

RURAL FIRE BRIGADES ASSOCIATION QUEENSLAND INC. ABN. 37 417 474 709

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PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

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The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Ms Deborah Jeffrey

Please find attached the Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland Submission into "Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland" – 15 pages.

Also enclosed is a printed copy of the PowerPoint Presentation to the Parliamentary Accounts Committee, consisting of 42 pages.

Regards

Dick Irwin AFSM

Chief Executive Officer

Rural Fire Brigades Association

Enc: PowerPoint Presentation printout, Submission

Supporting Rural Fire Brigade Volunteen



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The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane, Queensland, 4000

Ms Deborah Jeffrey,

Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland Submission into:

'Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland'

Strategic Overview

The Rural Fire Brigades Association of Queensland (RFBAQ) is acknowledged by Government, the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) and the Rural Fire Service (RFS) as the peak body who represents Volunteer Fire-Fighters, support members and Fire Wardens in Queensland.

As the RFBAQ is the Association that supports the Volunteer, many of the recommendations put forward in this document are current policy of the RFBAQ or have been recommendations put forward to Queensland Fire and Rescue Service and Rural Operations over several years. The Association therefore seeks the right to continue to openly display or recommend these changes.

The Rural Fire Service in Queensland comprises of some 1,380 brigades, with over 33,800 Volunteers and 2,600 fire wardens. Covering over 93% of Queensland, the Rural Fire Service is the provider of Volunteer emergency support that is represented in force across the State.

Volunteer Fire Brigades in Queensland range from Primary Producer Brigades, which make up about 45% of the total; even though these are primarily self help brigades where the use of fire is an integral part of their land management practices, they are crucial to the safety of the State due to these practises. Generally little individual funding is available to these Brigades.





The operational capacity of the remaining 55% of Brigades, depend on available finances, the communities ability to be able to provide active Volunteers to carry out essential mitigation works and respond to incidents. This variation is significant, ranging from highly active very motivated Brigades that are funded sufficiently for operational costs through the levy system introduced for Rural Fire Brigades in the mid to late 90's; to Brigades whose ability to exist is a constant struggle with a disproportionate and inappropriate time spent on fundraising.

There are a small number (predominately in the South East corner) of highly trained well resourced brigades which carry out aggressive structural fire fighting and road accident rescue within their Brigade areas, their role would also include grass and bushfires.

Brigade Placement

Coastal brigades run from the NSW border north to Cairns and above, these brigades, while still being very active are impacted by Local Government levy collection variances and a difficulty in recruiting and retaining Volunteers.

Far northern brigades are affected by strong seasonal weather patterns and also by the large distances that brigades need to service, with a very small pool of available Volunteers and rateable properties.

Western brigades are comprised predominantly of Primary Producer Brigades interspersed with Rural Fire Brigades that have very small income bases and a diminishing pool of Volunteers.

It must be recognised that brigades cannot be listed simply by service classification, or by geographic location. The economic capacity, the availability of suitable people and social drivers of a community more correctly defines the ability or capacity of a Brigade to meet their own fire needs. This truly underlines the fact that although classification may be advantageous for the Fire Service, it does not necessarily fit with the community's ability 'One size does not fit all.'

The RFBAQ recognise the improvement in funding to the Rural Fire Service especially to the area of additional training and support staff, which has improved the amount of available support time needed to meet the changing requirements of Government and the expectations of the community. Significant additional and ongoing funding is still desperately required.

The RFBAQ also welcomes the review, as we believe that it comes at an opportune time for both Queensland and the diverse communities that make up the Volunteer fire brigades.

Rural Fire Brigades across the state respond to rural and urban fires, road accident rescue, flood, cyclone, storm damage, search and rescue, first responders for the Ambulance Service, emergency service units and in any other way in which their communities expect of their Volunteer service. The brigades are able to supply such divergent support due to the nature of the unique resources the RFS has, 4 wheel drive trucks with high clearance, chainsaws,



transfer and high pressure pumps, experienced incident control staff and facilities, established communications networks and a credible presence over the whole of the state.

Couple this with the Volunteers, who in many instances bring a wealth of practical professions and skills, and also important local knowledge to any incident that they are presented with, and you have an agency that can provide a guick and professional response and where necessary on a very large scale.

Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?

The RFBAQ believes that on balance if adequately funded which it currently is not, the current model with the addition of a more equitable management and support structure, will ensure both an increase and the retention of current membership and a continuum of new adequately trained Volunteers, necessary to meet the growing fire management needs expected of it. Numbers of available active fire fighters have reduced significantly over the last 8 to 10 years.

