

19 APR 2010

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND  
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

## Response to PAC questions – Preamble

My name is Les Bateman, and I am the 3<sup>rd</sup> Officer of the Samford Rural Fire Brigade, which is located 30 kilometres north west of the Brisbane CBD. This brigade is in a unique position as it still has at its core a lot of undeveloped and potentially life threatening vegetation which is rapidly being swallowed up by development.

This is creating an area known to Fire Services as the Izone, where the urban development encroaches on the rural vegetation. This creates special issues for our brigade in that as a rural brigade we carry SCBA (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus), making us capable of defending structures within our area. This is a rarity within the rural service and as you can imagine has caused our brigade to look more globally at our area, in terms of crew make up and response capabilities.

I have been a volunteer for 10 years, and I have been fortunate enough to have undergone a high degree of training and actually fire ground experience, having been involved in large campaign fire at Kilcoy, Stanthorpe and northern NSW. It with this combination of knowledge and fire ground experience that I feel qualified to comment on the proposals that are being put forward for the rural fire service in the future.

Thank you, for this opportunity to express my thoughts on an "occupation" that I hold very close to my heart

Thank you

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19/4/2010

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## **Responses to PAC questions –Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?**

The current method of the 4 classification system – Primary Producer brigades, Level 1,2 and 3 (Izone brigades) is acceptable for making a broad generalisation about the capabilities of brigades, but again QFRS need to undertake a skills/equipment audit to determine how much additional value these individual brigades add to their local community.

There are 1500 brigades with 34,000 members state wide and each are individual and all different from each other, in their wants and needs, so it is inappropriate to try and use a “one size fits all approach” when dealing with the multitude of unique circumstances found in each brigade/brigade area..

While the task they perform is the same, the circumstances and responses to these fires may vary considerably yet they may only be a few kilometres apart geographically. Just as there is no one panacea for fighting fires, there is no one panacea for governing rural fires brigades/service. Brigades and their members need to be flexible and adaptive in their work approach, so must the management of these resources.

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

Why should brigades that work hard and are able to manage their funds be penalised by pooling all their cash , only to go cap in hand to a central authority (who is so out of touch of the needs of the brigades) to seek funding for required projects. The priority assigned these projects may/will vary from the fiscal lords and worthwhile and in some cases essential projects will not be given the go ahead, potentially endangering the lives of crews (Zero Harm). If the funding were to be removed from the brigades and handed over to the Area Director or Group to administer and mete on a needs basis there would absolutely no incentive for members to make brigades a going concern.. The members of the brigade would see any attempt to pool all brigade funds and place them under the control of the Area Office as a step away from what little autonomy to make reasoned local decision on the needs of the brigade. They would also view this as a means of rewarding under

performing brigades, while penalising the brigades (Samford) who are very proactive and diligent in their decision making processes, while being very aware that they are using community/public monies to achieve its fire fighting capabilities. There is a very real possibility that if the monies were centrally controlled that there would be a difference of opinion between the controlling body and brigades, as to what was considered to essential projects/purchases. The subsequent and ongoing debate could/would potentially place the lives of the members and the community at risk until a resolution could be reached, if at all. The model that is in place at the moment appears to be trying to use a "one size fits all" mentality at present, when in fact there needs to be a more case specific model developed, where individual brigades and circumstances can be reviewed in order to maximise the benefits to not only the brigades but also their surrounding COMMUNITY. Where a brigade has the ability to generate its own working funds both through their own efforts of hazard reduction work and by receiving supplementary income via the levy system, this would appear to be working, however as previously mentioned there are glaring anomalies in this approach, purely dependant on a brigade demographic location. There is no reasonable rationale to penalise a brigade purely due to its ability to generate these funds. A suggestion might be to impose a 10% per annum "local improvement levy" on the larger more successful brigades, with the understanding that they retain the balance of their funds for their own needs, in order to assist the smaller less well off brigades within their own region. So I believe there needs to be a more individual specific funding model developed that takes into consideration the unique circumstances to each brigade, the area it needs to defend, the population density and the community's ability to contribute to the running of these essential services in their area.

With regard to resource allocation, the QFRS brigade classification and population demographic will determine the level of support and that areas are eligible for, when in truth the needs may outstrip what appears on paper, and again there needs to be an individual model developed in consultation with the major stakeholders – the fire brigade members, who know first hand and best what is required to successfully defend their own patch of territory. Individual brigades will know historically what is required to handle fire suppression in their area and this local knowledge is invaluable when considering the provision of equipment/resources.

