



Speech by

Mr ROB MITCHELL

MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS

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**APPROPRIATION BILL
Estimates Committee B
Report**

Mr MITCHELL (Charters Towers—NPA) (3.53 p.m.): I rise to speak on the hearings conducted by Estimates Committee B and in so doing I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate all those permanent, auxiliary and volunteer rural firefighters who have worked so hard for so many long hours to contain the fires in and around Charters Towers and Townsville over the past six weeks. We have had more than 300 fires in the area, many of which have threatened houses and lives. Thankfully, no serious incidents have occurred. I certainly hope that none will occur.

All these workers have worked for 12 to 18 hours a day, on average, fighting these fires. It is a very big ask. I believe we will have to eventually assist many of these volunteers with some type of remuneration package in an effort to encourage them to keep fulfilling the role they play over a great part of the year.

Recently, I was alarmed to learn that rural fire brigades have to seek community funding to purchase even the fuel for their vehicles, as well as receiving a subsidy for only half the cost of the footwear required for the job. They also have to raise funds to replace rakes and drip torches lost or broken in the course of fighting bush fires. It is a worry that the officers have to raise funds from the general community for these things.

I am appreciative of the Department of Emergency Services for providing protective clothing for the officers to wear. However, I am alarmed at the very tight budget on which rural fire brigades have to operate. The fires in Charters Towers provided a prime example of the fact that rural fire brigades are a necessary part of rural life. I believe strongly that more should be done to finance this service.

I was pleased to see a further increase of 30% in funding to rural fire brigades, taking the figure now to \$16m. This is a step in the right direction. I do not know how far we can go because it is a budgetary matter. I believe it will help enormously. I am also pleased to see funding of a further \$21m for the provision of 70 urban and 124 rural vehicles. I would like to see the distribution of these vehicles fast-tracked. We need to have the vehicles operational before next year's dry season. From what I witnessed this year, it is obvious that we need more vehicles to contain a lot of these fires.

I direct the Minister's attention to the need for more rural fire services in and around Charters Towers. The Sellhiem brigade needs to be upgraded and provided with a more serviceable firefighting vehicle as soon as possible. The population in that area has increased dramatically over the last five years. Many new housing estates have been established in the area and we have only a trailer fire appliance at this stage.

The fires need all the assistance that the Minister can possibly give them. They particularly need assistance with equipment and running costs. Once again, I thank all the fires in north Queensland for a job well done over the past six or seven weeks.

The recent situation further enhances the call from Charters Towers not to decrease the urban brigade. Such a move was mooted over the past few months. It is impossible for the current staffing levels to keep up with the workload that the officers at the station have to endure for more than nine months of the year. In just four months, the call-outs at Charters Towers are nearing the total call-outs

for the whole of last year. This represents a lot more call-outs than many other urban stations which have a larger number of permanent firies.

I was pleased to read in the Estimates committee transcript that the QFRA has recognised that the use of the one plus three model is recognised nationally and internationally with regard to safe fire ground operations. I realise that the one plus three model has been under review for the past few months. However, I question the handling of the review. I brought this matter to the Minister's attention because the firies are very concerned for their future. I certainly hope that finance will not be the overriding factor with regard to crewing levels in some of the regional centres.

I cannot conclude without congratulating the Hughenden auxiliary firefighters for their creditable seventh placing in the Statewide auxiliary competition last month. It was their first attempt. They were also successful in winning one of the divisions. It was a great effort for first-timers. They told me that next year they will compete in Mount Isa. I believe that this type of competition is a great concept. The auxiliaries train very hard during the year. I believe it makes for a better firefighting unit. I look forward to next year's competition in Mount Isa.
