

Mr Tony Marks
7 Corbett Street
Samford Village, 4520

19 April 2010

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

Ms Deborah Jeffrey,

Submission by Tony Marks into:

‘Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland’

Background

I have been a rural fire volunteer for well over 20 years, with experience gained both in the NSW Rural Fire Service and Queensland Rural Fire Service. I have held or hold positions as an Officer in both services and am currently a Deputy group Officer with the Pine Rivers Group. I have also been sent on deployment to NSW and have participated in Strike teams in both States. I am also an Area Representative for the RFBAQ.

I am currently a member of the Samford Rural Fire Brigade, which is a brigade directly impacted by the urbanisation of the fringes of Brisbane, yet is still classified as part of regional Australia. A key feature of our Brigade area – “our patch” - is that it includes large areas of semi-rural residential development, a significant proportion of which relies upon their own stored water supplies as opposed to a reticulated, “town water” supply. In addition, this has led to ever increasing amounts of vegetation cover across the Samford Valley as areas previously farmed are revegetated by both native and non-native species of grasses, weeds, plants and trees. Also, due to the geography/topography of the area, vegetation types vary from remnant rain forest to both dry and wet sclerophyll forests and grasslands. These factors make the area covered by Samford somewhat unique, with many areas of high environmental value being present.

One social aspect that also remains a powerful driver and motivator within the area serviced by the Samford Brigade is a strong sense of community and community spirit. This is an aspect reflected in the continuing use of the name of "Samford Village" to distinguish those who live within the village area and those who choose to live within the wider area of the Samford Valley. I have no doubt that this strong association with community is common in all areas where a rural fire brigade is established.

I am also aware that the management of the Samford Brigade have also lodged a submission with this Committee and can only endorse the comments they make about the importance of serving in a community that strongly identifies and links the members of a Brigade with their voluntary service to their community. This aspect alone will not and can never be replicated in any form of paid occupation or service and endows Brigade members with both a special knowledge of their area of operation and a motivation to ensure risks are adequately managed within their community. In that sense, one matter that I would strongly urge the Committee to adequately consider in its deliberations and in the course of phrasing its recommendations is that this strong sense of identity and connection that brigades have with and within their community be fostered and enhanced. A failure to do so would, I suspect, lead to many rural fire volunteers leaving their brigades and seeking other avenues to serve within their communities.

I have attached to this submission a number of discrete areas for the Committee to consider based upon the areas they have been tasked to investigate. Not all areas subject to review are the subject of this submission.

I look forward to the outcomes from the review by this Committee; outcomes that enhance the capacity of volunteers to serve within their communities rather than increase the level of administration and process they need to follow.

Should you need to contact me, my phone number is 3226 3569 or 0422001814.

Yours faithfully

Tony Marks

Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?

Support for RFBAQ submission on the need for stronger recognition in the structure of QFRS

I have had the opportunity to review the submission of the RFBAQ on this topic and can only endorse the need for the Rural Fire Service arm of QFRS to be given greater recognition and importance in both in terms of structural recognition and representation. I do not believe that separation of Rural Operations from QFRS is desirable nor of benefit to volunteers as there will be an ever increasing need for paid, retained and volunteer firefighters to work closely together in a spirit of mutual respect. Having said that, having a separate identity is also important as the motivations and drivers of volunteers are significantly different from those who are employed to undertake their duties.

Adequacy of the service delivery model in rural and regional Queensland

I would also encourage the Committee to consider the question of whether the standards of fire cover provided to rural and regional Queenslanders is adequate? Another way to phrase this question is whether the skills and competencies of rural fire volunteers are being adequately harnessed?

A quick review of how rural fire services are delivered in other States highlights how inadequately this has occurred to date. In making this statement, I do not make any adverse comment on current management within QFRS, as they are trying to ensure fire cover is provided across Queensland based upon a level of funding that is itself inadequate. In particular, should the Committee look at the NSW RFS, the SACFS, the Vic CFA, the operational roles undertaken by volunteers include structural fire fighting (including the use of CABA), road accident and rescue, hazmat...and the list goes on in the roles and capacities volunteer fire fighters are able to undertake within their communities. It is also relevant to note this also means those elected to govern in those jurisdictions have decided that this is a good, affordable and efficient way to support rural and regional communities in their jurisdictions. So why should a state boundary, being the Queensland boundary, result in a significant decline in fire services able to be provided by volunteers to their communities in rural and regional Queensland?

