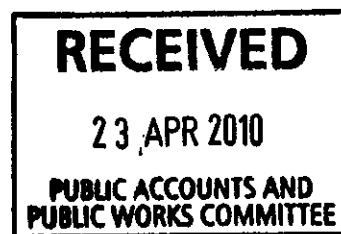




19 April 2010

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



Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland**

On behalf of CANEGROWERS I wish to thank you for the opportunity to make the following submission in response to the Discussion Paper on the above.

**About CANEGROWERS**

CANEGROWERS is the peak representative body for Australian sugarcane growers. Around 80% of Queensland sugarcane growers are members of the CANEGROWERS highly successful lobby, representation and services group. Based in Queensland, the State that produces around 95% of Australia's raw sugar output, the CANEGROWERS National Office represents the interests of cane growers Australia wide.

Government and business leaders recognise CANEGROWERS as the authoritative voice of cane growers. Membership ensures that growers' needs are represented at the highest possible levels of industry and government decision-making. We safeguard growers' interests on all issues likely to affect their business.

The CANEGROWERS organisation exists to:

- Provide strong leadership for cane growers within a viable sugar industry
- Deliver effective representation and valuable services to Queensland cane growers
- Ensure cane grower strength and influence at local, district and state/national/international levels through unity and shared common values.

**Who we are**

Our formal name is Queensland Cane Growers Organisation Ltd but everyone knows us as **CANEGROWERS**. We have been advancing and protecting the interests of cane farming families in Queensland since 1925. Grower directors (elected by their fellow members) determine organisational policy, which is implemented by staff based in a State office in Brisbane and 15 regional offices.

For many years State Government regulations made it compulsory for all cane growers to belong to CANEGROWERS but since 2000 membership has been voluntary. Our membership of over 80% is amongst the highest for agricultural organisations in Australia.

## **What we do**

### **Some of the things we do on behalf of growers:**

- Negotiation with Federal, State and Local Governments on industry issues
- Negotiation with government agencies and other industry bodies on significant issues affecting cane growers
- Collective bargaining with mill owners on cane supply, processing and payment issues, allowances and bonuses
- Cane testing and negotiation of cane and sugar quality schemes
- Environmental sustainability and property rights
- Irrigation, drainage and water pricing issues
- Harvesting equity arrangements
- Transport, licensing and fuel issues
- Growers' financial circumstances including government schemes and major lending institutions
- Industry research and extension matters
- Sugar marketing and trade issues
- Workplace health and safety matters
- **Cane firing arrangements and rural fires**
- Industrial representation and advice
- Crop protection, rats, canegrubs and other pest issues
- Chemicals and fertilisers usage
- Local government matters including valuations

CANEGROWERS also offers a wide range of services. District offices provide services and advice tailored for local needs. Many also act as the secretariat for bodies involved in local industry and community planning, development and management.

### **Our Structure**

CANEGROWERS operates as a single organisational entity, representing its members' interests at area and district level, and in state, national and international forums. Structurally the organisation comprises autonomous business units at the various levels, which are controlled by elected grower directors.

CANEGROWERS represents growers, directly and indirectly, on every important body involved with the Australian raw sugar industry, ranging from purely local issues to matters of global importance. Policy, strategic direction and the range of services provided are determined by practising cane grower members who are elected by the membership every three years.

The organisation's peak body is Queensland Cane Growers Organisation Ltd, based in Brisbane. Each of Queensland's 24 sugar milling areas supplies a member of the Board. In cane growing regions, grower-controlled companies operate CANEGROWERS offices from which professional staff provide a range of services and represent the special interests of members locally.

The operations of CANEGROWERS are funded at all levels through annual fees paid by those growers who choose to become members, supplemented by income from various commercial activities. Members determine the amount of the membership fee, which is generally calculated on the basis of an amount per tonne of cane harvested.

In preparing this submission we have consulted with District CANEGROWERS Offices and we have encouraged them to lodge their own submissions in response to the Discussion Paper.

### **The Important use of Fire in the Cane Growing industry**

The Queensland Sugar Industry produces around 95% of Australia's raw sugar and is recognised as a world leader in innovation, product quality, efficiency and sustainable production.

CANEGROWERS is dedicated to a sustainable sugar industry which is recognised as environmentally responsible.

