

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

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The effect of RFS government funded aircraft on local industries ability to sustainably supply an aerial fire fighting fleet into the future.

The Royal Commission into Natural Disasters stated Australia needed a stronger sovereign fleet to support aerial fire fighting and natural disasters. It was not stated the government buy these assets, it was to have the government support local (Australian) industry, not compete with it. A gap analysis of the industry conducted by the agencies identified a need for certain TYPES of aircraft, Large Air Tankers, Type 1 Helicopters and night aerial Fire Fighting capability. The industry was given very limited opportunities and time lines to supply this capability. The expense of implementing nighttime firefighting capabilities nearly triples that of daytime operations. It's crucial to acknowledge that only a restricted number of aircraft can effectively operate over fire grounds at night. Further research is necessary to assess the efficiency and expenses of nighttime operations compared to multiple shifts during daylight hours. Presently, firefighting operations commence only in mid-morning, resulting in missed critical opportunities to combat fires under favorable conditions when fire behavior is less aggressive. Government Funds used to duplicate an already existing fleet. Duplicating existing fleets with government funds raises questions. For instance, the RFS's acquisition of six Type 2 helicopters duplicates resources already available in the existing NSW approved fleet. This diverts significant resources from industry operators, jeopardizing their sustainability. The current NAFC fleet of approved Call when Needed and Contracted Type 2 Helicopters available in NSW is 46 as per the NAFC register on its website. RFS has spent potentially over 35 million on purchasing and building six Type 2 helicopters which compete directly against the already existing NSW fleet. The investment of local industry to supply these 46 Type 2 helicopters every year is significant and needs to be acknowledged and supported by government.

The current 6 RFS helicopters that operate in the Type 2 category are required to fly at least 350 hours each per year to justify the need. This is 2100 hours a year which has been taken away from the current fleet. An estimated cost of these hours which is now taken from the industry is well over 9.5 million per annum. With the rising cost of aviation this ongoing loss has put significant pressure on NSW operators. This model is creating an environment that may not be sustainable for existing operators into the future. There's a prevailing perception within the industry that the Rural Fire Service's (RFS) spending and budget lack transparency and appear to have no clear limitations. Therefore, an inquiry is necessary to examine the current expenses associated with the RFS fleet and to evaluate the justification for tax payers-funded RFS-owned aircraft. Currently, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) can sustain and grow its fleet due to government funding, while industry lacks similar support.

I am a former mayor and current serving councillor with Snowy Valleys. I have qualifications in aviation management, a commercial helicopter licence and own and operate a fixed wing aircraft. I have 25 plus years experience in emergency services and have previously worked in air ambulance.

I am available to give evidence in person if required. I can be contacted on my personal mobile [REDACTED]

With kind regards,

John Larter