

Submission by Keith Paulsen
to the
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
inquiry into
Management of Rural Fires in Queensland

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Submission being made by

Keith Paulsen
74 Martin Road
Mount Alford Qld 4310

PO Box 71
Boonah Qld 4310

07 5463 0111 (home)

0407 166 305 (mobile)

kpaulsen@netbay.com.au

Details of Rural Fire Service history

I am a member of the Mount Alford Rural Fire Brigade (since 2001) and have held the following positions:-

Active Fire Fighter (current)
Crew Leader (current)
Second Officer (current)
Vice President

I am also involved with the Boonah Rural Fire Brigade Group in the position of:-

Group Administration Officer (current)
Deputy Group Officer

The Mount Alford Rural Fire Brigade is a very active brigade and trains regularly and has been involved in many fires and hazard reduction burns including a large number of fires outside of its brigade area. It has a small core of active fire fighters and 72 members.

The Boonah Rural Fire Brigade Group is made up of 13 member brigades from the old Boonah Shire and 4 officers. The Boonah Group's main tasks are to set the amount of fire levy and to distribute the fire levy and if requested by a brigade, to provide assistance at a fire. The Boonah Group has been involved in a number of fires providing Incident Management. It is involved to a lesser extent in distributing QFRS correspondence and coordinating and preparing brigades on days of high fire danger.

Brief Summary

The Auditor-General's report revealed a large number of severe weaknesses in the QFRS implementation of the *Rural Fire Service (RFS) Model* which ostensibly should be governed by the requirements of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 1990.

There is no doubt that this report has shaken the QFRS and there has been much activity to overcome some of the identified deficiencies. However QFRS needs to do better and to do more.

QFRS has, or appears to have, an excellent reputation for maintaining, improving and managing their *Urban Model*. Unfortunately, how or why the *RFS Model* came to be so badly conceived, fabricated, maintained and managed defies belief.

A full and proper implementation of a "top down" management structure and operation of the Brigades and the Fire Wardens is required. There is far far too much autonomy and authority given to Brigades and Fire Wardens which creates the problems across the whole spectrum of the *RFS Model*.

A paradigm shift in the culture and thinking of QFRS towards the Rural Fire Division is urgently required. All employees of QFRS, not just the volunteers (unpaid employees) have to embrace this paradigm shift.

Brigades and Fire Wardens should not be stand alone operational entities. The brigades and Fire Wardens need to be managed, developed and coordinated along with the individual employees (full time, part time, casual or volunteer). Job specifications and positions need to be created and filled using the *Urban Model*.

Manipulation by a few entrenched egocentric individuals has created fiefdoms of many brigades to various degrees.

Many active fire fighters are genuinely altruistic and are wanting to be developed to their full potential to serve. Many of these people are not being given this opportunity within the current development environment of some brigades. QFRS are missing out on an opportunity to recognise and tap into this talent.

The government needs to facilitate change by way of legislation and auditing regimes as required.

A simple answer, with a powerful action, is that QFRS should move the RFS Model to an Urban Model for the whole of Queensland as a matter of urgency.

The tax status and the ability to obtain grant money of brigades should be given to the support/administration side of brigades. The support part of brigades should have no affect on the operational requirements, operational administration and operational management.

Is the current Model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?

NO! The investigation and report by the Auditor-General has clearly answered this question.

The EMS Director-General and QFRS would have us believe that it is not their child, that it is only adopted and belongs to the community.

Irrespective, QFRS are now the owners of the problem that has been “60 years” in the making. The legislation is very clear.

Time to throw out the current *RFS Model* and use the the *Urban Model* with appropriate modifications. The use of the *Urban Model* will have the advantage of no change for the QFRS infrastructure as the *Urban Model* already exists and works well.

QFRS need to seamlessly absorb the the truly active rural fire fighters and brigade assets. The same conditions of recruitment, employment, training, rank and management of brigades, as exist in the *Urban Model*, should be applied.

The remaining active rural fire fighters can be used as an adjunct, much like used to exist with the war time army reserve.

The reservists should be offered a position within the brigade if there are any unfilled vacancies, provided the individuals meet the minimum requirements and have completed basic training. The reservists should be trained along with the active fire fighters.

The reservists will then become an integral part of QFRS and its fire fighting ability.

