

**Submission
No 35**

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Organisation: Warrumbungle Shire Council

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Office of the Mayor
Cr Ambrose Doolan

8 May 2024

Jason Li MP
Chair
NSW Public Accounts Committee

pac@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry on Assets, Premises and Funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in relation to the Inquiry.

Council welcomes this Inquiry as a significant step towards resolving the ongoing tensions between the NSW Government and local government regarding the ownership and management of assets, premises, and funding within the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS). These tensions in no way should reflect on the volunteers, Council strongly supports and respects the large community volunteer base of the RFS who sacrifice much to aid the greater community.

While there are several pertinent issues to address, our primary focus centers on clarifying the ownership of what is commonly referred to as the "red fleet" assets, which include RFS trucks, vehicles, and firefighting appliances. Additionally, Council also has concerns related to premises, funding, and service level agreements.

The current arrangements, particularly the allocation of asset ownership to councils, have historical roots when councils held direct responsibilities for bushfire services. The landscape of emergency services has evolved significantly since then. Throughout the years the RFS has evolved from a purely community-based initiative, through to then being part of the local council, and now to being a State Government Agency with responsibilities under national emergency management arrangements. This evolution needs to be reflected in the Rural Fires Act so that the accountability and the responsibility for RFS are fully aligned.

Even since the Rural Fires Act took effect in 1997 the relationship between local government and the RFS has significantly changed, for example fire control officers who were employees of each council are now employed by the RFS. In essence, the RFS has evolved from a community-driven entity to being part of local council structures, and now, it operates as a State Government Agency with broadened responsibilities extending well beyond bushfire management.

Councils no longer have a say in the acquisition, deployment, usage or disposal of RFS assets and therefore do not have management and control of the assets. In reality, management and control sit firmly with the RFS.

It is Council's firm belief that ownership of RFS firefighting assets should be vested with the RFS and be recorded in its financial statements. It is for this reason that this Council is one of many that does not recognise these assets in its annual financial statements.

We urge the NSW Government to reconsider its stance to ensure rational and equitable governance of RFS assets.

Once again, thank you for considering our input.

Yours sincerely



**COUNCILLOR AMBROSE DOOLAN
MAYOR**