Increased funding alone will not achieve this objective, the Rural Fire Service must continue to reflect the needs of the communities, who are the Rural Fire Brigades and from which Volunteers are drawn. It will continue to lose support if the urban model and structure is allowed to continue to overshadow the very differing culture of the Rural Fire Brigade.

The current model in Queensland supports over 1,443 fire brigades who range from Primary Producer Brigades, that are an immediate self help mechanism for land holders to manage fire and fuel on their own properties, through to heavily urbanised brigades who respond to road crash rescue, structural fire, internal search wearing breathing apparatus as well as the traditional bushfire and flood and storm rescue capabilities.

The current Brigade model draws its authority from the Commissioner of QFRS. this authority resides in the 1st Officer of a Brigade, which allows for a Rural Fire Brigade to be internally structured in a way that reflects the needs and abilities of the community and in turn when adequately supported address the fire risk in line with the individual needs of that community.

As previously mentioned there is a necessity for diversity between brigades across the State to truly reflect the needs of the communities they support and in turn are supported by. The current model allows for a great degree of latitude in the service that individual Volunteer brigades supply to their communities. If this was to cease, both the short and long term impacts could be significant.

Impacts upon the current model come from a number of directions, and one of these is internal. The Rural Fire Service initially recommended the Area Offices listed below to service the Volunteer needs in (2002).

- 1. Cairns Peninsular



4. Cloncurry*



- 5. Mackay
- 6. Rockhampton
- 7. Emerald +
- 8. Barcaldine
- 9. Bundaberg
- 10. Maryborough
- 11. Miles *
- 12. Roma
- 13. Toowoomba
- 14. Caboolture
- 15. Ipswich x 2
- 16. Caloundra
- 17. Townsville

The Area Offices listed with a single * have been closed down, and the RFBAQ believe that not only should these offices be reopened and adequately staffed, but that the Ipswich Area Office, which also covers the Gold Coast and southern Brisbane brigades, be split in half due to the number and activity of brigades and the volume of Volunteers in the South East corner of Queensland. This would be in line with the opening of 2 additional Areas of Caloundra and Townsville. Emerald office remains open with Training staff and administrative support available but is managed from Barcaldine Office.

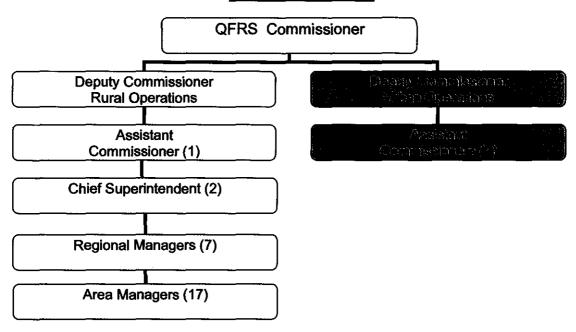
At the time when both areas of Miles and Emerald have and are experiencing significant growth due to mining, and the continued increase of risk associated with the gas and coal industry there has been a significant withdrawal or reduction of Rural Staff to these areas. This is concerning when Regional Councils are barely coping with this rapidly increasing risk and population.

Previously the Rural Fire Service in Queensland was led by a Deputy Commissioner who reported to the Commissioner of Queensland Fire Service (QFS). This position was later mirrored by the Urban arm of the fire service, but was deleted from the Rural Fire Service. Currently the RFS does not have a Deputy Commissioner but instead an Assistant Commissioner. The Urban Service has retained the role of Deputy Commissioner and also has seven (7) Assistant Commissioners.

The RFBAQ again believe that the re-introduction of a Deputy Commissioner for the RFS and the supporting structure would best serve the needs of the Volunteer communities across the State. This would also help redress the imbalance, as currently the RFS has the vast majority of fire-fighters, the majority of stations, the majority of fire engines, the majority of the land area and the majority of the fires; yet RFS has the minimum of representation and institutional support.



Proposed Model



The RFBAQ would see that the RFS continue as an arm of QFRS, and does not recommend a model in which the RFS was a standalone model. Neither does the RFBAQ see the RFS being absorbed into a one service philosophy.

