



SAMFORD RURAL FIRE BRIGADE
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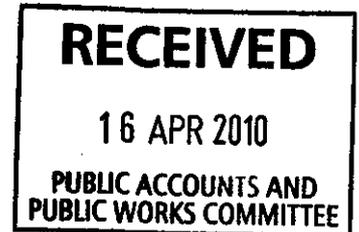
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The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
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Samford Rural Fire Brigade
Submission to Public Accounts and Public Works
Committee

Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland
Discussion Paper November 2009

We are pleased to provide the following comments for the committee's consideration.

QRFS has the responsibility of protecting persons, property and the environment from fire emergencies. These tasks are managed with the Urban/Rural models of service delivery and the role given to the Rural Fire Service (RFS) is to protect 17% of the population and 93% of the land area of Queensland. The efforts of the RFS, over the last 60 years, have been directed to doing just this.

Thousands of RFS volunteers have, since the inception of Rural Brigades, been committed to protecting their rural communities and have taken great pride in being part of this endeavour. The audit identifies 1,525 brigades made up of 35,000 volunteers. It has been a persistent problem for the RFS to correctly gauge the number of support and active members within rural brigades, despite the onus being on the RFS to ensure each of these brigades are maintained as an effective and efficient unit within RFS.

It is imperative that there is appropriate training, commitment from both the volunteers and the administrative support from RFS, and the provision of adequate resources for the type of activities the Brigades are capable of. It is possible that the RFS organization does not as yet achieve the right balance between its "on the ground" volunteers and the administration that supports them.

Additionally, the RFS has to find ways to deal with the ageing volunteer component or we will have to face the prospect of fewer volunteers with less experience of firefighting.

If we are faced with a marked decline in volunteer numbers, it would be prudent to investigate the mindset of current volunteers in relation to these issues:

- Has morale declined?
- Have recruiting and retaining strategies been inappropriate?
- Is the model faulty?
- Is the RFS management failing in some way?

The importance of morale and has morale declined?

Every volunteer service has to attend to the health of the organization and the maintenance of high morale. Otherwise volunteers are going to stay home or do something more rewarding with their lives.

In our experience, the following generalizations about volunteers are pertinent:

- They like some ownership in the enterprise
- There is a need for them to engage collaboratively with their organization and be consulted in any decisions that affect them
- Every now and then receive thanks for their efforts in a meaningful way.

The RFS has, on occasions made decisions which have been seen as not having any regard for the wishes and aspirations of the volunteers, but despite this we believe that the operational brigades have been resilient and continue to maintain a smiling, friendly and co-operative work ethic.

An underlying problem is that this type of decision making does eventually strain the morale of volunteers, and raises the question that if this continues, will the RFS organization have the skills and experience to properly manage the dissatisfaction of such a large number of volunteers.

Have recruiting and retaining strategies been inappropriate?

The latest training requirements now prevent new recruits from active involvement on the fire ground until basic training has been completed. This protracted introduction has been noted as a cause of some new volunteers losing interest and discontinuing their involvement.

The preferred alternative would be to allow some active involvement immediately on joining up, but to ensure their safety, have them directly under the control of an experienced mentor.

Volunteers would then be able to decide if the inherently hazardous role of a fire-fighter satisfies their reasons for volunteering in the first place, before valuable time, money and resources are wasted.

Delays arising out of police checks, the timing of fire management skills training and the unavailability of a new issue of PPE can be frustrating for new recruits.

Unlike the very public, State Emergency Service (SES), the RFS does not promote itself well within the wider community. The RFS appears to lack public relations specialists, and as a result the Community recognition of the RFS, particularly for its volunteer status, has been steadily declining.

Virtually every media report from a fire ground is given by an officer who is not immediately recognized as a volunteer rural fire-fighter, compounded by the fact that they are invariably dressed in a blue Urban uniform and standing in close proximity to a red Urban fire appliance, even though several rural brigades may have been engaged for many more hours.

