

Submission to the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee.

Discussion on the management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

Introduction:

The Aratula Rural Fire Brigade (ARFB) welcomes the opportunity to enter into the discussion on the management and provision of Rural Fire Services in Queensland.

Aratula provides fire suppression for wild fire in the area bounded, roughly, by Lake Moogerah and Mt French (western sides), Kalbar, Silverdale, Tarome and Cunningham's Gap. We also provide assistance to the urban fire brigades (QFRS) of Boonah, Kalbar and Harrisville in any situation we are called upon. This includes road rescue, relay of water, provision of manpower etc. We also assist the Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) with manpower and assistance when required. The ARFB attends around 25 to 30 'activities' a year and this includes emergency calls and controlled and pre-organised activities such as hazard reduction.

Paul Tiffany, first officer and chairman of the Aratula Rural Fire Brigade, who would like to acknowledge the assistance and input from the following, has prepared this submission to the Committee:

Mr Kevin Lotz, ESM – immediate past first officer and chairman,
Mrs Fay Lotz – immediate past secretary,
Mrs June Wallace – current secretary,
Mrs Jan Pfeffer – current treasurer,
Mr Brian Johnson – current second officer ARFB, and
Mr Trevor Pfeffer – fire fighter ARFB.

The current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitability:

The current structure of the rural fire service is structurally sound, but needs to be viewed in two separate parts – operations and management on a 'business' level. Like any organisation the RFS needs to be flexible to growth and development of the state.

The operational side, the immediate dealing with and control of fire and emergent situations, is sound. Having said this there is some serious concern about the removal of local people and officers from command and control in larger incidents and having the command taken by RFS office based staff with little or no local knowledge.

The RFS needs to remain an essential stand-alone organization and review its interaction with volunteer staff to improve outcomes.

The business side, which includes financial management, we see that there is need for improvement. There is no consistency or uniformity on across the state for the collection of the fire levy for the local RFS brigades and this leads to the inequities between brigades that exist now.

Currently the police service is funded from the collective revenues of the state; the ambulance service has a standardized levy across the state and the urban fire brigades are funded by a standardised schedule of levies with the amount-collected set to the type of property.

The local rural fire brigades are funded at differing levels and in varying ways across the state and because of this there is no equity in the funding of brigades but the required services are often expected to be the same. Some brigades are highly funded, some are self-funded with a huge

volunteer effort and some are poorly funded. It must also be noted that some brigades are poorly managed on a local level.

It is due to these inequities that some brigades are over equipped and some are operating with minimal tools and often using what personally owned equipment is available at the time.

The ARFB is in the belief that the formulation of a schedule which allows for equitable levies to be charged state wide with the RFS managing / over viewing of locally submitted and operated budgets is one valid option for the RFS. Submitted budgets that are generated on local risks and potentials are needed. The operation of the local services that the rural fire brigades provide can only be done with local level budgeting.

This operation would be formed and run along the lines existing government policy, accountability and procedure as what is found in the QAS and QFRS now without local government control, save for collection of levy monies.

Appropriateness of the existing funding:

Existing funding and its appropriateness is something that does need to be viewed on a local and individual basis. Currently the ARFB has a levy of \$7.50 per rates notice, which is a total of \$15 per property / notice per year. This amount was set in approximately 2000 by the Boonah Group¹ and has not been lifted in 10 years. The Boonah Group has a contingency fund for extreme conditions holds a portion of this money with no real equity as to its disbursement.

The ARFB is in an extremely healthy financial situation due to the efforts of the immediate past first officer and chairman and the immediate past secretary as well as the efforts of the members of the brigade as well as brigade culture of economic efficiency and views to the future of the brigade. We have the luxury to be 'comfortable' financially and are well aware that there are less financially secure brigades in operation.

On local levels any increase in levies are seen as politically distasteful. At a recent local forum of Boonah Group brigades they were advised to use the same amounts on a 3-year budget, totally ignoring the fact that prices go up. With localised management along this line local brigades are not advancing forward and are going backwards in real terms.

The existing structure of incoming funding is accounted for on a minimal level. The disbursement of this funding and its ultimate expense has no real form of accountability. This disbursement is done at the brigade wants and needs with little or no auditing of where this funding actually went, especially if payments are made for items sourced from outside of the RFS. There is no active or random auditing seen on a brigade level. There is a perception of the management of the RFS that they keep the brigades at 'arms length' away when it comes to a financial level.

With the introduction of a state-wide standardized property contribution along with a fixed and audited budgetary process will lead to appropriate funding for the provision of the services needed across the state.

Urban encroachment and effects on Rural Fire Brigades:

The last 10 years (and in the foreseeable immediate future) show that there is a large change in the layout of the traditional rural areas, particularly those within a few hours travel of the coastline.

There are indeed areas of the state in which there is a high level of stability, no large or expansive development. In the ARFB area we are seeing an increase of development with more residential acreage blocks and standard residential town blocks now being built and inhabited. Once what was

¹ Collective representative body of all rural fire brigades in the old Boonah Shire area.

fertile and productive farming land is now changing into lifestyle blocks and areas that were once areas of scrub now have residential houses and outbuildings within them.