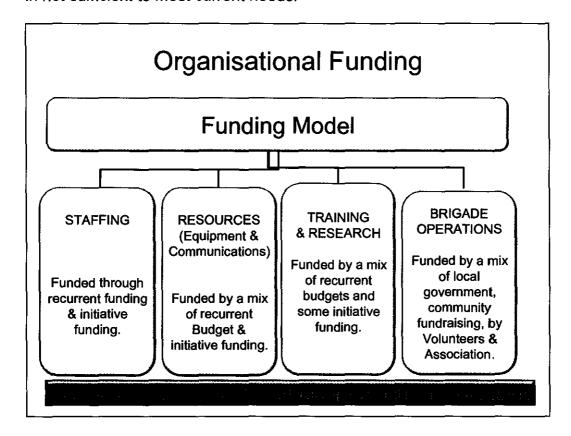
The RFBAQ supports the current model of Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland with the amendments as listed above and the understanding that the model be adequately funded.

The imposition of a model not acceptable to Volunteers will result in Volunteers and communities not mitigating local bushfire risk or fighting fire.



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

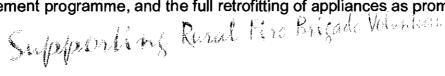
The existing funding model for Rural Fire Brigades and for the Rural Fire Service in not sufficient to meet current needs.



Staffing - Currently, staffing for the RFS is funded through recurrent funding and initiative funding from the Federal Government. Initiative funding can lead to the organisation taking direction from meeting the criteria of available grants and not necessarily the needs of the RFS or Volunteers. Initiative funding is also set to timeframes, and this does not necessarily reflect the best needs of the service. The RFBAQ can only support the RFS on these issues, as the service is attempting to make the best of a situation caused by ongoing funding shortfalls.

As mentioned in "Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?", The RFBAQ believe that re-opening the closed Area Offices and splitting the Ipswich Area would require extra permanent staffing to service the Volunteers adequately, and in addition to this the RFBAQ believe that each Area Office should have an extra FTE (Full Time Equivalent) Administration Officer as well as at least 1 extra Brigade Training and Support Officer (BTSO).

Resources – Currently equipment and communications are again funded by both recurrent and initiative funding. As mentioned above, this position leads to the inability to put in place ongoing long term projects such as the veteran vehicle replacement programme, and the full retrofitting of appliances as promised.





Training – Currently training and research are funded by both recurrent and some initiative funding, and while the pure volume of training has increased, it is largely focused on minimum requirements for operating safely on a fire-ground under supervision. The RFBAQ believe it is imperative for recurrent funding to be made available so that higher levels of skilled training also be undertaken, so that there is a leadership pool of Volunteers available to lead and supervise those with minimum skills.

There are over 2,600 Fire Wardens in Queensland, who directly manage the states fuel load risk on a local basis, and these Volunteers currently receive no financial support for the administration expenses incurred for this crucial position. This has been promised now for more than 15 years. Significant increasing is essential to meet the changing environmental necessities and the community.

Brigade Operations – Currently out of the over 1,380 Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland, approximately 400 brigades receive a Council Levy.

(This in itself does not equal adequate funding, as some levy allocations do not meet needs. 'A' brigade received approx. \$1,200 per annum from council levies and had an average annual overhead of approx. \$9,000 to meet operational necessities including appliances.)

Raising levies varies from council to council, whether a levy is raised at all, or as to what the amount should be.

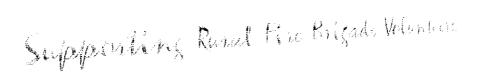
Under the *Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990*, there is a stated requirement for Councils to collect levies from properties that fall within the boundaries of the Urban service delivery model. This is not stipulated in the Act for properties that fall within the boundaries of Rural Fire Brigades.

Approximately 1,000 brigades, receive no direct council levy funding at all, although Council amalgamation has improved this number.

This in some areas will force Volunteers to spend their precious donated time in the pursuit of raising money for basic operational needs, such as diesel and tyres for their fire trucks; Instead of devoting their time to improved training, community education, risk mitigation and fire-fighting.

The RFBAQ recommends that a state-wide assessment framework, that is driven by 'Risk' and 'Need' be implemented, as there is a defined need for a system that reflects "to each according to their need and the ability for that community to support that need".

A system introduced in 1997/8 following a PAC inquiry, where managed properly was extremely successful and should be revisited as a part of the new state-wide framework.



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

Urban encroachment and the way that it is managed by QFRS is negatively impacting Rural Fire Brigades in a number of ways.

As urban expansion is necessary, undeniable and planned, the negative effect on Rural Fire Brigades is the complete lack of cohesive management between the different arms of the QFRS.