The *Urban Model* will discipline and improve the rural fire fighters to be a fighting force that QFRS will be proud to have as a part of their professional organisation.

It will weed out the chaff that dominates the current brigades. The rural fire fighters will not be wasting time having brigade general meetings, where much time is wasted, trying to convince non fire fighting members of their need for operational funding or any other matter of operational importance e.g. equipment (radios, GPS, wind meters, training resources, office resources, kitchen and food preparation facilities).

Brigades should have no boundaries. They should be directed to attend incidents or tasked by Firecom or by the Area Director (or duty officer) and not allowed to work autonomously. Training and community education are examples of a pre-approved task. Resources should be strategically created, placed and activated using a GIS (geographic information system) model that ensures the fastest response times to an incident.

A lot of what QFRS does and does not do with brigades and members is largely driven by the status afforded by QFRS. The *RFS Model*, as typified in the RFS Brigade Manual, is tantamount to a self styled QFRS embargo on brigades and its members. An embargo designed to distance themselves from and to keep the rural fire brigades and members out of its professional structure (*Urban Model*) and to put the onus of compliance, management, funding and auditing onto other bodies and individuals.

Is the current funding model, including resource allocation, appropriate?

NO! The investigation and report by the Auditor-General has largely answered this question.

The rural fire fighters should be funded and resourced the same as the *Urban Model*.

A government that provides for the existence of an emergency service by way of legislation should ensure, especially in this day and age, that the emergency service is fully funded and resourced irrespective of its historical roots.

QFRS should ensure that adequate resources (buildings, manpower, appliances, equipment) are properly designed, developed and strategically placed throughout Queensland and ensure that extra human resources can be rapidly mobilised into areas within 1-2 hours.

The *Urban Model* would ensure a standard for fire station buildings, appliances, training, reporting, management and equipment. Most importantly, it would ensure the appropriate strategic placement of resources. Additionally, the *Urban Model* has systematic checks, internal audits, better planning and risk management. It is a far more robust model than anything that has been requested of, or applied to the rural brigades and fire fighters.

The rural fire fighters should not be burdened with the onerous task of deciding an appropriate fire levy using the current *RFS Model*.

The greatest tragedy of the current levy setting system is that ratepayers are not getting value for money and there is no proper (or consistent) auditing and reporting of the entire process, including where the levy money is going within individual brigades.

Why is there such a huge variation in the levy amount per rateable notice being collected by the various councils? This is one question that would be answered using a well devised management strategy and one that needs to be answered. The answer and the data should then be made available for review by all brigades, councils and the Auditor-General.

The one levy system that needs to be avoided at any cost is the one where brigades demand that all the levy money collected within their brigade area goes into the brigade's coffers. This archaic arrangement has no place in the future QFRS. It is another good reason to do away with brigade boundaries.

The legislation to apply a state wide rural fire levy, which QFRS would manage according to the *Urban Model*, already exists. QFRS would be representing brigades and would only have to advise councils of an amount to be collected, the same as currently exists with the *Urban Model*.

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

There has always been an urban rural interface around every village, town or city.

Rural Brigades get displaced where QFRS deem that an Urban fire fighting presence is required and in some recent instances a joint operation has been deployed e.g. Jimboomba and Kalbar.

With an *Urban Model* in place, these changes would be mostly seamless, with only minimal changes required.

QFRS has become more intense about the urban rural interface after recent fires encroached into high density urban areas such as in Canberra and Victoria.

These interfaces contain areas where agricultural/grazing land has been sold for large acreage subdivision or just sold as large blocks of land to life-stylers and tree-changers. These people unwittingly increase the fuel loading and/or build in heavily timbered areas on ridges and hills which were previously largely inaccessible and considered inappropriate many years ago. Some of these owners actually go out of their way to 'green' their properties and surround structures with this 'green'. Many road verges are unmitigated areas of risk.

These practices create many risks and increase the intensity of fires which impact on the fire fighters who are requested to provide structural protection and/or fire suppression. Some of these properties are not defensible.

Many people will not consider grazing, vegetation removal or hazard reduction burns and much of this land surrounds many urban areas. These people have little or no time for rural fire fighters and don't like being advised on appropriate measures to reduce risks. When the inevitable occurs these properties provide no defence for the urban areas. Some of these landowners are governments.