Emergency Management Queensland actively promotes the SES whilst the rural volunteer's role has become quite diluted. With urban development in rural areas, invariably it brings with it a community that is familiar with the red appliances of the Urban Fire Service, and it is then necessary for the rural volunteers to promote themselves and demonstrate their capabilities as a competent and effective fire mitigation service.

It is quite obvious that the RFS is desperately in need of some publicity to promote the role and activities of the volunteer arm of the fire service.

Is the model faulty?

The RFS management, which is there to support the volunteers, appears to be gradually becoming top heavy, and this raises the question as to whether the volunteers are seeing any value from this management structure.

We are continuing to see the creation of new positions in the RFS management team and the subsequent costs of salaries, overheads, office costs and the cost of the fleet of vehicles supposedly used for operational purposes, leaves very little of the annual budget to improve the lot of brigades.

The face to face contact with all levels in the RFS management structure which was inherent in the old model seems to have disappeared, and the access and visibility of senior head office RFS staff is no longer evident. The question is sometimes asked: Are managers who can rarely afford to leave their offices and interact with volunteers, an improvement on the old way?

The longstanding rural flavoured RFS Administration has been changing in recent years to one that is heavily staffed by Urban fire service officers without the rural service background or the culture that is critical to the understanding and management of volunteers.

The volunteers are being further removed from the critical decision-making process through lack of consultation. There appears to be an increasing disconnect between management of RFS and the volunteer members.

Is the management failing in some way?

Volunteers are usually positive and supportive of any form of leadership. Unfortunately, our RFS "Leaders" making arbitrary decisions without consultation, make it harder to be so accommodating.

For example, at a time when the fire service is recognizing the toxicity of bushfire smoke, a decision has been made to eventually withdraw support for rural brigades with CABA capability. CABA is one of the most effective forms of respiratory protection for appropriately trained volunteers to use when aggressively attacking bushfires, motor vehicle fires and in structural fire situations.

Rural brigades with Breathing Apparatus have recently received instructions that they will no longer be supported in the use of this equipment when the next generation of CABA is introduced in three years time. We have been told that this is necessary to meet cost savings in the future. This decision has been made without any consultation with the affected brigades, and in the case of the Samford Rural Brigade, this is in spite of a 19 year faultless record of:

- Performing the required wears for annual accreditation
- Completing weekly service checks on BA equipment
- Furnishing weekly reports on the condition of the equipment
- Meeting all training requirements for a team of BA wearers
- Building a CABA cleaning station where BA sets can be cleaned in hygienic conditions

It is noted that the Auditor General, in his report states that *“Rural fire brigades are increasingly dealing with incidents such as structure fires, motor vehicle accidents and other emergencies”*, and yet the RFS has decided to take this capability away.

The Samford Brigade also agrees with the Auditor General who has pointed out that in the current management model of RFS delivery there is the lack of an appropriate system to monitor the condition and safety of rural fire equipment. In fairness to the RFS, more recent experience now sees the development of a more robust management of major assets by RFS including onsite audits and regular follow up on vehicle roadworthy certification.

Despite this, more needs to be done at both RFS Administration and Brigade level to ensure accountability.

Rural fire brigades and rural communities

The success of the RFS depends on preserving the bonds between rural fire brigades and their communities. There is strong support for the comment made by the Director General, Department of Emergency Services, that rural fire brigades are *community based organizations which are expected to assist with funding their own operations, purchases and expenses*.

Rural fire brigades have always worked with their communities to raise funds and contribute to the costs of vehicles, operations and equipment. They have worked to establish and preserve community bonds.

Brigades serve their communities by quickly and efficiently dealing with fire-related problems. If we attend to the needs of our communities and we do this well, we get and hold the respect and support of rural communities. They really don't care about interoperability problems, caused by power plays, empire building and takeover tactics. Our communities simply need us to respond quickly and efficiently to their calls for help and assistance.

Get there early and get them out

The main operational principle for rural brigades is to get to the fire at the earliest possible time and to contain it before it becomes a major incident threatening lives, livestock and property. The community being served would not be impressed if they knew about the current competitive response times and unnecessary delays caused by a system that favours urban responses over the involvement of rural brigades. To reinforce comments made previously, these same communities might find it difficult to accept that a rural brigade now has to stand back and let their houses or sheds burn down because they have just had their BA capability taken away.

