

**Submission
No 3**

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

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Partially
Confidential

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Submission to the:

NSW Legislative Assembly Parliamentary Inquiry into the effectiveness of the

NSW Rural Fire Service's asset management and operations

(The Inquiry is looking at the funding, maintenance, accounting and operational management of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) assets and premises. The inquiry will consider arrangements between the RFS and Councils. It will also consider the appropriate role of local authorities in providing emergency services and the sustainability of contributions to emergency service provision.

As the lead combat agency, the RFS has responsibilities for the provisions of rural fire services including services for the prevention, mitigation and suppression of fire in rural districts.

The Committee wants to hear from people with first hand experience, emergency service organisations and their volunteer associations and unions, local councils, bush fire experts, community groups and the public.)

We wish to draw to the attention of Committee members that the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) was created by “*An Act to establish the NSW Rural Fire Service and define its functions; to make provision for the prevention, mitigation and suppression of rural fires; to repeal the [Bush Fires Act 1949](#); to amend certain other Acts; and for other purposes.*”

Clearly, as set out in the *Rural Fires Act 1997 No 65*, this Government agency was/is intended to have as its primary function the “***prevention, mitigation and suppression of rural fires***”. Please see the following extract from the Act.

Objects of Act

The objects of this Act are to provide—

(a) for the prevention, mitigation and suppression of bush and other fires in local government areas (or parts of areas) and other parts of the State constituted as rural fire districts, and

(b) for the co-ordination of bush fire fighting and bush fire prevention throughout the State, and

(c) for the protection of persons from injury or death, and property from damage, arising from fires, and

(c1) for the protection of infrastructure and environmental, economic, cultural, agricultural and community assets from damage arising from fires, and

(d) for the protection of the environment by requiring certain activities referred to in paragraphs (a)–(c1) to be carried out having regard to the principles of ecologically sustainable development

described in section 6 (2) of the *Protection of the Environment Administration Act 1991*.

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It is our submission that whilst fire fighting is undoubtedly an essential and critical role of the RFS that the administration has lost its way from the primary intention.

We submit that their focus is now on building an empire of equipment and bureaucrats and that the preventing, mitigating and suppressing of fires has taken a back seat. It could easily be concluded that the administration is breaching its legal duties and that the annual funding is being misdirected from preventing fires to fighting them.

Funding is reportedly now in the vicinity of \$800 million annually and we respectfully suggest that this inquiry ought to establish the amount and proportion of the RFS's expenditure on:

1. a) fire fighting equipment such as aircraft, trucks and associated equipment as opposed to b) hazard reduction equipment such as mechanical mulchers and slashers
- 2) mechanical hazard reduction of undergrowth by sub contractors.
- 3) the salaries and wages of staff as a proportion of the overall budget.

It is kindergarten intelligence to understand that fires need fuel to burn and that the reduction of fuel reduces a fires intensity. Fires do not burn at all if there is no fuel.

We submit that, in our experience, in the last ten or more years in our Blue Mountains area of Bilpin that the amount of hazard reduction, via mechanical means and by burning, has reduced when compared to previous years and that this is a direct result of RFS administration. This has occurred under the leadership of Shane Fitzsimmons who was Commissioner from September 2007 until April 2020 and Rob Rogers who was Deputy Commissioner from 2011 and became Commissioner in July 2020.

The obvious, logical and direct result of less hazard reduction is that fires are larger, more intense and more frequent.

If the members of your Committee are interested in examining some of the instances that we have personally experienced, in our small geographic area, as a result of discretionary RFS decisions which have predominately prevented sensible hazard reduction we can provide evidence.

We have attached some details of just one issue that is current and where there is a dangerous RFS reluctance to act against Hawkesbury City Council and that includes two RFS documents that illustrate a tiny example of administrative waste. Both

documents contain very significant errors and were prepared without consultation with neighbouring property owners. The money wasted on these could and should have been spent on actual hazard reduction. They relate to a now notoriously dangerous block of Crown Land next to the destroyed Tutti Frutti business which, at

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a quick look at the regrowth since 2019, urgently needs controlling again. If done mechanically there is no need to wait for a 'window in the weather'.

The red and green tape, requiring compliance by local volunteer Captains, is largely created and prepared by the RFS administration and is adversely affecting and obstructing sensible hazard reduction. Local RFS Captains we have spoken to are frustrated by the obstacles placed before them.

If climate change is contributing to larger and more frequent fires then until we can prevent or control the climate changing then surely we must endeavour to ensure that more fuel reduction is carried out.

Our suggestions for more prevention, mitigation, and suppression of fires are:

- * Return as much power and discretion as possible to local brigades and Captains
- * Reduce to a minimum the superfluous red and green tape obstructing fuel reduction.
- * Concentrate on hazard reduction around populated areas, assets, infrastructure and access roads and utilise the mechanical removing of undergrowth. This would avoid fires escaping, enable large trees and much wildlife to be saved, reduce risk of injury to volunteers and avoid the smoke health hazard created by fires. There have been reports of many deaths of breathing challenged people during fires and hazard reduction burning.

We would be happy to appear personally before the Committee if invited.

Martin and Marion Tebbutt

[Redacted]
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Attachments
Powell Park Fuel Build up.
RFS letter from Deputy Commissioner
RFS internal report.