

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Organisation: Jindabyne Rural Fire Service

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NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Jindabyne Bushfire Brigade submission to the Legislative Council Public Accounts Committee

Inquiry into the assets, Premises and funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

Background

Jindabyne Bushfire Brigade is a small brigade made up of volunteers. We have about 14 active members out of a total membership of approximately 43, with an average age of 51.

Our brigade area is a combination of rural residential, small farms and light industrial. We work very closely with the NSW Fire & Rescue and the NPWS at Jindabyne.

We have a small 2 bay shed which houses our Cat 2 tanker and Cat 9 quick response unit.

We also have a small, attached meeting and locker room and a separate external pit toilet all of which we built. We have just had to rearrange our locker room, at our expense, to cater for the increasing number of women joining the brigade. We don't have the funds available to provide a toilet that would be suitable for all members.

There is no heating in our shed to prevent our fire appliances freezing in winter, so we must take special precautions. The volunteers installed insulation and have lined the walls to help prevent equipment freezing, again at our expense.

Our volunteers carry out maintenance and repairs to trucks and equipment unless specialist trades are required.

Response to the Inquiry's terms of reference

1. Mechanisms for:

a) Funding RFS assets and premises

Our brigade members raise much needed funds to ensure we keep our members well prepared for their work. Our most common form of fundraising is via the 10-cent container earn and return scheme with funds retained in our Brigade account. The RFS District office provides great support and provides replacement firefighting equipment and arranges for mechanical repairs for firefighting equipment.

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Our recommendation is that Brigades should receive funding for all repairs, maintenance, and purchase of all equipment. The days of brigades needing to fundraise for basic station facilities should be a thing of the past. In many ways the entire funding model is historic and needs an overhaul.

b) Maintaining RFS assets and premises

We submit that an important component seems missing from the terms of reference in this section and that is the responsibility for enhancing the premises that volunteers work out of.

Our brigade facilities are a good example of inadequate basic needs to meet a reasonable workplace standard. We have no proper change facilities and what we have we made ourselves.

We have no modern toilet, just a simple pit toilet with no lighting. By contrast well-funded city brigades have hot showers and some work out of facilities more akin to a club house.

We don't expect much but we do believe our volunteers deserve better.

We are hopeful that our 24-year-old cat2 tanker may get replaced but this cannot happen until the roller door is made higher.

2. Whether the following arrangements between Councils and RFS are fit for purpose

b) The division of responsibilities for bushfire management and hazard reduction

We are of the opinion that Councils should be taking much more responsibility for asset protection works around and in towns and villages for vegetation management that does not require burning.

It is a well-known fact that remote hazard reduction burning does little to save towns from being impacted by wildfire, yet we see long grass and other vegetation problems being left unattended within and immediately adjacent to urban areas. With worsening wildfire events this problem needs to be addressed.

It should also be noted that Councils have broad responsibilities for weed management, yet we see repeated failures in the system. A prime example is the spread of African Lovegrass into our local Jindabyne community. This noxious grass species is a disaster when it comes to fire control.

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It burns like kerosene and is very dangerous to control when burning. The reality is we are watching a potential fire hazard explode and doing very little to prevent the problem.

e) The existing model where RFS designs and builds fire control centres, should be maintained.

4. The sustainability of local government contributions to emergency service provision

5. Any other related matter

We ask the Committee to investigate the repeated claims that the RFS has 70,000 plus members. It is widely accepted amongst RFS members that this figure is very misleading. We are of the opinion that the real number of trained, available, and competent volunteer fire fighters would be lucky to be 25,000. Of this 25,000 it is likely that only 20% are available to respond to fires outside of their local area. We believe it is irresponsible to allow the community to falsely believe the resources are substantial when clearly, they are not and therefore it is unreasonable to assume if your property is threatened by fire a red truck will be there to assist. It is noteworthy that while volunteer numbers appear to have declined over the last decade the number of salaried officers and senior managers has increased significantly.

We also recommend that the Inquiry consider issues associated with the aging volunteer demographics. Over the last fire season, we experienced a number of occasions when our volunteers in their 60's and 70's worked 15 hours straight because night shift resources could not be provided.

Another issue to note is the push for RFS to take on other responsibilities such as flood response and rescue. Recently each brigade was issued flood rescue kits with the expectation that training would be via a short video. Clearly such training falls well short of what is required. The costs of these kits would have been enormous.

Submission prepared by Jindabyne Bushfire Brigade executive committee and endorsed by members at the AGM 07/05/24.

Kind Regards

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