



Speech by

**Mr JIM PEARCE**

**MEMBER FOR FITZROY**

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Hansard 29 April 1999

**QUEENSLAND FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY AMENDMENT REGULATION (No. 1) 1999**  
**Disallowance of Statutory Instrument**

**Mr PEARCE** (Fitzroy—ALP) (10.39 p.m.): I rise to speak against the motion for disallowance. Here we go again, a Labor member from a rural electorate standing in this place to defend the need to properly fund rural and urban fire services. When it was in Government, the coalition cut Government funding to rural and urban fire services; in Opposition, it wants to disallow increases that will ensure ongoing quality in respect of fire service delivery to people in rural Queensland.

People living outside major city centres rely on the Rural Fire Division and auxiliary firefighters to come to their aid when buildings catch fire or bushfires strike. It is wonderful to see that the Rural Fire Service, its army of volunteers and the auxiliary firefighters will be the winners out of the new urban fire and community safety levy. This Government understands how vital rural volunteer and auxiliary firefighters are to so many rural and regional communities. It has placed special emphasis on increasing the rural fire budget in recognition of the sterling job performed by almost 50,000 volunteers right across Queensland.

Auxiliary firefighters also benefit from this year's record \$209m budget for the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority. The QFRA rescue package will take this Government's commitment to the fire service even further. I continually meet with rural fire brigades and rural volunteers throughout my electorate. The need for new stations, vehicles and equipment is a constant theme. Recently, this Government demonstrated its commitment to improving conditions in rural fire brigades. Last week I met with the rural fire brigade at Westwood. We spoke about the provision of a shed in which they could store their fire appliance. Again, it was a pleasure to speak with Rural Fire Division volunteers who were dedicated to providing a service that so many people in rural Queensland rely on. I was able to advise them on how we might be able to obtain a shed for their new vehicle.

Tonight I am pleased to say that in the next few weeks there will also be three new rural brigades in central Queensland. One of those will be at Alton Downs, in my electorate. Another will be at Baralaba, which is in the electorate of the member for Callide and will, after the next election, be in my electorate. The third new brigade will be at Turkey Beach. Those new brigades will be provided as part of approximately \$4m in funding under the rural fire fleet enhancement program. Under that program, 34 new fire appliances have been delivered in recent months, and a further 41 will be rolled out across the State by June, taking the total number of appliances delivered this year to 97.

I am proud to have been a part of Labor Governments, under Premiers Goss and Beattie, that have ensured a turnaround in the quality of fire vehicles and equipment provided to people in rural areas. I know that members opposite agree with me, but they will not speak up. I would like to see them having the courage to acknowledge that. They know as well as I do that we have delivered and that the rural fire brigades appreciate what a Labor Government has done for them and are very concerned about what the Opposition is doing tonight.

Another 69 rural fire brigade vehicles are in the pipeline for next year. We are not stopping at that. We will have one of the best equipped rural fire brigades in the nation, and it is all because a Labor Government appreciates and understands what they do and their need for proper equipment. Those fire appliances will go a long way towards enhancing the rural fire brigade fleet. Some of the brigades receiving new vehicles have been operating with trucks that are between 20 and 30 years old.

This is scary. We have to look back only a few years to see which former Government allowed this disgraceful situation to develop.

Those brigades will now be able to better protect their communities from the devastation of bushfires. Rural fire volunteers in my district and across the State were consulted widely on the final design and equipment layout of the new vehicles. So the people who will be using the vehicles and who know their requirements have had the opportunity to have input into the design of these vehicles. Credit has to be given for that. That is the way to do this. There is nothing worse than having bureaucrats—the people who live in Brisbane who go home to their leafy suburbs every afternoon—trying to design vehicles when they do not understand the demands in rural areas. As I said, it makes good sense to have the people who are using the equipment having an input into the design of the equipment on which their survival may hinge. Throughout the construction process of the vehicles, we have asked volunteers what was best for them. We believe consultation is the best way to ensure the safety of volunteers. If they know of a better, safer way of performing a task, we will certainly listen to them and modify their equipment to suit their needs.

The budget allocation for rural vehicle replacement complements a sizeable increase in general funding for the Rural Fire Division of \$3m over three years. A plan to consolidate base funding for the Rural Fire Division took shape when we were in Opposition. We are now in Government and it is being implemented. In 1992, base funding was around \$2.6m. Under Labor Party policy, it will reach \$11m this year. This multitude of grants and top-ups will be consolidated. Then we intend to enhance fire service funding even further.

Our rural fire volunteers deserve the best and, under this Government, they will get it. For as long as I represent a rural area, I will be speaking to the Minister and making sure that she is listening and doing what is needed out there. We said that we would boost funding for the construction of rural fire stations. We have delivered on that promise by boosting subsidies for rural fire stations by 60%. Only last week the new \$85,000 Allora Fire Station was officially opened. That station is a joint services facility—another positive move—with both auxiliary firefighters' and rural firefighters' vehicles housed in the one premises. That is only one of numerous rural and auxiliary facilities opened around the State this financial year. And it is not over yet; we are going to keep doing this.

We said that we would buy more land for new rural fire stations. This year's Budget included an extra \$100,000 for land purchases. We are delivering on our policy to boost expenditure on new equipment to the tune of \$100,000, and safety gear to the tune of \$50,000. As a former miner and union delegate, I am acutely aware of the need for improved safety for the people who actually perform the job. The deaths of five volunteer firefighters in Victoria in December last year were a tragic reminder of the importance of protecting our rural firefighters. Every time they are called to fight a blaze they take a dangerous risk for the sake of the safety of their community.

Rural fire brigades around the State are on full alert at the moment as the dry winter months approach. Rural volunteer firefighters know that the heavy rain and flooding experienced throughout much of this State this year has left a large amount of fuel on the ground, which has the potential to create large and destructive fires. Over the past couple of weeks, in my electorate I have spoken to land-holders and people in rural fire brigades. Central Queensland is facing a huge crisis. Over the past couple of weeks, the grass has dried out because of the strong south-easters. A very dangerous situation is developing. I hope that landowners, the rural fire brigades, Queensland Rail, Main Roads—all of those people—start to think positively about where we are heading in relation to the coming summer. We face a major problem. There is a lot of fuel out there and it does not take much for a fire to get away.

The firefighters also know that people out there have been complacent about the danger. If everyone is complacent, that can prove a deadly mistake for everybody. That is why so much of the work is in averting the danger before it happens through hazard reduction burning. Hazard reduction burns minimise the danger to our army of volunteers, just as they minimise the risk to property. Labor Governments have always been aware of the dangers associated with fighting wildfires and structural blazes. In fact, Labor has a long history of supporting rural volunteers. This equipment includes not only new vehicles but also the issuing of free overalls, helmets and other personal safety equipment which is all important if these people are to do their job.

I am very pleased that each new rural fire vehicle provided by this Government will be fitted with more than \$1,400 worth of additional equipment, including a first-aid kit and a fire blanket. A simple thing such as a fire blanket, which is so important, will finally be provided to these people. This additional funding for vehicles, station construction, firefighting and safety equipment means that our rural volunteer and auxiliary firefighters will be better able to protect Queenslanders and themselves.

Early this year the Government introduced the State's first rural fire brigade manual. Brigades in my area, such as at Gracemere, Dingo and Bluff, tell me that the manual fills a gap in guidelines and procedures for brigade members, making their administrative duties easier and less time consuming.

Time expired.