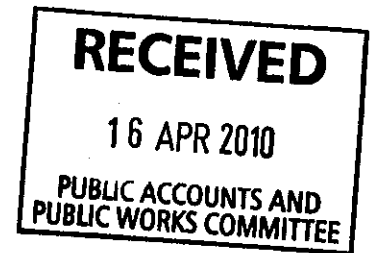


PO Box 464
INGHAM 4850

10th April 2010

Public Accounts and Public Works Comm.

RE: DISCUSSION PAPER



Dear Sir/Madam,

Firstly, I apologise for this late submission as this discussion paper has just come to my notice. To inform you where I am coming from, I am a member of the Hinchinbrook Fire Management Committee; on that committee I represent all Rural Fire Brigades within the Hinchinbrook Shire. Our task is to identify potential fire hazards within the shire, and arrange for the necessary authorities and permits to conduct these hazard reduction burns. The committee is purely an administration and advisory committee which means we are totally dependant on fire fighter volunteers who make up these Rural Fire Brigades. Without these volunteers, there would be no hazard reduction burns or anyone to control any wild fires that do occur during extreme fire conditions. Communities rightly depend and expect to be protected by these volunteers, they are necessary and essential.

I am also a Secretary, Fire Officer and Deputy Fire Warden of Toobanna Rural Fire Brigade. I have held the position of Secretary since it's formation in 1993 when I was approached by the Rural Fire Service to call a public meeting with the purpose of forming the brigade. Since then, I have been heavily involved in all facets of the Rural Fire Brigade system. I say this to help you understand that the views I express are based on these seventeen years of Rural Fire Service involvement.

First and foremost I am sugarcane farmer and have been involved in this field for some fifty-five years. The first thirty years I was involved in the regular burning of sugarcane. Twenty of those years I was responsible for the planning and management of these fires. All in all, I have over forty-five years of involvement in cane fires and the Rural Fire Service of QLD. I say all this, only to highlight my understanding of fires and volunteers who increasingly are finding it more difficult to give of their time.

Outside the provincial centres most Rural Fire volunteers are primary producers, hobby farmers, semi-retired, or retired personnel. These groups have one thing in common, they are all well past the prime of their life and are being subject to increasing pressures and demands on their ever decreasing available time. As expectations of these volunteers increase, more volunteers are exiting. They are also exiting for reasons of age and health. Primary producers are being unfairly burdened by regulations and all the

accompanying plethora of paperwork. Primary producers are exiting the industry and are not being replaced by the younger generation because agriculture has become too difficult and lacks any financial security, without which, young families cannot survive. This in turn, has the effect on decreasing the number of available fire fighter volunteers.

I myself, give approximately one month a year to the Management Committee, Rural Fire Service, and Rural Brigades. This is time that I really cannot afford. More and more volunteers are echoing these views. Like most brigades, Toobanna Rural Fire Brigade is experiencing a decline in volunteers. State wide, the number of fire fighter volunteers during the early nineties totalled some fifty thousand, today there are just thirty-five thousand and decreasing. This should ring alarm bells, especially, when one considers the huge increase in QLD's population, this trend must be reversed otherwise there will be insufficient numbers of volunteers to maintain the Rural Fire Brigade system, not to mention the lack of effective control of wildfires.

Moving to the Auditor- General's Executive Summary – in Sections 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5; he says that there are serious limitations in the system to ensure training and Workplace Health and Safety Standards are met, and that there is a significant gap between Q.F.R.S. accepted minimum standards of brigade training and actual level, here, he seems to be implying that pressure be applied on all volunteers to be brought up to the minimum standard. Should the Rural Fire Service be forced to impose this compulsory training, the Auditor General would have to live with an immediate loss of 25% to 50% of fire fighter volunteers. I know this, because many volunteers have told me that the day training becomes compulsory, that's the day they will walk away and never return.

