

**Submission
No 2**

**ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES FOR DECISION-MAKING FOR THE DELIVERY
OF MAJOR INFRASTRUCTURE, CONTRACTING OF PUBLIC SERVICES
AND/OR THE PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC ASSETS IN NSW**

Organisation: NSW Rural Fire Service Association Incorporated

Date Received: 28 November 2023

INQUIRY AREA OF FOCUS:
CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM (CCEP)



28 November 2023

Mr Jason Li MP
Chair
Legislative Assembly Public Accounts Committee

via email: PublicAccountsCommittee.PAC@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Li

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to make a submission on behalf of the NSW Rural Fire Service Association (RFSA) to the Public Accounts Committee's *Inquiry into accountability measures for decision-making for the delivery of major infrastructure, contracting of public services and/or the privatisation of public assets in NSW*.

The RFSA is the representative body for the volunteers and staff of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS). With over 40,000 members, more than 99% of them RFS volunteers, we cover a broad range of the membership of the RFS right across the state.

The Critical Communications Enhancement Program (CCEP) is of particular interest to our members. The CCEP is upgrading the NSW Public Safety Network (PSN) radio coverage that is used by emergency services state-wide.

While all emergency services rely on the PSN to do their work it is arguably even more critical for RFS volunteers, who operate in remote areas without reliable mobile phone reception more often than workers in the other emergency services.

Effective radio communication is critical to the work of our members. Not only does it provide general communications for tasking and coordination of our work on the fireground, radios are a lifeline in circumstances where a crew comes under threat and requires assistance. Given the inherently dangerous nature of so much of the firefighting work undertaken by volunteers, the importance of effective communication links is difficult to overstate.

The PSN not only provides voice communication, it also facilitates safety critical automatic vehicle location (AVL) services. This allows crews' locations to be monitored to assess their safety, and ensures that when a crew requires assistance in an emergency help can be sent directly to the place where it is most needed.



In addition to improving firefighter safety, AVL will facilitate better coordination between the RFS and Fire & Rescue during major events, by allowing both agencies to be aware of the exact location of their own and each other's appliances that are responding and/or on scene.

AVL being rolled out across the RFS fleet was a key recommendation of the *Bega Valley Fires Independent Review* conducted by Mick Keelty AO APM in 2018. Following the 2019/20 fire season, the *Final Report of the Independent Bushfire Inquiry* noted that the rollout of AVL "is reliant on the Critical Communications Enhancement Program."

Unfortunately, the CCEP has long been plagued by delays and cost increases, which have been well documented by the Auditor-General in her report into the management of the program. Of particular concern to our members are the continual delays in the project's expected completion date, which has slipped from 2020 when first announced out to 2027.

That said, not all changes to the CCEP since its inception have been negative, with the proposed increase in coverage area of the PSN to more remote parts of the state well supported.

We would urge the Committee to be mindful that unlike many other infrastructure projects, whose costs and potential benefits are largely economic, the CCEP represents an opportunity to improve community and emergency worker (including volunteer) safety, by increasing the effectiveness of communications during critical incidents. As such, any assessment of the CCEP must take into account these broader benefits, and the corresponding risks associated with any delays or reductions in scope.

If I can be of any further assistance to the Committee, please contact me through the RFSA office on 4723 3400.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Yours sincerely



Scott Campbell
State President