

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Organisation: Wollongong City Council

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Mr Jason Yat-Sen Li MP
Chairperson
NSW Legislative Assembly Public Accounts
Committee
NSW Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Your Ref: 25265077
Date: 24 May 2024

Dear Mr Jason Yat-Sen Li MP

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE (RFS)

Wollongong City Council (Council) would like to thank the Public Accounts Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to your inquiry into NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) assets, funding and operating model.

Council acknowledges the invaluable services provided by the RFS as the lead combat agency for bushfire mitigation and response within NSW and appreciates the committee's efforts in consulting with local governments on how best to share responsibilities for bushfire management and hazard reduction.

Council's local government area is situated on Dharawal Country on the South Coast of New South Wales and has a population of approximately 219,000 residents spread across 684 square kilometres. Wollongong has ten RFS local brigades and shares costs with Shellharbour and Kiama Councils to maintain the Illawarra Fire Control Centre (FCC). The FCC is owned by Shellharbour City Council and operated by paid RFS staff to manage bushfire incidents within the Illawarra and Sutherland region.

Under the current arrangement local councils in New South Wales play a critical role in supporting the RFS by providing local brigade land and buildings, maintenance of capital and operational assets, and assists in coordinating efforts during bush firefighting events. Local councils work closely with the RFS to develop and implement bushfire management plans, conduct hazard reduction activities, and provide community education and awareness programs.

The current governance model for RFS day to day operations and maintenance of their assets in local councils dates back to the formation of the service in 1997 (under the Rural Fires Act 1997). The formation of the RFS represented efforts by the NSW State Government to centralise bush firefighting efforts and hazard reduction activities across the state. While the RFS transitioned to the primary agency for bushfire management and hazard control, local councils continued to support the RFS's activities, particularly in terms of infrastructure and community engagement.

In our view the optimal governance structure reflects original intent of the RFS through centralised control and ownership of RFS assets to the NSW State Government. Centralising RFS would enable streamlined decision-making and improve overall coordination of the daily

operations of the RFS and during firefighting efforts. A unified command structure under the State Government could enhance communication and resource allocation, ensuring a more efficient and effective response to hazard reduction across the state and between local government areas, bushfires and other emergencies.

A key aspect of the RFS operations is collaboration between the RFS and local councils to deliver effective bushfire prevention, preparedness, and response, especially given the state's susceptibility to bushfires due to its climate and landscape. Under a fully centralised model councils' role would be by way of continued support to the RFS during bush fire emergencies through the Local Emergency Management Officer, engaged in maintenance of Red Fleet through fee for service arrangements, and continued management of the Asset Protection Zones (APZ's) controlled by local councils.

The above arrangement would require review to the levying and collection of the Emergency Services Levy (ESL). There is a review underway on this matter and Council's position is the ESL should be levied and collected by the State Government based on ratable properties as opposed through an indirect tax on ratepayers and through insurance premiums. Consideration will need to be given for rateable properties owned by local councils as ESL levies on these properties would result in an increase in rates for other rate payers within the local government areas. This would result in the creation of another indirect tax on ratepayers.

The current mechanism of funding Council's capital and operational contributions to the RFS locally is primarily through the NSW Rural Fire Fighting Fund (RFFF) Allocations. This allocation is intended to fund building maintenance and operational costs of the RFS Red Fleet and deliver capital works on local brigade infrastructure. While this is not an efficient process, if this inquiry determines the current governance structure is to remain a review of the funding model is required to identify and correct any noted funding gaps.

Council notes that current governance arrangements between the RFS and Council regarding the ongoing management of bushfire risks with Council through the Illawarra Bushfire Management Committee are effective and would not propose changes to the arrangement at this time.

Council maintains 367 Asset Protection Zones (APZ's) across 135 hectares of Council owned land and maintains a collaborative working relationship with the RFS to deliver on on-ground bushfire mitigation works, including planned burns and fuel reduction works. Like other landowners, Council acknowledges the role of landowners in bushfire management and hazard reduction activities on their own land and continue to support the role of Council in these efforts if the governance model was to move to a centralised approach.

Funding is available to Council from the RFS to support the delivery of hazard reduction activities. Historically funding applications submitted by Council in the first quarter of the calendar year are generally not announced until the fourth quarter of that same year. This funding cycle means that works cannot commence until mid-way through the bushfire season, sometimes resulting in delays to the delivery of funded works.

If the current arrangement was to continue based on this inquiry our recommendation is to develop a fairer, more transparent, and financially sustainable method of funding critically important emergency services (RFS, SES, Fire & Rescue etc.). There is a need to gain a deeper understanding of infrastructure and plant and equipment needs of emergency services, including potentially combining facilities where appropriate.

There is also inconsistency in the amount of funding received from the RFS for hazard reduction works from year-to-year. The changing value of funding allocated to Council for bushfire mitigation works can create challenges in the planning and programming of these works across the LGA.

While the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Public Accounts Committee has been limited to reviewing assets, premises, and funding of the RFS, the issues raised in this submission are also relevant to the funding of local units of the NSW State Emergency Services (SES) and we would encourage the Public Accounts Committee to consider this as part of this (or a future) inquiry.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback to the Parliamentary Committee. Should you require any further information, please contact Nathan McBriarty, Manager Infrastructure Strategy & Planning (Acting) on [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully

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Renee Campbell
General Manager (Acting)
Wollongong City Council
Telephone: (02) 4227 7111