

**Submission  
No 78**

## **ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE**

**Organisation:** Fire Brigade Employees' Union (FBEU)

**Date Received:** 4 June 2024

4 June 2024

Mr Jason Yat Sen-Li

Chair, Public Accounts Committee

Parliament House

Macquarie St

Sydney NSW 2000



**Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into NSW Rural Fire Service assets and operations**

**About the FBEU**

The Fire Brigade Employees' Union (FBEU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The FBEU is a trade union registered under the Industrial Relations Act 1996 (NSW) which represents permanent and retained professional firefighters in Australia's largest fire and rescue service, Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW). FBEU members work across metropolitan and regional areas and are involved in all manner of emergency response. NSW professional firefighters provide a range of emergency management activities, including prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

**Fire Fatalities and Response Times**

The FRNSW report titled 'Adverse Structure Fire Outcomes 2016 – 2021'<sup>1</sup> documents a statistically significant increase in fire fatalities within FRNSW jurisdictions between 2016-2021. The report, peer-reviewed by Monash University, underscores the importance of response times from appropriately resourced firefighters in increasing survivability in structural fires, and preventing loss of life and property.

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<sup>1</sup> Fire and Rescue NSW. (2023). Adverse structure fire outcomes: 2016 - 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.fire.nsw.gov.au/gallery/files/news/2023/FRNSW%20Adverse%20Structure%20Fire%20Outcomes%20-%202016%20-%202021.PDF>

In contrast to the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), FRNSW provides a guarantee of response to incidents. Further, as part of recent industrial reforms for professional firefighters, FRNSW will shortly guarantee that two FRNSW appliances with eight professional firefighters are dispatched to incidents, to ensure safe and effective fireground operations.

In part, these arrangements seek to address the limited ability of the RFS to provide suitable and timely support to professional firefighters reflective of accepted fire science and response standards. The FBEU submits that such improvements to the 'standard' of fire cover within FRNSW's jurisdiction also reflect growing community expectation of emergency service capability, particularly in the context of increasing demand on the sector, driven by population and infrastructure growth as well as more frequent and protracted natural disasters.

The FBEU welcome further discussion on the standards of fire cover adopted by both agencies, noting that greater transparency about response data can better inform the NSW community of the standard of fire cover applicable to their given area.

### **Capability and Capacity**

The recent NSW Government Review of Emergency Volunteering<sup>2</sup> ("the Review") notes that the growing demands of emergency services must also be considered in the backdrop of increasing pressures on volunteer and volunteer agencies such as the RFS. The review's data demonstrates a 123% increase in incident requests 'tasked' to volunteer agencies over several years while correlating data within the same period demonstrates that the number of incidents attended by the RFS are in decline. The FBEU submits that this data supports anecdotal evidence that NSW professional firefighters are consistently propping-up volunteer efforts within volunteer agency response areas, including at non-fire incidents such as road crash rescue.

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<sup>2</sup> Premier's Department. (2024). Review of emergency volunteering: Report 2 – Preparing for the future of emergency volunteering. Retrieved from <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/premiers-department/review-of-emergency-volunteering-reports>

The review reports that such circumstances are producing challenges for agencies like the RFS in maintaining the capability and capacity to meet these demands but also notes that a lack of data collection and performance indicators driven by agencies may be hindering planning and decision making. For example, the RFS were unable to provide the review with data concerning the average tenure of members within their agency, despite the agency having recently invested in a \$1.6 million e-Membership project as well as the volunteer availability App 'RFS ACTIV'.

### **NSW Rural Fire Service Volunteer Numbers**

The inability of the RFS to articulate the number of 'active' volunteers within the agency's volunteer base continues to be met with scrutiny. In a recent Budget Estimates Inquiry, RFS Commissioner Rogers confirmed that as few as 45-46,000 of the agency's reported 70,000 volunteer base were 'operational' firefighters. Training data obtained by the FBEU through a GIPA application in March 2023 indicates that a mere 22% of RFS volunteers are trained in essential competencies for small structural, vehicle, and similar firefighting activities. Competency levels specific to urban firefighting challenges are even lower, with less than 7% of volunteers trained in self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA), and fewer than 2% trained to work safely in structural fires.

Despite these factors, the RFS continues to acquire assets and develop capabilities within urban environments. Data provided to the FBEU through GIPA application reveals a 38% increase since 2013 in the procurement of RFS 'Urban Pumpers,' including those allocated to metropolitan areas with a clear need for professional firefighting coverage, such as Londonderry and Appin.

The 2023 NSW Auditor-General Performance Audit into the RFS<sup>3</sup> identified *"limited measures to assess the performance or the capability of firefighting fleet to respond to*

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<sup>3</sup> Audit Office of New South Wales. (2023). Planning and managing bushfire equipment. Retrieved from <https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/our-work/reports/planning-and-managing-bushfire-equipment>

*fire incidents and risks*”, noting that the RFS were highly dependent on the limited availability and training of their volunteer workforce, areas for which the agency had little accountability. The audit found the absence of data to inform strategic planning and assessment made it impossible to determine whether resources were being distributed appropriately.

These circumstances speak to a growing disconnect between the priorities of the RFS leadership and the agency’s volunteer workforce, a disconnect which is often reported in the media and indeed features in submissions to this inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

The significant growth in population and infrastructure across NSW confirms the necessity for an overarching review into the State’s emergency management framework, specifically to examine the adequacy of the standards of fire coverage offered to the NSW community.

The FBEU submits that a transparent evaluation of the ‘active’ numbers of RFS volunteers is fundamentally important to this inquiry and to any future review.

Kind Regards,

Leighton Drury

State Secretary