Whilst green cane harvesting has substantially reduced the number of fires with some 70% of Queensland's cane crop being harvested as green cane; fire is still an essential management tool within the industry. There are sound agronomic reasons for the use of fire in certain circumstances as well as to assist the harvesting process by removing excess leaf and extraneous matter, eradicate vermin and to mitigate health hazards for harvesting crews.

Cane growers are skilled, responsible managers of fire. The harvest season traditionally occurs from early June to early December each year. For an average of 30% of the total industry crop fire will be used to prepare the cane for harvest. Fires in cane tops and trash residue may take place in all mill areas.

The Queensland Government has recognised the industry needs through the provisions of the Fire and Rescue Service Act, Regulations, Commissioner's Notification and a Seasonal Permit system for the cane industry.

Cane growers commit considerable resources to the purchase and maintenance of fire fighting equipment for fire management on the farm. Many cane growers are active members of the local Rural Fire Brigade. The fire fighting equipment, generally owned by cane growers and largely maintained by growers also benefits local communities. There are many cane growers who are the local Fire Wardens serving the community.

### **Objective**

Our objective is to provide sugar cane industry specific information to assist the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee to complete this inquiry into the Management of the Rural Fire Services in Queensland as set out in the terms of reference contained in the Discussion Paper.

### **Issues to Consider**

We set out here under our submission in relation to the main issues listed in the Discussion Paper for consideration for the Committee.

#### ***1. Is the current model of Rural Fire Brigades suitable?***

The Queensland Government recognises that it has a responsibility to protect persons, property and the environment from fire emergencies. These obligations are provisions of the Fire and Rescue Service Act. As mentioned in the Auditor General's report there is two distinct models to deliver this service. The paid staff urban 'red truck' service model to protect cities and towns (i.e. the urban community) and this service is funded by an Urban Fire service levy. Secondly, there is the Rural Fire Brigades manned by volunteers (the 'yellow truck' service model) providing protection to rural areas and minor townships and villages. There are Rural Brigades operating in the rural areas on the fringe of townships that

would not necessarily be regarded as minor townships. The Rural Brigades are responsible for protecting approximately 17% of the population but 93% of the land area of Queensland.

As you will be aware Rural Fire Brigades are very much community self-help organisations with the brigades expected to assist with funding their own operations, purchases and expenses. CANEGROWERS has supported the situation where a Rural Fire Brigade in consultation with the local Authority identifies specific equipment and resourcing needs for the local Rural Fire Brigade/s, develops a budget and subject to general agreement and support of the community at a public meeting introduces a voluntary levy on the ratepayers in the local Authority area. Such levy income raised by the local Authority must remain in the local Authority for allocation to the Rural Fire Brigade/s within the local Authority area.

For many in rural areas the development of QFRS organisational structures over the last 10 years or so has seen the urban arm of the QFRS take greater control and exercise increased influence on the traditional Rural Brigade operations. As an observer the status of the Rural Fire Service within the QFRS appears to have been downgraded. CANEGROWERS submits that there needs to be greater equity afforded to the Rural Fire Service which oversees some 1,525 rural brigades involving approximately 35,000 dedicated volunteers and with rural fire brigades covering 93% of the land area of Queensland. Land management and hazard reduction continues to be the prime focus of Rural Brigades as well as responding to wild fires.

Historically, the Rural Fire Service has functioned well but increased bureaucracy, more demands on volunteers' time and reduced access to equipment that local rural brigades consider to be appropriate and warranted has created some disquiet about the adequacy of the level of support offered to rural brigades.

Proposed QFRS changes to Urban Fire Service Areas for levy purposes without consultation with the stakeholders and more particularly without increasing the effectiveness of fire service delivery to the local community is opposed by local cane growers and the CANEGROWERS organisation. Such action by QFRS has been seen as a grab for funding and a transfer of costs to cane growers. Coupled by the fact that such action does not increase the effectiveness of fire service delivery CANEGROWERS suggests the following for consideration. Aspects of the current model fail to ensure adequate consultation with Rural Brigades in strategic planning and does not recognise Rural Brigades, their funding methods and their assets as part of the "system".

Suggested alternatives:

- A. A model which encompasses all Fire Services (Urban and Rural) as part of the one system and classifies/classes brigades according to a set of predetermined criteria, (e.g. area covered, population, types of fire risks); or
- B. A model which completely separates Rural Brigades through the Rural Fire Service from QFRS and establishes a separate management and funding structure for Rural Brigades.