We acknowledge that the vast majority of rural brigades would have little interest in or the capacity to operate in a BA environment but this should not exclude those brigades from having a BA capability if they can satisfy the required operational efficiencies.

Rural brigades provide the opportunity and the avenue for community service. We have attracted over the years many volunteers who primarily have a genuine desire to serve their areas in some way. We have no time for hoons, drunks or antisocial misfits bent on damaging society. In a very real sense we are a breeding ground for good community spirit amongst people. We work with those who have something to give and we give them training in teamwork, leadership and ways to achieve personal and social development. Rural fire brigades can do a power of good in every demographic in the land.

SUMMARY

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

The current model of Brigades remaining largely autonomous with limited bureaucratic interference will best serve communities into the future. Focus must remain on the value of volunteers and their "ownership" of their brigade should not be diluted. A more robust governance of some brigades may be necessary, particularly those that draw their support and membership from a small demographic. Despite the political implications some review or rationalization of brigades that are unable to operate autonomously may be warranted.

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

The current local government supported levy system works effectively, but some scrutiny should be put in place to ensure the prudent utilization of the public monies collected. The management of funds collected on behalf of brigades through the levy system should predominantly remain within the hands of the brigades. Brigades should have governance processes in place to ensure that resources (vehicles and equipment) and operating budgets are commensurate with the underlying servicing requirements of their community and that funds received are well and prudently used.

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

Greater density of housing in the peri-urban fringes has resulted in a blurring of the areas of responsibility between the urban and rural services. This has led to a loss of identity of the volunteer RFS. Nevertheless our brigade has grown and continued to adapt to the changing environment without any diminution of service to the community.

Those knowing people in the community continue to actively embrace the value of the volunteer service which is evidenced by the calls upon the brigade to assist landholders to manage the fire risk on their properties in a manner not available from the Urban fire service.

There are increasing examples of unnecessary and costly deployment of urban appliances to many I-Zone incidents which could have been competently handled by our rural fire brigade.

Urban encroachment has increased the risks of bushfires with mitigation and overall management best handled by an efficient and well equipped rural brigade. Access to higher risk properties is also best managed by rural brigades as the Urban appliances are unable to operate off road.

The intellectual capital of local volunteers regarding the risks associated with their brigade area regularly proves invaluable in fire suppression.

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

Improved content and delivery channels for training will enhance operational management and effectiveness.

Introducing simple administrative functions/processes for brigades without sacrificing accountability will assist in reducing demands on brigades.

The opportunity exists for a greater level of use of technology to support brigade activities e.g. electronic lodgement of incident reports.

5. Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place adequate?

Given the increasing level of public funds involved, it is important that robust financial accountability procedures and reporting are in place and assistance to smaller brigades may be necessary to ensure this outcome.

We support open and accountable processes but governance at RFS management level must be qualified and competent to deliver it to rural brigades.

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

With the increasing importance of managing biodiversity and community expectations regarding use of fire, it is important that Fire Wardens are well trained and operate in close co-operation with local rural brigades.

Fire Wardens should receive an appropriate level of training to equip them adequately to discharge their increasingly onerous responsibilities.

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

It needs to be borne in mind that in rural and peri-urban areas the Urban fire service is predominantly reactive, whereas the RFS is both reactive when the need arises and also proactive in working with the community assisting them with fire mitigation and hazard reduction. Continued strong support of the volunteer rural fire brigades is essential to minimize fire risks throughout our communities as any diminution of the role of this service including the subtle encroachment by the Urban fire service, will deliver increased risks at a time when climate change is signaling increasing volatility across our nation.

In closing, we appreciate the opportunity to present this submission and look forward to a positive outcome to the committee's deliberations.

Submitted By:

On Behalf of the Samford Rural Fire Brigade,



Anne Wells
Hon. Secretary
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