

Submission
No 19

**THE MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS OF THE NSW
AMBULANCE SERVICE**

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**Submission by Frank Edward Fitzpatrick
to the Inquiry by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2
into the Management and Operations of the NSW Ambulance Service**

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Inquiry into the Management and Operations of the NSW Ambulance Service

This submission is made in response to the media release last month by the Hon Robyn Parker MLC, Committee Chair, inviting submissions from the public.

In her media release Ms Parker stated that the Committee will "*inquire into and report on the management and operations of the Ambulance Service and in particular (e) any other matter*". In that context I particularly wish to address the issue of the effectiveness of the NSW Ambulance Service's rescue operations.

I have been researching the delivery of general land rescue services in NSW for the last 28 years. I am now retired following forty years of public service in the NSW and Federal Court systems in a number of jurisdictions. My interest in the delivery of rescue services has its origin in 1980 when I researched '*Waste and duplication in the public sector*' as part of a personal education and development course I was undertaking. At no time have I ever been employed by any emergency service on a permanent, part-time or casual basis.

Current situation

There are five agencies of which three are permanent, *NSW Fire Brigades (NSWFB)*, *Ambulance Service of NSW (ASNSW)* and *NSW Police Force (NSWPF)* and two volunteer, *State Emergency Service (SES)* and *Volunteer Rescue Association (VRA)* involved in general land rescue; transport, industrial, domestic, vertical etc.

The State Rescue Board of NSW (SRB) is the responsible government body that oversees the delivery of rescue services pursuant to the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 (SERM Act). The SRB website www.emergency.nsw.gov.au shows there are 214 land rescue locations that are serviced by SRB accredited rescue units comprising *primary* (47 NSWFB, 14 ASNSW, 9 NSWPF, 78 SES and 45 VRA) and *secondary* (121 NSWFB and 9 SES). There are a total of 3208 registered land rescue operators comprising 1833 NSWFB, 181 ASNSW, 99 NSWPF, 709 SES and 386 VRA personnel. [SRB Annual Report 2006-2007].

The Ambulance rescue units are located at St Ives, Parramatta, Bankstown, Camden, Caringbah, Cowra, Gosford, Rutherford, Hamilton, Singleton, Bomaderry, Wollongong, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga.

Inquiries and Reviews

There have been numerous inquiries and reviews over the last 25 years concerning general land rescue in NSW. Internal reports from emergency services, police and health portfolios and coronial inquiries have produced a plethora of evidence suggesting the system is not operating at an efficient and effective level. External agency reports and investigations, such as Performance Audits from the Audit Office of NSW, also highlight that rescue services could be greatly improved. It is very clear on the balance of such evidence that rescue in NSW is bordering on disarray. There is no over-

arching strategy concerning rescue and the best case scenario could only be described as ad hoc and antiquated.

2001 Auditor General's Performance Audit Report (No 80) into Ambulance Service

In 2001 the Audit Office of NSW conducted a performance audit into the NSW Ambulance Service (*Readiness to respond*). The main objective of performance auditing is to examine the extent to which activities undertaken by agencies are carried out efficiently, effectively and economically. The final review of this audit was released on 6 July 2007. The final report states that all recommendations have been substantially implemented. One of the 2001 recommendations was "*Review the contribution the Service makes to the State's rescue capabilities*". This recommendation is repeated in the 2007 report under the broad heading '2.6 Operational Structure'. However, the report appears to be a complete whitewash of the rescue issue as there is no further mention made whatsoever of rescue in the final report.

The response from the Department of Health on behalf of the Ambulance Service signed by the Acting Director-General also neatly sidesteps the rescue issue.

The original 2001 investigation recommended that the Ambulance Service should review its involvement in rescue and concentrate on its core roles and suggested that the NSWFB and/or SES could provide this service. Pages 95-97 of the Performance Audit report '*Readiness to respond 2001*' support the recommendation. In particular refer to page 96:

"However, many more officers felt that the Service had no natural role in rescue, which also requires additional expensive equipment and training. It was argued that the other rescue organisations always defer to ambulance officers on the scene to ensure that the patient's welfare is not compromised."

At its meeting on 20 July 2001 the then Ambulance Service Board decided, in the first instance, to withdraw its rescue units in the gSa. This involved Ambulance Rescue units at Bankstown, Camden, Caringbah, Parramatta and St Ives. On 28 August 2001 the then Ambulance Service Board put its proposal to the SRB which determined to consider it in the context of a review of the provision of rescue services across NSW. The SRB was to make a recommendation to the Minister following its next meeting on 27 November 2001. The rationale for the Ambulance Service Board's decision was "*to enable us to establish more rapid response units and is intended to release more officers for the delivery of clinical care and to improve responsiveness to all cases*".

Following a public campaign by the Ambulance Rescue Officers' Union, now the HSU, the SRB at its meeting on 27 February 2002 recommended to the Minister for Emergency Services that it was probably not in the community interest to allow ASNSW to withdraw from rescue at that time. This perplexing and baseless decision by the SRB was in spite of the SRB's own study that found sufficient capacity and capability in other rescue providers to take over from the 14 Ambulance Rescue units.