The fundamental natures of the two arms of the Fire service are vastly different. Rural Brigades are about land management, hazard reduction and combating wild fires in the landscape whereas the Urban Brigades are about extinguishment of fires in building structures, road accident rescue and search and rescue following a natural disaster (e.g. earthquake) or terrorist activity.

Therefore, the structure of each arm of the Fire service needs to be more closely aligned with the service outcomes that they provide and their client base.

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

CANEGROWERS has received a number of expressed concerns about the lack of choice and availability of equipment as well as the suitability of available equipment and their cost.

There has been a call for increased government funding for the provision of resources suitable for use by Rural Brigades.

Certain equipment that was considered appropriate for use by rural brigades located in the cane growing industry has been removed from the subsidized equipment list and calls have been made for this equipment to be re-introduced.

The method of collecting what is local voluntary levy monies from the community is best collected by the local Authorities for and on behalf of the local Rural Brigade/s and such monies must remain in the local Authority area for allocation to the respective Rural Fire Brigade/s within that local Authority area. Purchases made by the Rural Fire Brigade can be acquitted through the relevant local Authority. Access by QFRS to such monies is not supported by CANEGROWERS.

Historically, the Rural Fire Service has not been well funded by government and the service is to be commended for its achievements in this area of roll out to Rural Brigades despite the low level of funding to the Rural Fire Service.

The operation of the Rural Fire Service through the Rural Fire Brigades has been an appropriate service to the local community at a very low cost to the Government and the Community.

CANEGROWERS is of the view that the current model can be amended to provide better support to Rural Fire Brigades.

## ***3. What effect is urban encroachment within brigade areas having on Rural Fire Brigades?***

Proposed QFRS changes to Urban Fire Service Areas for levy purposes without consultation with the stakeholders and more particularly without increasing the effectiveness of fire service delivery to the local community is opposed by local cane growers and the CANEGROWERS organisation. Such action by QFRS has been seen as a grab for funding and a transfer of costs to cane growers. Coupled by the fact that such action does not increase the effectiveness of fire service delivery CANEGROWERS suggests the following for consideration. Aspects of the current model fails to ensure adequate consultation with Rural Brigades in strategic planning and does not recognise Rural Brigades, their funding methods and their assets as part of the “system”.

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Urban Fire fighting vehicles and equipment are not appropriate for fighting fires on cane growing properties—in many cases tractor/trailer combinations are the only vehicles suitable to access run-away fires – rural property owners can only have their fire fighting and

protection needs met fully if the Rural Brigades continue to operate in their areas to supplement the Urban Fire Services.

The situation where a Rural Fire Brigade calls for assistance by the Urban Brigade to be on hand as a safeguard just in case a wild fire should escape or spread thus threatening a household structure and in so doing (i.e. the Urban appliance being on standby) the QFRS sends a bill to the householder is inappropriate and unwarranted. This puts the volunteer Fire Officer in a dilemma and imposes unreasonable pressure/tension on the Rural Fire Brigade First Officer at a time when his focus should be in combating the wild fire and not having to be concerned about cost implications for the landholder/householder should the Urban Brigade attend the scene. Charges can be made notwithstanding that the Urban Brigade takes no part in combating the fire.

The continuation of burning programs for hazard reduction purposes is required. It should not be more difficult to obtain a hazard reduction permit. Some public opposition to landholders burning under a permit system is vexatious and therefore should not prevent the issue of hazard reduction permits.

The role of Fire Wardens should remain 'as is'. Local Fire Wardens know the terrain, understand the local weather and are respected and experienced members of local rural brigades and have no hesitation in saying 'No' when conditions dictate. Most Fire Wardens have been in the role for many years with no major rotation of wardens being experienced.

#### ***4. How can the increasing demands on Rural Fire Brigades be managed effectively?***

Whilst training is valuable it must be remembered that members of Rural Brigades are volunteers with job, family and other obligations. Therefore, training on a voluntary basis should be offered. Training requirements must take into account the volunteers work and family obligations.

It is recommended that the Rural Fire Service and local Government develop a standard information pack that the local Government could provide to each new landholder to inform them of the Rural Fire Brigade and the services provided.