Obviously recurrent funding is a critical issue, as reflected in the significantly higher levels of funding provided to rural fire services and brigades in other states as measured on a "per volunteer" basis. Some very simple financial modelling also demonstrates that the number of Rural Operations staff

supporting volunteers is woefully inadequate as well. And these are all aspects within the responsibility of Parliament to adequately fund. Hence, this either means the Queensland Government has not been prepared to provide the necessary funding or that they see the role of rural fire volunteers as simply limited to bushfires. In either case, this is demeaning of the skills that volunteers can bring to their communities and limits their capacity to serve within their communities.

The use of volunteers in an expanded form is also consistent with the use of the phrase “Rural Fire Service”, as is used in Queensland. NSW deliberately moved away from the phrase “Bushfire Service” to “Rural Fire Service” close to two decades ago in recognition of the expanded role volunteers played in providing safety from a range of hazards, of which fire is but one hazard. Volunteers are also able to provide a level of all hazards cover in their communities at a fraction of the cost able to be provided through either a retained or permanent fire service.

Hence, in phrasing their findings and recommendations as relates to this area of review, the Committee needs to make explicit their understanding of the role volunteers do and can play in a contemporary Rural Fire Service. Should their role be limited to simply bushfires, or do they, as other states already recognise, have an all-hazards role. This is a critical matter for the Committee to resolve and an essential strategic foundation for the delivery of fire and mitigations services across rural and regional Queensland, as the implications related to funding, staffing, resourcing and training are significant, although the alternatives are not particularly palatable: who would want to be held responsible for:

- A dwindling volunteer pool, as the opportunities to be trained and become involved in serving their communities became more limited due to a limited service vision and model?
- The outcomes from catastrophic events, as have occurred in southern states, because the service model itself lacked vision and funding and prevented volunteers gaining or utilising their skills in the management of all-hazards events, particularly where other states already facilitate volunteers doing so?

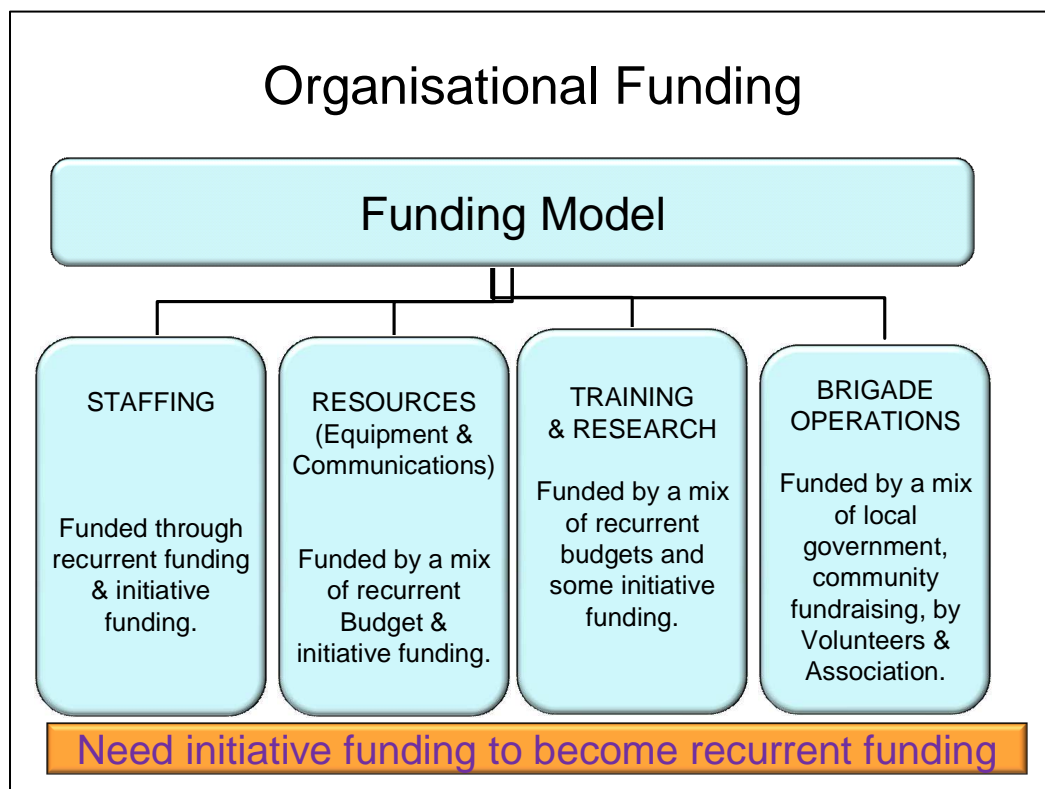
Unfortunately, it is a reality that promulgation of a retained/auxiliary and/or permanent fire service model across a state is too expensive for any state budget (and its residents) to bear, let alone Queensland. This is easily evidenced and supported by what exists in other states. However, an enhanced volunteer model is sustainable, as can be evidenced in other jurisdictions where a “full service”, rural fire service delivery model has been implemented. Further, such a model will recognise the skills of volunteers

