

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Organisation: NSW Rural Fire Service Association

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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 opportunity to make a submission on behalf of the NSW Rural Fire Service Association (RFS) to the Public Accounts Committee's Inquiry into *Assets, premises and funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service*.

About the Association

The RFS is the representative organisation of the volunteers and staff of the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), recognised in the *Rural Fires Act 1997* (NSW). With over 40,000 members – more than 99% of them volunteers – the RFS runs a range of assistance programs, including equipment grants for Rural Fire Brigades, sponsorship of RFS events, scholarships, volunteer family days and other mental health support programs, as well as advocating on behalf of members to the agency and government more broadly.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the current Inquiry based on perspectives that have been shared by our membership.

Overview

In considering the assets, premises and funding of the RFS, the RFS's primary concern is ensuring that there is adequate funding for the RFS to provide the equipment our members need to safely and effectively fulfil their roles.

The importance of ensuring our members have the right equipment to keep themselves and the community safe cannot be overstated. Firefighting is a dangerous undertaking, which we are sadly only too well aware of. Just last week the names of three RFS



firefighters who died in the line of duty in 2023 were added to the National Emergency Services Memorial in Canberra.

The provision of adequate equipment is not only important to ensuring the safety of our own members, but also contributing to the safety and confidence of the community. The public look to the RFS for assistance against so many threats. Our members don't only respond to bush fires, but also structure fires, motor vehicle accidents, assist Ambulance, flood operations, and in some areas are the primary road crash rescue or general land rescue agency. Indeed, for many communities in remote parts of the state the RFS is the *only* local emergency service. This is all the more extraordinary when one recognises that this service is being provided by volunteers!

For these reasons, ensuring a strong level of financial resourcing for the RFS is a critical task for every government. This is not spending for the sake of spending, but spending to ensure our members have the equipment and resources they need to keep themselves and the community safe.

While this resourcing is our main focus when it comes to the subject matter of this Inquiry, we do believe it would be beneficial to improve consistency in arrangements across the state, while retaining a level of local flexibility. Regional communities, while united in their shared experience of the tyranny of distance and more limited access to major services compared to those in metropolitan areas, are nonetheless incredibly diverse. So are the local government Councils that serve them. The highly varied financial and operational capacity of Councils across the state requires that, to the extent local government remains involved with the provision of services to the RFS, there will be some flexibility to reflect those local circumstances.

The devolved nature of management of the RFS into its 43 Districts creates some discrepancies in the nature of equipment and support available to our members. Many of these issues rightly rest with the chain of command of the RFS, and when issues of concern to members arise we address them with the RFS internally. However, there are two issues in particular that may be affected by the outcomes of this Inquiry, and it is those matters that we want to bring to the Committee's attention.

1. Insurance

One area that has caused concern for members is the inconsistent insurance cover for Brigade equipment – especially equipment that is purchased by, or gifted to, Brigades directly rather than being supplied by the RFS. Equipment purchased by Brigades through their own fundraising or grants, and those items gifted to them, sit in

something of a grey area. They have not been purchased with money from the Rural Fire Fighting Fund, and therefore arguably are not vested in their local Council by the operation of s 119(2) *Rural Fires Act 1997*. Nonetheless, these items are generally accepted by both Councils and the RFS as being covered by Council insurance policies.

The differences in the insurance policies held by Councils mean that Brigades often face excesses of \$5,000, \$10,000 and even \$20,000 when equipment that has been purchased through fundraising is damaged or stolen. In many cases, the level of the excess means that this equipment is in effect uninsured. It would undoubtedly benefit members to have greater consistency in terms of insurance coverage, and a single point of responsibility for replacing items.

While the value of these excesses may be small in the context of the RFS overall, for a volunteer Brigade that may have invested years' worth of local fundraising to a purchase an item, or worked to secure a one-off grant for an item they couldn't otherwise afford, these amounts are incredibly significant.

Consistency in insurance coverage could be achieved in a number of ways: by making clear that ownership of these items (and therefore responsibility for insurance) rests with the state; by requiring certain standards (including a modest maximum level of excess) for Council insurance policies with regard to RFS-operated equipment; or by a special state-wide insurance arrangement (whether through the Treasury Managed Fund or otherwise) for all such equipment.

We do not have a strong view as to which particular method should be adopted to ensure consistency in insurance coverage. As in other areas relevant to this Inquiry, we are much less concerned with the mechanisms employed than we are with the practical outcomes and implications for our members.

2. Appliance Maintenance

Maintenance arrangements for fire appliances vary significantly across the state. In some areas this is primarily managed through the local Council, in others primarily through private providers. These arrangements vary from Council to Council, and tend to reflect the capacity and willingness of the Council to support the RFS more so than any decision of local RFS management. For example, within some RFS Districts the arrangements vary between different Councils within the District.



Local flexibility is important in this regard – in some areas the Council works depot may be the only facility capable of dealing with servicing and maintenance of the local RFS fleet, whereas in others the Council may not have the capacity to deal with trucks outside their own fleet. If the decision is taken to change ownership of RFS appliances, servicing and maintenance arrangements with Councils should still be considered (by the RFS) and made available (by Councils) where appropriate.

Conclusion – state government support for the RFS

Whatever recommendations may be made by this Inquiry, and whatever path forward the government ultimately determines to follow, it is critical to ensure that the overall level of resources available to the RFS is not diminished in any way. To the extent that financial responsibility for the RFS is removed from Councils (if that is the decision which is taken), this shortfall **must** be provided for by the state. It is unfair, and frankly unrealistic, to expect volunteers to either cover the gap or to go without.

In considering this issue, it is important to take into account not only the financial resources that Councils are required to provide to the RFS, but also the additional support (whether financial or in-kind) that some Councils provide to the RFS without obligation. We would be very concerned if a decision to remove (or significantly reduce) local government involvement with the RFS were to result in any cuts to the resources available to our members. This is not to say that local government should (or should not) have a legislated role in connection with the RFS, or the extent of any such role. Rather, it is a simple recognition that support for the work of our members must be maintained, regardless of the arrangements that exist as between different levels of government.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this submission.

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

Yours sincerely



Scott Campbell
State President