The Rural Fire Brigade members are volunteers and should not be required to develop one year operational plans and three year management plans. Such activities for the development of plans should be part of the role of the Regional Fire Management Committee where such committees are in place (e.g. the Hinchinbrook Fire Management Committee) and these activities should not be imposed onto members of the volunteer Rural Fire Brigades.

Another problem that Fire Officers are faced with, is the situation where a volunteer is hurt, or worse still, die because he followed a direction made in "Good Faith" by the Fire Officer. If circumstances changed beyond the control of the Officer, such as an unexpected wind change causing the fire breaching a break, the Fire Officer now will find himself in a Court of Law defending himself without the support of QFRS. Previously, if the same Fire Officer made a decision "in Good Faith" (The Official Term) but circumstances changed beyond his control or expectations, he was guaranteed protection under the act. This, no longer applies. As a consequence of this change, Fire Officers have relinquished these positions and many current officers are indicating that they will not remain in their roles for long, as it is too stressful. Fire Officers need and deserve increased legal protection.

As expectations of these volunteers increase, more volunteers are exiting the Rural Fire Brigades.

Should the Rural Fire Service be forced to impose compulsory training, this is likely to have an immediate negative impact on the number of fire fighter volunteers.

Since the Rural Fire Service has been moved directly under the umbrella of the QRFS and referred to as QRFS Rural Operations, volunteers have seen a change that they are not comfortable with, as opposed to a “stand alone” service that they could relate to, a service that did not give them the feeling of being overbearing with increasing expectations and demands. It should be a Committee consideration to provide the Rural Fire Service with a ‘stand alone’ service that the volunteers can relate to.

***5. Are the accountability mechanisms currently in place appropriate?***

With regards to accountability the current system could be improved with the Rural Fire Service District office maintaining a register of equipment purchases for and/on behalf of the local Rural Fire Brigades.

An annual inspection and reporting on machinery and equipment would overcome concerns regarding condition and safety of Rural Fire Brigade equipment.

A strengthening of the link between the individual Rural Fire Brigades and the Rural Fire Service Area Director would benefit the parties and the service.

Rural Brigade Fire Officers need and deserve increased legal protection.

Clearly, the current confusion over whether Rural Brigades are separate entities or part of the QRFS system means that appropriate accountability measures are not in place. A revised structure model should address this confusion and also include accountability structures that are practical and easily understood by all parties.

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

CANEGROWERS supports current model with local wardens with local knowledge and experience being able to issue permits.

CANEGROWERS supports the continuation of the provisions of the Commissioner’s Notification and the maintenance of the seasonal fire permit availability for cane growers conducting pre-harvest burning of standing cane and for burning sugar cane tops and trash.

This has been a tried and tested successful facility for cane growers.

***7. Are there any other relevant matters the Committee needs to address?***

The requirements for Rural Fire Services in the Wet Tropics would vary greatly from the needs of other brigades across the state. For this reason, it is disappointing that the Committee set up to consider submissions, review and evaluate the management of Rural Fire Services does not have balanced representation drawn from across the State.

Nevertheless, we commend this submission for the Committee’s favourable consideration.

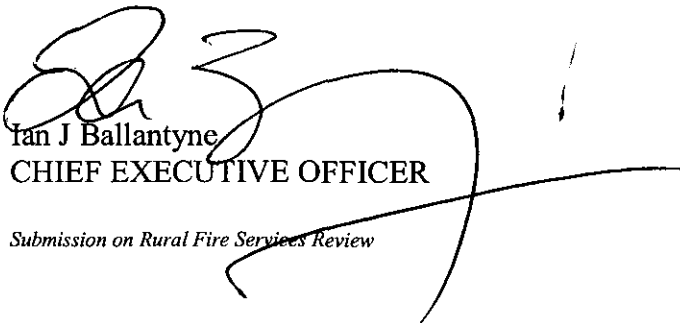
**Summary**

In summary, of course the use of fire is very important to cane growers. Equally cane growers commit significant resources to fire management, control and prevention with their equipment available for fire fighting activities to support the local community. The majority of cane growers are active office bearers and members of Rural Fire Brigades. Naturally, any decision by Government, Government Committee, Government Department or

Agency/Service (QFRS) which has the potential to transfer costs to cane growers and/or does not increase the effectiveness of fire service delivery to cane growers is of particular interest to CANEGROWERS and its members.

We would be happy to consult on any aspect of this submission.

Yours sincerely



Ian J Ballantyne  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

*Submission on Rural Fire Services Review*