and enable/release them, should they decide to do so, to provide an improved level of fire cover, let alone an all-hazards cover, to their communities.

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

The existing funding model for Rural Fire Brigades and for the Rural Fire Service is not sufficient to meet current needs and will certainly not be adequate should the Committee determine that Queensland deserves a “Rural Fire Service” as opposed to a bushfire service. Further, by retaining the Qld RFS within QFRS as an operating division, financial and other synergies will be retained and secured to the State, further enhancing the safety and security of its residents.

The following material has been “borrowed” from the submission by the RFBAQ as it succinctly reflects some of my views reflected in this submission, with modifications as may be required to reflect what I believe should be an appropriate level of all-hazards cover, particularly fire cover, for residents in rural and regional Queensland delivered through a Rural Fire Service.



Staffing - Currently, staffing of Rural Operations is funded through recurrent and initiative funding from the State Government. Initiative funding is currently limited by the vision of what volunteers are capable of delivering as a service and does lead to the organisation taking direction from meeting the

criteria of available grants and not necessarily the needs of Queenslanders, the RFS or volunteers. This is undesirable as it results in short term initiatives without future certainty in service delivery and limits the on-going opportunity for volunteers to deliver a quality service to their community.

I suggest that the Committee carefully examine the levels of staffing provided through other comparable Rural Fire Services to assess whether the current levels of staffing within Rural Operations are appropriate.

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 direct supervision. Consistent with the views of the RFBAQ, I believe it is imperative for recurrent funding to be made available so that higher levels of skilled training is also undertaken, so that there is a leadership pool of Volunteers available to lead and supervise the growing numbers those with only minimum skills.

There are over 2,600 Fire Wardens in Queensland, who directly manage the states pre-fire mitigation activities and fuel load risk management plans on a local basis, and these volunteers currently receive no financial support or on-going training. This places them at a significant disadvantage as they struggle to meet the changing social and environmental needs and expectations of their community, and those of QFRS. Ultimately, this can only result in an increasing number of disputes between land owners, Fire Wardens and QFRS, whom the Fire Wardens represent.

Brigade Operations and funding – Currently, out of the over 1,400 Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland, the RFBAQ estimates approximately only 400 brigades receive a council collected levy. As a Brigade that has benefited from the collection of such a levy, I can personally attest to the way such a reliable source of funding enhances the operational effectiveness of our service to our community. Hence, instead of having to collect funding through raffles and community fund raising activities, Samford Brigade is able to focus upon undertaking hazard reduction and other pre-fire management activities. This is a significant benefit to our community and means our volunteers are focussed upon their tasks/role as a fire brigade member and not as fund raiser.

I also note that other states have formalised their collection of such levies on a uniform basis, whether that be by way of a Fire Service Levy (on insurances) or another levy on property, such as exists in Western Australia. The critical element is that the levy has to be set at a level that allows for the sustainable, on-going funding of fire or emergency services, is equitable and is not easily able to be avoided by the persons whom the levy is ultimately intended to support.

As noted by the RFBAQ, councils are required to collect a fire levy on rateable properties within urban boundaries under the *Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990*, although this is not a requirement for properties that fall within the boundaries of Rural Fire Brigades. Consequently, not all Queenslanders are equitably sharing in the cost of providing fire services in their communities. Unfortunately, given the demographic spread of residents within Queensland, should a uniform levy be imposed, this will result in an element of subsidisation by residents in more densely populated regions of residents in more sparsely populated areas. However, such a scenario is no different from the principles underlying the collection of any form of levy or tax.

