIRECTLY aligns with the aim of the QFRS. Encroaching Urban Brigades means that there is a greater density of population, and given the vast roles of Urban Brigades, having a local Rural Fire Brigade that can manage a grass fire and enable an Urban Brigade to prioritise structural fires or road accidents, can only strengthen the response of QFRS to emergencies. There is a future for both to remain, despite urban encroachment, and for this to be a strong and positive relationship to the betterment of local communities.

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

Communication between brigades and Area Office needs to be improved. As an example - acknowledgement of correspondence would be appreciated particularly if a time frame could be given for action requested. Many Government departments have guidelines that all correspondence must be answered within a set time frame of about 21 days.

Information regarding brigade activities or planning also needs to be distributed to brigades in a timely manner. As an example - this report asking for our input was released in November, but only came to our attention in March, 14 days prior to closing date for submissions.

Increasing demands arise in 2 areas:

- 1 - more training and fire-fighting and
- 2 - more administration.

The use of volunteers means that a lot of time is required for training in appropriate fire-fighting skills.

With bad fire seasons, there is a need for relief crews. The structure of rural brigade groups, such as Keppel Group, needs to be maintained so local brigades (through Firecom) can call upon neighbouring group members to assist when needed.

To encourage volunteers, there may need to be a system of payment or financial assistance for volunteers who have to leave paid work to attend the fires. Many members are willing to give up time (and pay) to defend their home area, but they are not so willing to lose pay to work in an outside area.

With reference to the increased accountability (#5 below) more guidance and assistance will be needed to get the appropriate paperwork under way.

5. Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

Financial accountability mechanisms are presently adequate but QFRS makes little use of the information supplied by brigades. The annual audited Statement of accounts submitted by our brigade supplies the required information on income, expenditure and reserve funds.

With increasing computerisation it should be possible to collect data electronically to be compiled into a comprehensive register to show total assets - operational funds, reserve and future funds, income and expenditure on an annual basis.

According to the discussion paper, only 25% of brigades currently receive a levy and hence need to have an annual audit. Information on the remaining 1133 brigades may not be available. These Brigades may function without a bank account, or with a minimal balance so that a full audit is not required. However QFRS should still be able to get at least an annual statement of Income & Expenditure and funds available for those Brigades.

Existing technology should be used within QFRS to improve communication so that brigades are notified when returns are due. As returns are forwarded by Brigades, they can be checked off on a comprehensive list where any omissions are immediately obvious and noted for action. This would prevent a repeat of the situation encountered by several Brigades when budget submissions were 'lost' and nothing was said or noted for 12 months or longer.

Equipment stock takes and inspections for condition and safety of brigade equipment also need to be incorporated to give a complete picture of resources available.

The main question would be who signs off on the equipment condition report. Should it be one of the QFRS personnel (Brigade Training and Support Officer?) or the Brigade 1st Officer who has ultimate responsibility for all Brigade activities. This task will add to the workload of the person(s) involved.

The current accountability mechanisms on Rural Brigades do not necessarily mesh with the expectation of the QFRS; but they are appropriate. The QFRS is very concerned with accountability of public funds (and rightfully so), and the changes proposed included for this to be managed in a centralised manner, independent of volunteers. However, this is not the best model for volunteers and their communities who want to remain empowered. The fact is, the current model where the money is distributed from Local Government to Rural Fire Brigades, is working because there is yet to be a Brigade fail their yearly financial audit. But there remains a desire to remove this function from local Rural Fire Brigades. It should be noted that local Rural Fire Brigades readily submit audits, both financial and equipment, on request; as well as supply detailed forward plans for their local Brigade based on public meetings convened by the local Rural Fire Brigade. The amount of responsibility and expectation placed on Rural Fire Brigades is not beyond their abilities, and this needs to be recognised and built upon rather than removed.

There are adequate accountability measures in place for local Rural Fire Brigades in this region; however, the chronic understaffing of the regional Rural Fire Office makes it difficult for some systems to be administered to the best of their ability. A lot of paperwork that is submitted can't be dealt with in a timely manner, which leaves a difficult situation that often appears to be mismanagement or poor management; which isn't accurate.

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

The fire warden for our district states that his role within the rural brigade area is not only to issue fire permits, but also to be an active member of the local brigade and to promote fire awareness and fuel reduction with residents and brigade members.

Our brigade feels strongly that the warden needs to be working closely with the brigade members and that this is best achieved if the warden **holds an executive position** of his/her local brigade. In this position the warden is aware of brigade activities and is able to pass information to & from the Brigade and Landowners.

It has been demonstrated by our Brigade that when the Warden and Brigade work together to conduct fuel reduction burns when weather conditions are appropriate, the reduction in fuel loads has led to reduced fire danger before weather conditions deteriorate. This has led to a low uncontrolled fire incidence, even in severe fire seasons. This action will also be of benefit to the environment being a 'cool' burn, thus reducing the devastation of hot wild fires later in the season.

Any change from the present local administration of the permit system would be seen as a backward step.

Fire Warden's are currently easily identified in their local community, and this needs to be continued and supported.

7. Other points noted.

The Keppel Group notes that member brigades have improved operations immensely since the introduction of the levy collected on our behalf by the local Council. This has removed the need for continual fundraising and allowed members to concentrate on the tasks of training, control burning, and fire-fighting response.

Brigades are able to plan for equipment purchases, and set aside funds for vehicle replacements. Any change to this levy system will have a big impact on the functioning of the brigade.

Once any part of the decision making process is removed from the Brigade, members lose their sense of ownership and pride in their work.

What is the biggest problem we see for the future?

Recruitment of younger members is our biggest worry. If the retirees were removed from the Rural Brigades there would be only a skeleton left. There is not much reward for younger members to give up hours of their time for training and for tactical response. Perhaps there should be a system of wages recompense for those members involved in large fires with extended response times.

Another great concern is that as we move forward, volunteers and their communities should be consulted about matters that affect them. There needs to be active consultation with Rural Brigades, not a move towards centralised decision making and management.

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Firies fury: mass resignation threatened

QUIT THREAT: Rural firefighters from brigades across the region voted yesterday to leave the service if a flat-rate fire levy is introduced. The Caves first officer Gary Dash is flanked by Naomi Scott and Cathy Robson as concerned brigade members stand ready to carry out their threat to leave. Full story, Page 3.

PHOTO: CHRIS ISON, C15/0209/2