In areas where fire control was easy and straightforward is now complex and requiring more assets and manpower to control.

The expansion of urban areas and the increase of residential acreage is going to require the formulation of potential demand profiles for services that may be required, such as what types of fires may eventuate. The management of emergency service provision in the state need to be continually evaluating the need for new urban stations.

The immediate issues that this development generates for the Aratula RFB is a greater 'izone' area with the integration of residential habitat with the landscape which brings with it a higher probability of increased calls in the traditional fire seasons.

Effective management of increasing demands on Rural Fire Brigades:

Often, and it is seen in many government departments, the increase in demands and services results in increases on individuals, both personal and departmental. As the changes in demographic and to the landscape in areas of the state the RFS will have to increase administrative staff. This has to be done by providing much more accurate and clear guidelines to brigades as to who does what. All too often there is poor communication purely caused by not being able to access the correct person.

Operationally the RFS needs to integrate closer with local operational staff. With the changes to some areas the years of previous experience of older members, first officers and fire wardens is invaluable and fire behaviour in some instances cannot be learnt from a book.

The greatest difficulty we see the RFS encountering is a change in contributions to the service along with the introduction of appropriate accountability and financial control measures.

Appropriateness of existing accountability mechanisms:

As previously discussed we are of the belief that there is minimal if any real accountability for the funding and finances of the rural fire brigades.

The issue is that the levies raised our area is collected by council, then it is passed on to the local Boonah Group and then onto local brigades. Our enquiries into exactly how many rateable properties we have in our area are always stonewalled. We cannot find out how much in the way of levy total is collected in our area and how much is actually we are actually receiving.

By the introduction of a proper established and structured levy system, which is actively audited and managed effectively, there will always be inequities.

The role of fire wardens within the Rural Fire Service:

The role of fire wardens within the community, and the state as a whole, is vitally important. Having said that, it is viewed that there is little to no real interest in the fire wardens by the RFS. This is demonstrated in the lack of efficient communication with the local wardens, particularly during high fire danger times. This was demonstrated during the last fire season where the Aratula first officer took numerous calls from the area office about the current status of his area. Whilst there was a good and competent overview the fire warden, whose position includes this was never called. It is the fire warden who has the legislated responsibility for fire use in the area.

In the past the RFS would have staff actively touring areas and visiting fire wardens and contact was kept. It was these visits in which information was passed and feedback given, often freely. The 'feel' of the real world was valid and used then, not so much now.

The fire wardens of the state must be kept and must be supported.

Other matters:

Volunteers:

There is a major shift in the culture of volunteering in the state. This can be looked at on both a cultural and managerial level.

Today's person is leisure rich. There is so much for them to do leaving very little 'disposable time' in which to give to the community. Add to this the essence of volunteering, no pay. The demands on a normal person for normal financial survival are high.

People will often turnout for jobs when the need is real but it is increasingly difficult to have people give away a whole weekend, or even weekday nights, to attend training. Compound this with existing members with often many years and thousands of hours experience being told that they 'know nothing really and have to attend training' to stay a competent member.

The increase in the administration and the huge expectations and requirements of people just to be a volunteer makes the actual offering of oneself to a position less and less appealing as it becomes a business, a job and not something that is done for the benefit of the community. The earlier proposed introduction of financial requisites should not be seen as additional 'paper work', the level of financial management should be there already. The establishment of a position within RFS regions of a financial assistance officer whose task is purely to assist local brigades with financial documentation and procedure should be done.

There is a loss of 'ownership' in the brigades due to this business like approach. There is huge pride and satisfaction in the work performed and the hard work that has gone into the raising of money for assets of brigades. All ultimately for the well being of the community.

Add to all of this, the major reduction of the youth who are volunteering. Leisure time, changes of social culture and migration away from rural areas for many reasons, including employment and studies, all mix to an end result of having less and less 16 to 30 year old volunteers. The Aratula RFB average age is around 50, this is not uncommon.

Strategies and policy needs to be reviewed to attract younger members to the RFS and to adequately embrace the changes in the everyday culture to ensure the on going viability of the RFS purely on a membership level.

Summary:

- The RFS needs to remain an essential stand-alone organization and review its interaction with volunteer staff to improve outcomes.
- The current appropriateness of funding of rural brigades is essentially poor and is inequitable. This is viewed with the poor accountability measures for funding received now.
- That local brigades formulate and operate under locally prepared budgets with the assistance of the RFS thorough the implementation of a financial assistance officers position.
- There are changes happening to the rural – urban interface. Ongoing management and monitoring of demand profiles needs to be maintained to ensure adequate services are available.
- Fire wardens are an invaluable resource within the state, they must be supported more.
- Volunteers are the heart of the RFS. More contact by RFS management and greater listening and acceptance of views and individual ownership will strengthen the organization.