The Urban fire fighter commands more respect and is regarded as more professional. The rural fire fighters need to 'urbanise' and become more professional with the same training and standards of presentation. The professional approach should increase their ability and chances of achieving change within these and other rural areas.

Additionally, people need to be protected from themselves and if they are living in a fire prone area then the government needs to provide direct legislation that gives the power to detect and enforce compliance with a lot of legislation that already exists. Full time Fire Wardens of the QFRS could be used to provide this service as well as carrying out their normal fire warden duties within defined areas.

Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

No! The investigation and report by the Auditor-General has largely answered this question.

The *Urban Model* would make many, many, improvements that are long overdue.

QFRS would be responsible for separate internal audits (i.e. independent of a brigade's self audits). Quality assurance (QA) and quality control (QC) should be an integral part of how QFRS provides its services and maintains those services.

The Auditor-General should audit the individual brigades and charge them accordingly. These brigades are government entities under the Fire and Rescue Services Act 1990 and receive public monies.

The brigades should be subject to standard reporting, financial recording and audit processes equally. These changes would standardise the information that is aggregated by QFRS for whole of division reporting to the minister and importantly, to brigades.

What should be the role of Fire Wardens within the Rural Fire services Model?

All Fire Wardens should undertake and pass a standard QFRS training package before being accredited to carry out the duties of a Fire Warden. A standard procedures document should be used by all Fire Warden and be available for download by the general public.

The requirements for a permit need to be improved. At a minimum, a landowner must provide a copy of the fire management plan associated with the intended hazard reduction burn. The fire management plan can be a standard template with provision for a map. Critical information would include information on distribution of fuel types and loading along with detailed information on fire breaks and fire fighting resources. Ideally, the Fire Warden should inspect the property and the equipment to verify the details in the plan before issuing a permit.

Fire Wardens play a critical role in QFRS fire mitigation strategies. These positions need to be integrated into the *Urban Model* and the incumbent should be a paid employee. The Fire Warden system needs to be an integral part of QFRS.

Permit details should be provided to brigade officers along with a copy of the Fire Management Plan.

A fee should be charged for the issue of a permit.

Brigades could be tasked to undertake a hazard reduction burn on behalf of a landowner for a fee.

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

The following 4 points are provided as an example only, of how the QFRS status of brigades creates inequality and weakens their own professionalism :-

- When seeking information from QFRS a common answer is that the information is subject to the Privacy Act. This answer is given for information that is not personal and does not identify a person and which would be considered “commercial” information for use within an organisation. Another answer is that the records are not complete.
- Other information such as digital mapping and digital cadastral mapping along with land ownership details is not made available to brigades. There is a need for uniform IT (information technology) provisioning and training.
- QFRS have been degrading standards by circumventing training requirements and performing the most minimal assessments of some individuals over the phone. This activity has been described as RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning). Previously RPL required an individual to undertake some current training and an assessment of equipment usage. In fact the whole training package has been downgraded to allow more individuals to pass so that brigades can remain current. Other examples are 4WD driver and chainsaw operator training to a QFRS standard or an Australian Standard not being provided, however, the equipment is available and used in most brigades by unqualified operators.
- Not training active rural fire fighters using the same professional trainers and in the same training facilities as Urban fire fighters. And not using the same assessment and accreditation level or standard as for Urban fire fighters. And not providing access to common training modules further degrades the professionalism of the rural fire fighter and their value.

The word “community” is a very powerful word and is regularly used and abused to gain advantage. Whenever this word is encountered, it should be replaced by another to test the value of the what is being communicated. For example, a community can range from the whole Australian community to the community of a 2 household village. It also denotes a “togetherness”. For example, the community of Mt Alford village is not the Mt Alford Rural Fire Brigade community and the majority of Mt Alford residents are not members (or attend brigade meetings) or have an interest. However, the majority if not all of the community of the village and surrounding areas want emergency services of a high order and are prepared to pay for those services. Significantly, a few brigade members can say they represent the community when in fact they only represent a community of themselves and their own interests.

Only a few pertinent points and suggestions have been included to keep this submission simple, but indicative of a general forward direction for QFRS to take with providing quality rural fire fighting services.

Much more could be said.