Currently QFRS is attempting to manage the increased service expectations in urbanising areas by transporting a new service level onto a community, and then directing the local Rural Fire Brigade to prove that their Volunteer Community Fire Service still has a reason to exist.

Direct impact to a Rural Fire Brigade will be the:

- Loss of income due to the loss of rateable properties, currently there is no defined mechanism for distribution of rates in a dual service delivery model.
- Loss of identity and of a geographic hub impacts on the ability of a Rural Fire Brigade to attract Volunteers and also to 'rattle the bucket'.
- Loss of a geographic hub negatively impacts upon the Rural Fire Brigades' ability to project an ongoing presence in the urban interface, and this then impacts upon ongoing community support and awareness.
- Lack of public acknowledgment by QFRS of the years of effort and community safety that the local Volunteer Fire Brigade has ensured. This directly impacts retention of experienced existing members and recruitment of new Volunteers.
- Engendering in the public eye that the Urban service delivery model, once
 offered, is superior to that given by the local Rural Fire Brigade. This impacts
 on all Rural Fire Brigades and Volunteers, as the inferred perception carries
 outside of the I-Zone area and into the general community.
- Unwillingness of QFRS to accept that a dual service delivery model can meet the expectations of the community.
- New coastal communities are not exposed to Volunteering, as the majority of new service delivery is from a permanent station. This is leading to a diminishing ability to recruit and also for bush fire awareness in the I-Zone. (Newer planned communities, due to design, have a high susceptibility to bushfire.)



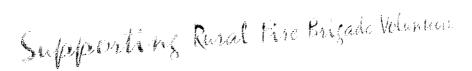


Opportunities that present themselves to Rural Fire Brigades will be:

- The impetus to structure the Rural Fire Brigade to meet the emergent needs of the community looking 15-25 years ahead.
- Consolidating or amalgamating existing brigades to reflect the changed needs of the re-shaped community, this also can be the impetus for a central management committee that can support two or three satellite stations. Giving:
 - -increased training and level of training
 - -correlation of weight of attack
 - -increased devotion of time to core business
 - -ability to structure brigade around opportunities (appliances)
 - -better negotiating position with Rural Operations
 - -ability to fund better facilities
 - -higher likelihood of response

(Due to the vast diversity of brigades, communities and geography, brigade consolidation or amalgamation can only be driven from within and not directed from without. In many instances, consolidation or amalgamation would not benefit the community or brigade.)

- Interface Zones having high population densities in close proximity to Rural Fire Brigades, which allows for a positive recruiting environment.
- Building dual service delivery models that can meet the needs of changing communities.
- The ability of brigades who are close to the high risk interface, to be able to support a more diverse community as service provision transfers across zones.
- Creation of more high volume brigades that can support and export strike teams in times of high fire hazard. This was exemplified by the last fire season, where the south east of Queensland provided hundreds of firefighters and appliances in support to other regions and communities.
- Brigades learning to work closely and regularly with Urban, Auxiliary and SES units.





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

Increased demands on Rural Fire Brigades are now undeniable; as CSIRO research shows that the average temperature in Queensland will increase by 2 degrees by 2050, and that while rainfall rates across the State should not drop, evaporation rates will increase, exposing Rural Fire Brigades to more Level 2 and Level 3 Wildfires and also to more frequent and violent monsoonal, flood and cyclone activity.

Increased demand is also driven by development, and even if the current level of fire activity was to not to grow, demand will grow due to the increase in the sheer number of properties.

Example: A paddock has 1 fire per year that threatens the 1 house bordering the paddock = 1 property exposed.

The same paddock still has 1 fire per year, yet now 50 houses border the paddock = exponential growth in demand.

Add to this the design of some newer communities where heavily urbanised areas abut scrub, forest or National Park, or where eco-communities are built amongst coastal heath-land and wallum and in conjunction with narrow access roads, there is a community that will absorb a large number of appliances in a time of fire emergency.

Effective management of the already increasing workload should be done by:

- Acknowledging RFB's and what they do, not just bushfire management, but as an agency for emergency management and community support.
- Acknowledging Volunteers abilities in all fields, as Volunteers are able to fulfil almost all of the functions of the communities that they represent.
- Providing increased funding support from QFRS to allow Brigades to build stations and facilities that at least meet minimum current operational needs, or preferably meet future needs.