In reference to his recommendation that Q.F.R.S. provide guidance and support to brigades to develop one year operational plans and three year management plans, coupled with brigade hazard identification and reduction plans, this would virtually destroy the brigade system, as most of the remaining volunteers would never want an Executive Position. It is irresponsible to expect brigades to comply with these demands. I would remind the Auditor General that the Rural Fire Service has to deal with unpaid volunteers not paid personal, who have unlimited time on their hands. These plans are, and should be, the role of the Fire Management Committees, **NOT** your volunteer brigades.

I now come to the final stage of this submission – since the Rural Fire Service has been moved directly under the umbrella of the Q.R.F.S. and referred to as Q.R.F.S. Rural Operations, volunteers have seen a change that they are not comfortable with, as opposed to a "stand alone" service that they could relate to, a service that did not give them the feeling of being overbearing with increasing expectations and demands.

As well, volunteers have seen a service that has become too top heavy at the expense of a decreasing amount of subsidised fire fighting equipment being

made available to brigades. For instance, the majority of pumps have been abolished; the majority of tanks have also been removed and no longer appear on the list. Complete hose kits have also been removed, there is no longer **ANY** hose kits available in the equipment list. Fire fighting trailers are no longer available, and the availability of slip-on units has been drastically reduced. Each year brigades are seeing a smaller range of subsidised equipment being made available to them. In rural areas all this equipment that has been removed from the subsidised list is absolutely essential for the control of hazard reduction burns and controlling wildfires. This is viewed by brigades as a serious lack of support by Q.F.R.S.

There are also problems that affect Rural Brigade Fire Officers. Under the previous system, if a brigade was fighting a wildfire the Fire Officer could call on the "Red Truck" to be on standby to protect neighbouring landholder's structure while the brigade could concentrate on the wildfire. Because a Fire Officer (in charge) made this request, the neighbouring householder would not receive a bill for having the "Red Truck" on standby. The situation now, is reversed, and the householder will receive a bill. This puts the volunteer Fire Officer in a dilemma at a time when he can least afford it. This puts more pressure on the Fire Officer at a time when he has to make critical decisions to control the fire at hand.


Another problem that Fire Officers are faced with, is the situation where a volunteer is hurt, or worse still, die because he followed a direction made in "Good Faith" by the Fire Officer. If circumstances changed beyond the control of the officer, such as an unexpected wind change causing the fire breaching a break, the Fire Officer now will find himself in a Court of Law defending himself without the support of Q.F.R.S. Previously, if the same Fire Officer made a decision "in Good Faith" (The Official Term) but circumstances changed beyond his control or expectations, he was guaranteed protection under the act. This, no longer applies. As a consequence of this change, Fire Officers have relinquished these positions and many current officers are telling me they will not remain in their roles for long, as it is too stressful. Fire Officers need and deserve increased legal protection.

This concludes my submission and in doing so, I must stress that I have **NOT** taken the time to compile this submission to have it treated as a worthless and negative statement. I would not waste my time to have it treated as such. The driving force behind my taking the time to put pen to paper is not because I enjoy "bucking" the system, rather, because I care, about the Rural Fire Brigade system and the many unpaid volunteers who make it all work as well as it does. In the meantime, we are witnessing an increasing drift away from this most essential service. The more that leave, the greater the burden on remaining volunteers.

I implore the powers to be to get out of their air conditioned offices and talk and listen, to the people they purport to represent. Recompensing volunteers for their valuable time would go some way to slow down the drift away, if this is not to be, then the burden of responsibility and expectation has to be

removed. My own belief is that it has to be a combination of both. If the powers to be to leave the system continue to diminish as it currently is, because it is just too hard, then it is they, who will knowingly be presiding over the demise of the QLD Rural Fire Brigade system. It will also be they, who will have the unenviable task of explaining to Queenslander's "What Went Wrong?" and at what cost to the many communities of this state. Hoping this submission is taken with the seriousness it deserves.

Yours faithfully



Paul J. Cauchi