It would appear no review of that decision by the SRB or the Minister has occurred despite the final report.

It is unbelievable that the NSWFB has a dedicated heavy rescue unit staffed 24/7 at Gosford on the Central Coast, but it is only secondary accredited. Meanwhile, ASNSW provides a primary rescue unit whilst at the same time it has been reported in the media that the ASNSW responds ambulances from Sydney to emergency calls on the Central Coast. This is clearly another example of poorly managed and duplicated rescue service delivery. The same situation is occurring in Newcastle. The NSWFB heavy rescue unit is staffed 24/7, but is rarely utilised.

Furthermore, the situation with ASNSW rescue unit in Cowra in the central west of NSW is that the local NSWFB has assumed a temporary primary rescue role due to the Ambulance Service not having adequate rescue trained officers to operate their rescue unit. At Bundeena and Engadine, south of Sydney, the NSWFB has taken on the role of secondary rescue to assist Caringbah Ambulance rescue, which is constantly stretched to provide both medical and rescue duties. It is widely known that both Bulli and Wollongong NSWFB are providing additional rescue response to assist the ever struggling Wollongong Ambulance rescue. In Wollongong, the NSWFB is the primary rescue provider a night, but reverts back to secondary rescue during the day with Ambulance rescue assuming primary response. Such a ridiculous and pathetic system has no strategic direction or common sense.

In the greater Hunter Valley area Ambulance rescue units are often off the road for various reasons or responding with only one rescue operator on board. NSWFB are regularly acting-up to fill the ASNSW shortfall. Local newspapers regularly feature reports from the HSU highlighting such gross deficiencies.

The follow-up Performance Audit (No. 167) in 2007 revealed the audit scope did not seek to make recommendations on the future of changes to the service, despite stating that all recommendations have been substantially implemented. It would appear the provision of rescue services by ASNSW was not in fact addressed. Furthermore, the reference that ASNSW provides a service comparable to ambulance services in other states is certainly erroneous when rescue is concerned. No other state in Australia has the ambulance service providing any form of general rescue work or accreditation to perform such tasks. Such benchmarking to other states is certainly not a valid argument when holistically considering the performance of ASNSW rescue.

It is ironic that the Health Services Union is currently waging an industrial campaign for more ambulance officers on the basis that there are insufficient officers to perform their core role of pre-hospital emergency medical response. The front page report of the 15 September 2007 edition of the Sydney Morning Herald highlights the extreme difficulty that NSW Health is having in recruiting doctors for emergency departments in its public hospitals. Scarce funds that could be used to fill medical vacancies at 21 public hospitals are instead being used to prop up ambulance rescue units.

2004 Public Accounts Committee Report (No 3/53-146)

In June 2004 the Public Accounts Committee of the Legislative Assembly (PAC) released its report '*Inquiry into the NSW Ambulance Service: Readiness to Respond*' [Report No. 3/53 (146)]. Two recommendations were made by the PAC in relation to rescue:

Recommendation 6.1: The Service should continue to monitor the workload of the emergency rescue units in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas through data collection so that more informed decisions about the continued use of the Ambulance Service in this area may be obtained.

Recommendation 6.2: The Committee encourages the State Rescue Board to re-visit the question of appropriate allocation of metropolitan rescue units, including the use of the Ambulance Service in rescue operations.

The PAC gave close attention to the issue and the following paragraphs at page 43 of the report:

4.77 It can be argued that withdrawing from rescue work would allow the Service to concentrate on its core functions or pre-hospital emergency care, especially in metropolitan NSW.

4.78 The Service stated in a submission:

Should sufficient capacity currently exist across other emergency service agencies in the Sydney metropolitan area to absorb rescue services in the 5 Ambulance areas and maintain the standard required by the Rescue Board, the Service would consider withdrawing from the 5 areas.

4.79 When not involved in emergency rescue operations the rescue units are involved in core service work. If an emergency rescue matter arises while the ambulance is otherwise engaged this can impact on the response times for emergency rescue.

4.80 The pressure on the Service to maintain acceptable response times is difficult as the Service grows. Although the Service requested to be withdrawn from five of the 24 primary rescue areas in metropolitan areas, pressure to remain has prevailed.

4.83 The Service advised the Committee that several reviews suggested that better use could be made of available rescue resources. The continuing debate in relation to rescue resources highlights a need for the State Rescue Board to re-visit the question of appropriate allocation of metropolitan rescue units.

There is no evidence to date that the SRB has acted on the PAC's recommendations. Again, there is a valid argument supported by numerous facts and economic realities that has simply gone unchallenged.

