



EUDLO RURAL FIRE BRIGADE

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PUBLIC ACCOUNTS & PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland Discussion Paper November 2009

Dear Sirs,

We provide the following for your consideration:

The Eudlo Rural Fire Brigade is located in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland and was formed in 1952. The Brigade had a total of 56 members consisting of 19 active members, 5 reserve members, 17 recruits and 15 support members. In 2009 the Brigade attended a total of 44 incidents and participated in numerous Strike Teams. The Maroochy South Group Officer and Group Administration Officer are also members of the Brigade.

1) The way Rural Fire brigades do business seems to be constantly changing to meet changes in the local community as well as technical changes in the way in which fire is controlled. We feel that the current model does allow a degree of flexibility across the state. Our requirements are very different from those operating in a pure rural environment so it would be impossible to make a one size fits all system. Flexibility in structure is the reason why the model works.

2) Within the Caloundra Area on the Sunshine Coast we have developed a funding model that is simple and meets the needs of the local brigades. Recent changes have ensured a more equitable distribution of levies. It is essential that individual Brigade funding is not consolidated into QFRS revenue. Brigades are fiercely protective of their funds and as a result generally tend to use the funds in an efficient manner. Consideration should be given to QFRS supplying vehicles at no expense to the Brigades and that Brigade income is adjusted accordingly.

A uniform method of funding needs to be applied across the State. It is absurd that local governments effectively control funding and yet there is an expectation from the community that a Rural or Urban unit will respond to an incident. We are aware of Brigades out west who really struggle to fund their operations. Members give up enough of their time as it is without having to raise funds to supply a community service when there are more effective methods of funding.

On the coastal fringe the density of properties is sufficient to apply a small levy – out west it may be necessary for some assistance in funding from QFRS. Our point is that we are considered to be part of QFRS. We feel that the Director General is expressing

an out of date view when he says that brigades are expected to fund their own operations.

There can be a danger that brigades may accumulate funds unnecessarily. Our experience on the Sunshine Coast is that when the account balances are studied it will be found that in most instances Brigades are under-funding their vehicle replacement program and what at first glance seems to be an excessive surplus is in fact a shortfall. Many Brigades are still trying to build sheds or extend buildings to meet requirements.

3) Urban expansion is a fact of life in south east Queensland. Funding is usually the first item to be affected by the changes in Urban QFRS boundaries although there are examples of successfully merging urban and rural funding in an area to ensure the continued operation of the local rural brigade. This is important where the expansion of the Urban service footprint includes a considerable number of Rural properties. Incident management can be an issue and this is discussed later.

4) There needs to be a standard accounting methodology that is used across the entire Rural Operations network. We have difficulty in our brigade to compare accounts when we have changed auditors since they each have their own interpretation of cost centers etc. We know that this is an issue across all Brigades in our area. QFRS should develop a standard accounting package for all Rural Brigades. This system needs to be simple – often the Brigade Treasurer has limited financial experience. In the Caloundra Area the agreement with the Sunshine Coast regional Council is that each Brigade will submit a set of audited accounts together with a three year budget before 31st March each year. Funds will be withheld until such time as this requirement is met. These accounts are sent to Caloundra Area office so we would presume that at this point QFRS has the opportunity for oversight of each brigade's financial status. Once again we fail to see how our funding can be influenced by the local council as we believe this is a matter for QFRS alone.

5) We are fortunate that in the Eudlo area we have one Fire Warden and he is a member of the Brigade. We are aware that changes are taking place with how Fire Wardens operate. They have a vital role to play. Some thought needs to be given to consolidating the number of wardens and aligning their areas to match those of each Brigade where possible. We have an excellent relationship with our Fire Warden. This is really important during times of high fire danger as we can control the issuing of permits without having to resort to waiting for fire bans to be placed. It is helpful if the Fire Warden doesn't also hold the position of First Officer in the Brigade as this adds a level of "challenge" in the decision making process.

6) Incident management – The last fire season was one of the worst in Queensland's history. There was a severe fire season in 2004 – the Kilcoy fire was at that time the longest running fire that Rural Operations had dealt with. One of the points to come out from that year was fatigue management. This matter has still not been dealt with and was a factor again last year. Part of the problem is the use of senior permanent Urban staff that lack understanding in the way Rurals operate.

We have a very strong view that QFRS needs to review its operational doctrine with regard to who actually controls major incidents. Clearly there are more Urban permanent officers than Rural Operations staff so the work load will require Urban staff

to help manage rural incidents. It is not a matter of whether a Rural or Urban officer is in charge but more a case of that person having suitable operational experience. The current approach seems to be a focus on rank rather than experience. This is much like the Army having a major in the Catering Corps being in charge of a gun battle against insurgents. There are also many senior Rural volunteer officers that are competent to assist in the management of large incidents and greater use should be made of their experience. It has been our experience that incidents that seem to have an Urban focus in the management of a rural incident have been poorly managed. That was the case in 2004, 2008 and again in 2009.

Senior QFRS personnel seem to be comfortable with the level of pre season training but we challenge that. It is all very well to run a table top exercise but there is nothing to beat a practical exercise using a live hazard reduction burn. The benefits of this would be two fold. In the first instance it would allow Urban personnel to see first hand how a real incident unfolds and secondly they would see that Rural volunteers act in a professional way. There is still an element of "us and them" at times between the two services. The more the Urban's and Rurals work together the less this becomes an issue. That is certainly our experience in our local area.

We look forward to the outcomes from the Committee.

Yours faithfully

Hamish Murdoch
First Officer

Alan Hammond
Secretary