Critically, the introduction of a standardised form of levy for the funding of fire services across Queensland must be linked directly to the provision of those services. So, if a uniform fire levy is settled and collected, it must go to the provision of those services and not be diverted to other government programmes. This is a strength of the fire levy system used in NSW, although I note that the Property Council of Australia and insurance companies frequently argue its imposition is not equitable as not all residents take out insurances to cover fire events.

Magnitude of the issue - To provide some idea of the scale of the funding issue to be considered by the Committee, the NSW RFS indicates in its 2008 Annual Report that:

- it engaged around 710 permanent staff to support a volunteer workforce of some 70,000 volunteers, at a coverage of approximately 99 volunteers to one staff member. To achieve a comparable level of cover, QFRS, Rural Operations would need to engage approximately 340 fulltime staff to provide an equivalent level of support to its 34,000 (odd) volunteers; and
- it had an annual budget of \$198m, averaging at funding of \$2,829 per volunteer. To achieve a comparable level of funding for Queensland rural fire service volunteers, the Government would need to provide annual funding of \$96m per annum, which is some \$60m short of current funding levels or an expressed need to increase funding by approximately 266 percent over current funding levels.

Hence, the scale of the funding problem facing the Committee is significant and probably evidences that there is already a diversion of funding from the urban fire service levy that is collected towards rural fire services. Practically, should the Committee believe that rural and regional Queenslanders deserve an appropriate level of service, then the amounts collected to fund those services need to increase by a significant margin. Admittedly, there will be some savings to be gained through the sharing of Head Office resources by Urban, Auxiliary and Rural Operations; however, there is still a significant disparity to the current position.

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 on Rural Fire Brigades in a number of ways. Samford, as brigade that is an iZone brigade is frequently not responded to incidents that are clearly and historically well within the skills and competencies of its members. This is unfortunate and leads to a reduction in morale. Ultimately, where rural fire services cease to be provided within a community, then a significant portion of the pre-fire mitigation activities also cease. These is because such services are not a core or financially supported function of both an Urban or Auxiliary service model and are left with individual landholders to manage on their own as opposed to with the assistance of their local rural fire brigade. This is an important issue for the Committee to understand, particularly as other state and local government agencies reduce their funding and resourcing towards fire mitigation activities.

I note the observations made by the RFBAQ on this important area and endorse their comments. In doing so, I also draw the Committee's attention to the importance of the service delivery model adopted for rural fire services within Queensland. In particular, should the Committee agree that the Rural Fire Service is just that - a full service fire service across rural and regional areas – then the issue of urban encroachment from a volunteer's and community perspective largely disappears. This is because a volunteer fire brigade will be equipped and resourced to provide an equivalent level of service as can be provided through an Urban or Auxiliary Brigade at a fraction of the cost. However, it would seem that the current method of determining service delivery is rather outdated and expensive and ignores the role that volunteers can provide; assuming that a type of "residential" or "structural" fire service can only be delivered through an Urban or Auxiliary model. Clearly the examples evidenced in rural NSW, SA and Victoria attest to this and the capacity of volunteers to fulfil such a role.

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

I note the submission made by the RFBAQ and, once again endorse their comments and sentiment. However, one aspect that requires closer attention is the role of employers being in a position to release volunteers to undertake their roles. As a volunteer, I have experienced discrimination and had my intentions questioned as to my involvement. This is notwithstanding I have been employed by large employers and they have entrenched volunteer policies.

In terms of how the Committee could assist volunteers in addition to those recommended by the RFBAQ, I suggest the following initiatives:

- A reward and recognition programme be implemented that recognises employers who actively engage volunteers and release them as and when needed in their roles as volunteers;
- Empower the head of the Rural Fire Service or the Minister, as appropriate, to declare the services of volunteers as essential in specified circumstances. In this way, volunteers engaged in those services should be able to have their employment “protected” while engaged in an essential service. Obviously, some checks and balances would be required to ensure this concession is not abused; and
- The Qld Government introduce into their contracting arrangements with suppliers of goods and services terms that favour those organisations that have “volunteer friendly” employment arrangements.