Current maximum support from QFRS for the construction of a new station is \$10,000. The RFBAQ currently match this Government funding (when applied for) and the RFBAQ has suggested to the RFS that if they increase their station funding the RFBAQ would consider same. The support funding of \$10,000 to build a fire station that when finished is classified as a government asset is less than appropriate. This is less than one eighth the cost of erecting the building notwithstanding fit out cost.

Providing increased retained staff support to Area Offices so that Volunteers can devote donated time to training, community education and mitigation activities instead of performing administrative duties.



- Providing a dedicated rural fire-fighter and leadership development training facility that is accessible to all Volunteers and fire wardens, and to train Volunteers in road crash rescue, respond remote structural, breathing apparatus (where applicable), 1st officer, officer, senior fire-fighter, crew leader and incident management courses. This training facility would need to be in a regional location in that is accessible to Volunteer fire-fighters and fire wardens.
 - Actively look to retaining experienced Volunteer fire-fighters, by QFRS supporting and treating members of Rural Fire Brigades as both unpaid professionals and bushfire specialists and dealing with Volunteers and their communities in a consultative and supportive, not in a directive way.
 - Actively build community awareness in the need for Volunteer fire-fighters as an ongoing and considered campaign.
 - Ensuring that Rural Fire Brigades are represented within QFRS by a Deputy Commissioner.
 - Maintaining the responsibilities of Local Government in the identification and enforcement of local government laws relating to the reduction of fire hazards.
 - Fully fund fire-fighting and support vehicle repair and annual roadworthy certificates.
 - Fully fund tyre replacement on fire-fighting and support vehicles.
 - Return to 50% government funding for slip on units, and make provision of slip on units to Primary Producer Brigades a matter of immediate importance.

(Slip on units consist of a water tank, pump, hose reel and foam applicator that are attached to a steel frame. The slip on unit sits on a steel frame (speed loader) and can be 'slipped on' to a primary producer's utility so that they can fight fires in their areas. These units are the backbone of Primary Produce Brigades.

 Markedly increase funding to the RFS, so that Volunteers can spend time away from their families in training, community education or fire-fighting, not rattling a bucket to put fuel in a fire engine.

The RFBAQ are aware of the constraints placed on the government purse by increased funding requests by all organisations; yet prioritising need means that the provision of an emergency service to an organisation that covers over 93% of Queensland will hopefully start to meet the already increased immediate needs of Volunteer fire brigades.

Supporting Rural Fire Brigade Volunteen

Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?

The accountability processes that are currently in place to monitor and track individual brigade financial activities, the RFBAQ believe are adequate. In stating this, the RFBAQ also realise that brigades financially report in varied ways that reflect the time available to Volunteers in the brigades, the financial reporting expertise and the communities that they come from.

Financial reporting, as mentioned in previous sections is a responsibility that has devolved down to brigade level, while the RFS now demands higher levels of consistency and timeliness from brigades, no general pro-forma or support is available to brigades to meet these demands. The RFBAQ is meeting this need by making available to brigades, at no charge, an easy to use financial transaction tracking system. This initiative is a support model that in no way supersedes systems that brigades may currently have in place.

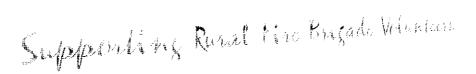
Brigades across the state, as mentioned previously are funded, or not, to varying levels by Local Governments and the communities that the brigade is drawn from, or in many Primary Producer Brigades, the community is the 2 or 3 landholders. In the instance where a Volunteer brigade has little or no external funding, it is a severe imposition to demand high levels of reporting of Volunteers that the Government is not supporting.

Accountability for equipment is again a responsibility devolved to brigades due there being a lack of retained RFS staff in Area Offices. An increase in the number of retained RFS staff in Area Offices and the reopening and adequate staffing of closed Area Offices would both lighten the load on Volunteers and allow for a greater ability to track and replace equipment.

The Auditor-General considers that as part of QFRS the brigades revenues, expenditures, assets and liabilities should be accounted for in the financial records of the department. At present, there is no reflection of these financial records other than for appliances and buildings in the accounts of the department.

The RFBAQ reflect the advice of the Director General in his response to the Auditor-Generals report, as the RFBAQ see that the auditing of equipment that is not stations and capital equipment such as appliances could lead to Volunteer fire-brigades being unable to purchase and dispose of assets valued at less than \$5,000.

Bearing this in mind, the RFBAQ also believe that as the RFS and therefore QFRS currently do reflect stations and appliances as Government assets, then the responsibility for fully funding the provision and maintenance of these assets rests with the Government and not with the Volunteers.