Overall there needs to be a reworking of the model used to allocate funds and resources making certain that it takes into consideration the unique and specialised conditions that exist in the rural and regional areas of the state. This model needs to work in a consultative manner with the local brigade members and the local community to ensure that any equipment/resources supplied are fit to meet the community needs.

The parent organisation QFRS need to appreciate the level of skill, dedication and professionalism that is involved in being a rural fire fighter. They need to understand what skills the rural service has to offer in their individual regions, and just what type of resources these brigades hold e.g. BA, RAR etc. the major difference between the urban service and the rural service is that there is little COMMUNITY based thinking in the urban service.

### **How can the increasing demands on the Rural fire Service be managed effectively?**

The parent organisation QFRS need to appreciate the level of skill, dedication and professionalism that is involved in being a rural fire fighter. Remember volunteers DON'T have to be there, they choose to be there. They need to understand what skills the rural service has to offer in their individual regions, and just what type of resources these brigades hold e.g. BA, RAR etc. the major difference between the urban service and the rural service is that there is little COMMUNITY based thinking the urban service.

Volunteers who live, work and invest in their own communities are extremely proud to do so. QFRS need to carry out a skills audit (this should be easy enough with the volume of data in relation to training, equipment etc that brigades are forced to supply to area offices) to see what skill base there is in the community out there. Volunteers not only add value to their community/brigade through the regimented training regimes but they bring a wealth of personal skills, which sadly again is not recognised by QFRS. The rural fire service are busy trying to retain volunteers by offering incentives e.g. crew leader gear bags, greater recognition of skills obtained – crew leaders skills, by issuing yellow helmets and epaulettes to show this qualification, if asked most brigades would prefer the cost of these items be given as cash to the brigade to be used as

seen fit by the members. Brigade members don't need reminding who is at what level of capability, it is obvious to them. Also as part of the Queensland Government Q2 project a basic tenet of this scheme is the "continuing to grow our volunteer workforce in organisations such as the State Emergency Services and the Rural fire Service", "Encouraging volunteers from all backgrounds to increase diversity in the volunteer workforce", promoting the economic, social and environmental benefits of volunteering", working with the community sector to help supply the volunteers that it relies on".

In response to the 4 roles that the Queensland government are concentrating on in the Q2 program:

- While there is disharmony in the Fire Service between the Urban Service (in particular the UFU, who see volunteers taking the paid jobs of their colleagues) and the rural service, it will be impossible to grow the service in the constructive way. The Urban service have little idea of what level of equipment, skills, training and dedication that rural brigades possess and which they readily offer at non cost to their COMMUNITY and there appears to be little or no will to find this out.
- The volunteers in the Rural Service bring a wealth of knowledge, skill and entrepreneurial talent, purely through their diverse backgrounds and interests, and again these skills are not recognised or encouraged by the people in charge at all levels of the urban service.
- The economic benefits provided to their local COMMUNITIES by the rural service are immense and are ongoing as part of the very tangible commitment to its COMMUNITY. Due to the diligence and application of the members the fire levy is able to be kept at \$25 per household, while providing the best in response in a very timely manner. The brigade also carries out community education programs in the COMMUNITY, at schools, local events (Agricultural Shows) and in conjunction with the Moreton Regional council, and through these programs that

there has been a change of thinking within the COMMUNITY that has resulted in a lessening of the potential of fires as well as the provision of a greater awareness of what to in the case of an emergency. The brigade participates in fund raising efforts of the COMMUNITY, thereby putting economical resources back into its local COMMUNITY. The brigades through very astute use of it's funds, not only provides equipment and training for it's crew members but it lessen the impact on the State coffers by being almost totally economically self sufficient where possible, an example of this is the brigade to which I belong, Samford. A cost analysis carried out has indicated to provide an equivalent service with minor station upgrades and using auxiliary crews would cost the government \$1.2 million dollars a year, the current service is almost cost neutral, this provides a major cost saving benefit.

- Socially – the brigade provides an avenue for members – new and old an opportunity to mix and develop new skills and to expand existing ones. The brigade is very active in the community, by being very actively involved in COMMUNITY based activities such as Anzac Parades, the Local Agricultural Show, RSPCA Million Paws Walk, the presentation of education programs such as Fire Awareness and Bushfire Prepared communities to all the COMMUNITY based organisation in the valley as well the pre schools, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in the region. The brigade is also highly respected and works well with the QPS, SES, Council and QAS within the region.
- Environmentally the brigade carries out regular property assessments for land holders in order to best prepare them for the upcoming perils of the fire season. The brigade has a very active program of hazard mitigation which will help negate the potential catastrophe of what happened in the southern states last year. The program combined with the ongoing education campaign will enable the brigade to achieve a balance of hazard reduction along with a good sustainability, by allowing us to identify the potential environmental loses that would have otherwise occurred if

education and preventative work had not been previously carried out.

