

Question on Notice

No. 1411

Asked on 14 November 2023

MRS D FRECKLINGTON ASKED THE MINISTER FOR POLICE AND CORRECTIVE SERVICES AND MINISTER FOR FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES (HON M RYAN)

QUESTION:

With reference to the 2021 Independent Review of QFS Services which noted ongoing challenges with regional radio communications for emergency services, and in light of the recent bushfires—

Will the Minister clarify (a) what on-ground communications technology is currently available to volunteer rural firefighters and when was it introduced, (b) if problems with this technology have been identified by volunteer rural firefighters i.e. loss of contact with other crews on the fireground and (c) if volunteer rural firefighters are expected to utilise their mobile phones on the fire ground when radio communications are not effective?

ANSWER:

I am advised by Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) that there is no technology currently available that will guarantee universal coverage at all times, particularly in regional and remote areas.

I am advised that atmospheric conditions, radio background noise, topography, types of vegetation, smoke, building design and construction materials can all influence a radio's signal strength and audio clarity.

This is normal behaviour for all radio communication devices and is not limited to fire and emergency situations.

The physics of radio communications, whether it is distance or other interference, means that Public Safety Agencies are continuously looking for safety improvements and ways to ensure continual communications are maintained with all frontline personnel.

To assist with improving connectivity, I am advised that QFES aims to provide firefighters with a multi-layered communications system to allow for redundancy or alternatives to meet the operational needs of the given situation.

Additionally, due to the variability of all radio-based communications technologies, firefighters have longstanding practices to manage communications challenges during operations.

This includes returning to the last point of radio contact and re-establishing a link if communication is compromised and closing the distance between communicating parties to improve signal strength.

These processes are in line with industry best-practice and consistent with how firefighters manage other operational challenges on the fireground.

I am advised by QFES that Rural Fire Brigade (RFB) volunteer firefighters have access to multiple pathways of communications that are designed for different needs of communications during incidents.

Since 2021, where appropriate, phones are provided to allow for the use of data communications such as the 'WAVE PTX' communications application which works on the mobile telephone network.

Further, recently QFES commenced the use of low earth orbit satellite communications in limited circumstances, to provide data connectivity for communications when deployed to incidents in remote and regional areas across the state.

This new technology compliments the Very Small Aperture Terminals satellite, introduced in 2009, and can be provided to the front line when appropriate.

The above is in addition to the below technologies:

- Emergency Services Ultra High Frequency radio - for fireground communications and Fire Communications Centre transmissions.
- Very High Frequency radio - for fireground communications and Fire Communications Centre transmissions.
- Citizen Band radio - used as simplex radio with portable and fixed incident ground repeaters.
- High Frequency - which is used in certain circumstances in a simplex format for vehicle to vehicle or vehicle to base communications.
- Satellite phones.
- Mobile phones.

Unfortunately, QFES advises that it does not have records about when exactly the other various technologies were introduced for service in Queensland.

QFES advises that RFB volunteer firefighters are not expected to utilise their personal mobile phones on the fire ground.