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

The Auditor-General advised that for the Fire Warden network to play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of bushfires would require a significant enhancement to the current communication, operational and planning systems within QFRS.

In response the RFBAQ cite the Director-Generals' response noting the role of the 'Permit to Light Fire System' and the 2650 Volunteer Fire Wardens in mitigating the impacts of bushfire. The Director-General noted that Fire Wardens have a pivotal role in addressing changing community attitudes to the use of fire, particularly in higher density population areas. The future impacts on climate change, the continuing migration into Queensland and the changing societal values over smoke and environmental burning are all pressures that are placing greater demands on the skills of Fire Wardens.

The RFBAQ fully endorse these sentiments and add that the pivotal role that Fire Wardens play in mitigating fire and educating landholders can only continue if Fire Wardens are allowed to continue applying their local knowledge to the differing needs of the communities that they represent.

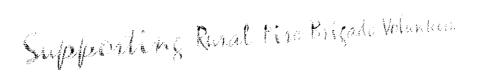
The RFBAQ, as stated earlier believe that Fire Wardens must be valued by the RFS and QFRS, and must be given ongoing training and support so that the decisions that they make on a local level reflect not only local, but also the expectations of the community at large.

The RFBAQ are against any move to centralise Fire Warden activities, and also against the implementation of a "Declared Fire Season" in Queensland or any regional restrictions on fire burning. This system would place in the same position as other southern states with equally catastrophic results.

Other impacts to mitigation activities by Fire Wardens are the varying Local Government laws that in instances restrict or make mitigation impossible. Landholders, with the support of Fire Wardens, must retain the ability to use fire to dispose of vegetative fuels on their properties.

Another recommendation of the RFBAQ is that the declaration of preserved or endangered species must remain the responsibility of the fire permit applicant.

Currently across Queensland, a Chief Fire Warden could be the Clerk of the Court, local Policeman or other Government employee. The RFBAQ believe that this system now needs to be reviewed, and that the RFS Area Director be appointed to the role of Chief Fire Warden. This would encourage a higher level of connect between the RFS and Fire Wardens. In some areas this may not be appropriate in extremely isolated areas, this needs to be addressed with caution and significant requirements.



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

Continued Rural Fire Service arm within QFRS

The RFBAQ believe that the Rural Fire Service should continue as an arm of service provision within QFRS, and that the Director General undertake to endorse the policy of the current Government in clearly defining the ongoing need for the RFS. The RFBAQ also believe that the provision of a Deputy Commissioner, Rural, would ensure the independence and value placed upon Rural Operations and the Rural Fire Service.

Key Recommendations

- Reinstate all Area Offices. Increase retained staff particularly support to Area Offices
- Training: Dedicated Rural Fire Fighter / Fire Warden & Leadership Development training facility
- Volunteer Fire Fighters: Focus on retention of experienced as well as acquisition of new
- Leadership: Deputy Commissioner Rural
- Hazard Reduction: Identification and enforcement of local laws by local government to reduce fire hazards
- Rural Brigades should be able to focus on training and protecting the community (and not fundraising)
- Initiative funding to become recurrent
- State-wide assessment framework for funding (based on risk / need).
- Local government rate collection & disbursement. Voluntary levy system.
- Fund stations/ facilities that meet current needs (OHS) and future needs
- Improve accountability of funding by returning to the process, in the signed agreement
- The responsibility for providing the asset audit should remain with staff, and not be delegated to Volunteers
- Ability to use fire responsibly as a land-management tool
- Recognition of different area types across the state and need for flexibility to issue permits



- Increased support for Fire Wardens, especially on the coastal fringe
- Declarations of endangered species must remain the responsibility of the permit applicant
- Applicants should disclose known endangered species
- Retain the ability for the land holder to use fire to dispose of vegetative fuels on their properties
- Rural Fire Service remains a separate entity within QFRS continued reporting of Rural Volunteers and staff to Rural Operations Management (not urban)

The RFBAQ is committed to the representation of Volunteer fire-fighters, support members and fire-wardens from across Queensland. In addition to the above submission, I will make the President of the RFBAQ, Max Rogers, myself and my staff available to appear before the committee at a time that suits the committee and look forward to working with you in the support of the Volunteer brigades and their communities.

Regards

Dick Irwin AFSM

Chief Executive Officer

Rural Fire Brigades Association

Queensland Inc.

Supporting Rural Fire Brigade Voluntions.