- Through the activities carried out in the previous categories of Economic, Social and Environmental participation, the brigade has earned the trust, respect and support of the COMMUNITY.

### **Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?**

Brigades in the state operate under the establishment of a constitution and the associated regulations/rules /legislation contained in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 1990. As mentioned in the Auditor General's report, that there was no reporting of revenues, expenditures, and assets and liabilities undertaken by QFRS, only appliances and buildings are recorded. A majority of Level 1, 2 and 3 Brigades would have a very robust organisational structure including the detailed report and recording of all the financial aspects that are currently neglected by the QFRS recording system. The brigade books are audited annually and maintained in accordance with Sections 27, 28, 29 and 30 the Brigade Constitution D7.27 of the Brigade Manual as described on the QFRS web site. Asset checks and inventories are carried out at brigades by local Rural Fire Operations staff members and these records are forwarded on the QFRS headquarters at Kedron.

### **What effect is urban encroachment within the brigade areas having on rural fire Brigades?**

The increased urban presence within Samford Valley has brought the problem of unreal expectations by the new property owners that if there is ever a fire in the valley that there will be a fire engine located at every property, this will not be so, due to the need of the brigade to be in the best and safest position possible to combat the present threat of the fire. Rural Fire Brigade are actively involved in a process of changing that mind set by carrying out series of community education programs, designed to education the community so that it can make calm and reasoned decision in the

time of a bush fire. This community education is carried both in concert with the Councils and QFRS through they're jointly run Bushfire Prepared Communities Program, and independently by brigade by visiting and educating as many pre schools, kindergartens, primary and secondary school children as possible in the area, so that the bushfire safety message are taken home. The brigade also educates local community groups, as well as the general public at shopping centres and local agricultural shows.

With the increased development that has occurred in state, combined with the building of homes in more inaccessible, yet affordable blocks of land, will impact greatly on the rural service, as we possess vehicles that are suitable to attacking fires in these situations. Samford is indeed fortunate to be one of only five rural brigades to possess CABA capabilities. This coupled with the fact that urban appliances are too heavy (16t) and are ill equipped to travel over soft dirt rural roads (2 wheel drive), make the rural presence in the valley a necessity. The brigade has maintained the equipment and the training regime of our CABA qualified fire fighters in line of that of an auxiliary station. We have been called in by urban appliances to provide support to their crews during aggressive structural protection activities.

Even though the brigades are a ready source of skilled manpower, there appears to be a concerted effort to negate this service, by the dispatchers' at FIRECOM, not responding us to RTC, Motor vehicle fires etc, even though our brigades has been involved in these activities for decades. As Samford, Mt Nebo and Mt Glorious areas have become a mecca for weekend drives and motor cycle riders; the need for this brigade to be responded has increased dramatically. Again due to the inhospitable nature of the terrain in these areas, it is often the case that the urban appliances are unable to reach these incidents, which means that they reluctantly and belatedly call for assistance from us, or they call for further urban assistance from the Urban Rescue Vehicle (502L) stationed at Roma Street headquarters. This response can take up to 20 minutes to reach these areas, dependant on it's availability at all. In the emergency response business time is critical; there is a genuine reluctance to use a readily available, trained and well equipment resource, which could respond in a matter of minutes.

This increased popularity of this tourist destination has seen a marked increase in traffic volume including the use of mini buses



taking tour groups up to the mountains on day trips. This creates the very real possibility of large scale multi vehicle incident, which would require a major timely response, which would be better covered by crews that possess good local knowledge. It would be prudent by QFRS to keep the rural component of the service actively involved in rescue response in order to provide the best possible cover for the community and visitors to the valley.

The major impact on the rural brigades will be as more houses are built in the rural Izone area; there is a push by QFRS to increase the response times of nearby urban brigades in order to cover more and more of the Samford Valley region. This will in turn push the fire levies up from \$25 per house per year, to \$108 per house per year (in outlying houses – up 400%) and up to \$149 per house per year (for houses that would fall within the redrawn urban boundaries – up 600%). It should be noted that Samford Valley already have a structural fire fighting capability, and while not presupposing to replace the professional urban fire fighters, it will and has provided invaluable support to the urban brigades. The community must be made aware that the extreme increase in the fire levies would not see an increase service delivery. In fact should it be determined that an auxiliary station be established in Samford, the excessive increase would see the service level drop off, as auxiliary/urban brigades do not carry out hazard reduction burn offs.

### **What should be the role of Fire Wardens within the Rural Fire Service model?**

The Fire Warden should have sufficient knowledge to determine under what weather conditions a fire can be safely lit and contained. The warden by this determination is carrying out the task of risk manager as well as undertaking a public safety role for members of the community. They should also possess sufficient knowledge that will allow them to carry out property assessments, in order to advise local residents of the best methods to either prepare (hazard reduction) or defend their properties (bush fire prepared communities) in case of a fire. Along with this knowledge it would be advantageous to have a good local and historical knowledge in relation to fire behaviour and activities in their area. The warden undertakes to control the use of fire within their allocated area and this can be done by granting or rejecting a permit, the placement of specific conditions upon a permit and act

under the legislation contained in the Fire and Rescue Services Act 1990. There should not be a specified fire season in which permits can be issued, as nature knows no calendar. To limit the capacity of fire wardens to issue permits in suitable fire weather conditions, introduces the real possibility of a very dangerous build up of fuel that would impossible to control should it catch fire.

**Any other relevant matters that the committee needs to know?**

I think the real question has not been addressed and that is - What should the expected level of fire cover be for regional areas of Queensland. There needs to be a comparison done between NSWRFs, CFS and CFA to determine and explain WHY rural areas in Queensland are different. If you were to live on the Qld /NSW border the service delivery either side of the border are vastly different, yet what makes that difference?

Volunteer services in every other state of Australia are advancing in their levels of skill, training and equipment levels, with the apparent exception of Queensland. The interstate volunteer services are trained for and involved in all aspects of fire and rescue work, and in many instances they are only form of response available to their communities. Volunteer services can be seen regular on national news broadcasts, taking the lead role in incident management, a position that QFRS are unwilling to even consider.

There also appears to be a much better and more harmonious working relationship between urban and rural volunteer services in the other states. Why is this so?

We are constantly feed a diet of the fact that we are one service. This however can be debunked by the following examples:-

- ❖ RFS volunteers have been instructed not to respond to emergency situations under lights and sirens, as they are not covered under the Fire and Rescue Act 1990 as it states *"that they are not authorised fire officers as they are not employed by fire Services"* . there needs to be an

amendment to Fire and Rescue Act similar to that which appears in the Transport Act – where fire fighters (Urban, Auxiliary and Rural are recognised as authorised fire officers for the purpose of driving emergency vehicles.

- ❖ The on going debate about the use of red/blue flashing lights on emergency services vehicles – why not on rural? There is documented evidence that blue/red lights offer better night visibility and therefore better safety. Isn't this a basic tenet of the QFRS Zero Harm policy? While it is recognised that red/blue are more visible it is also noted that the mere presence of red/blue lights will not guarantee the safety of fire fighters whilst working on our roads, only due diligence by all members concerned can do this.
- ❖ The ongoing reluctance by FIRECOM/QFRS Management to call out our brigade even though we have a well trained and equipped resources waiting to respond – the non responses by FIRECOM is having a very marked effect on morale of the members, so far to their credit they have maintained their attendance at training again showing their dedication and commitment to their community. It is unusual that their appears to be an effort to undermine the volunteers when there is a directive from the Premier in the form of the Q2 Program, which advocates the greater inclusion of volunteers in the community based activities. There have been instances of genuine aggression shown by urban crews to volunteers attending jobs(they are rare, but it has happened)
- ❖ The failure by QFRS to respond suitable vehicles (4x4, light and medium attacks) to rural incidents which can and has resulted in lost time in responding.
- ❖ The failure by QFRS to provide our trained and qualified structural fire fighting PPE. The supply or rather the non supply of this equipment went on for 12 months, and in the mean time it not only prevented some of our crews with out of date equipment from responding, it needlessly put the community to needless risk. Is this public defensible?

- ❖ The major thrust of my submission is that QFRS do not know or appear to want to know just what resources or level of skills exist within the Rural Fire Service ranks, and this “us” and “them” mentality is doing no good to the fire service as a whole. When all rural fire fighters want to do, is defend or assist their communities in the case of an emergency. As previously stated – volunteers want to be there, professionals have to be there