2004-2005 Auditor General's Performance Audit Report (No 140) into 'Co-ordination of Rescue Services by SRB'

The Audit Office of NSW Performance Audit focused on land rescue only in metropolitan and rural areas and examined how the SRB:

- is able to shape the long-term strategic direction for rescue
- establishes standards for performance and monitors the results
- designates rescue units
- recommends the accreditation of rescue units
- assures their ongoing compliance with accreditation requirements

The report (Performance Audit No. 140) was tabled in both houses of parliament on 20 July 2005. It made the following recommendations:

- The SRB collect data on rescue performance and cost over the next 12 months to inform the planning process (page 19)
- The SRB use this data to develop an overarching strategy for land rescue that recommends to the Government who the providers of rescue should be. (page 19)
- The SRB use the strategy to review current arrangements and develop a five year plan to implement rescue arrangements which align with the strategy (page 19)

- The SRB develop a risk management framework to assist committees in assessing applications for accreditation (page 24)
- If data on rescue performance indicates immediate opportunities for improvement these should be addressed by the SRB (page 19)
- The SRB develop response time standards for metropolitan and rural rescue services to guide committees in determining the number, type and location of rescue units (page 25)
- The SRB include time standards for responding to an incident in accreditation standards (page 29)
- The SRB revisit the need for specific accreditation criteria for various rescue activities (page 29)
- Providers supply data to the SRB for each rescue attended, the location and type of incident, turnout time, response time and time when available for re-tasking (page 30)
- Providers supply data to the SRB on the cost of rescue (page 25)
- The SRB require the Chief Executive of each rescue provider to certify on an annual basis that all rescue units comply with the SRB's accreditation standards (page 31)
- The SRB develop an audit program to test compliance with accreditation standards (page 31).

The Performance Audit was highly critical of the overall performance of the SRB and its lack of a strategic approach to rescue. This is highlighted on page 16 in relation to 'Developing a strategic approach to rescue':

"What is missing from rescue is an overarching strategy or plan to ensure that the current division of responsibilities across the five providers leads to optimal service delivery. We have seen very few changes in rescue arrangements since 1990.

We still have three permanent services involved in land rescue. In contrast, we found that most other jurisdictions have moved to having a single provider, generally the Fire Brigades, undertake land rescue in metropolitan areas.

There is no reliable and consistent information on what it costs the permanent services to provide rescue. There is insufficient information on which to offer an opinion on whether or not rescue is efficient or effective.

What arrangements are best suited for NSW is not known, but an overarching plan for service delivery would help guide the Board in deciding who the providers of rescue should be in order to maximise efficiency and effectiveness and avoid duplication and waste."

At page 22 in relation to 'Planning for rescue':

"However, it is rare for a local committee to review rescue coverage and performance and to approach the Board for additional resources. Generally, local committees respond to requests for accreditation for potential providers.

Currently, there is nothing available to guide committees in conducting local hazard assessment or threat analysis that would indicate if additional rescue units were required and where units should be located.

Also, there are no minimum performance standards for rescue such as response time. Committees are not able to judge whether their existing rescue units have capacity to deal effectively with changes in demand or whether capacity exceeds requirements."

At page 28 in relation to 'Achieving an effective response':

"However, in regard to assuring that providers can respond in a timely manner, the accreditation criteria only require the provider to respond in an 'acceptable' time. That time is not defined. The Board needs to expand accreditation criteria to include actual performance standards reflecting differences between metropolitan, rural and remote locations, for responding to an incident including turnout time, response time and time when available for re-tasking.

In order to retain accreditation, providers must maintain the skills of operators and ensure equipment and vehicles comply with standards. Yet there is no obligation for a provider to advise the Board if compliance may be at risk.

2003 Pickering Coronial Inquiry (No 1190 of 2002)

On 19 November 2003 the then State Coroner, John Abernethy, in handing down his finding into the tragic death of Michael Pickering at North Head made some adverse comments in relation to the Ambulance Service (the responding rescue unit) culminating in the statement:

"Given the competing demands upon it, it occurs to me that NSW Ambulance might be better not being involved in rescue".

At an earlier meeting of the SRB on 29 October 1996 the Board declared that

'where a response is required to a vertical rescue incident in the Sydney Metropolitan Area and an accredited vertical rescue unit was not the nearest general rescue unit, or the vertical rescue unit was temporarily unavailable, then the nearest general rescue unit should be activated as well as the vertical rescue unit. It is the responsibility of the leader of the general rescue unit first on the scene to assess the situation and make a recommendation to the co-ordinator if it is considered that the vertical rescue unit should be called off. The vertical rescue unit would assume responsibility for the incident on arrival.'

It is clear from the coroner's findings that this protocol was not followed. The Rescue Coordinator, Sergeant Ray Skehan did not activate Narrabeen Fire Rescue simultaneously with St Ives Ambulance Rescue, the then accredited vertical rescue unit for the area. If Narrabeen Fire Rescue had been activated at 1602 hours (the time St Ives Ambulance Rescue was allocated the job) there was every prospect that it would have been on site well before Mr Pickering fell. Narrabeen Fire Rescue was eventually activated at 1626 hours and arrived "soon after Mr Pickering fell". All NSWFB rescue units, whether having vertical accreditation or not, carry sufficient rope rescue equipment to attempt a rescue of the kind at North Head.

The State Rescue Policy clearly states that "Police have the authority to call out any emergency service whether accredited or not, which, in their opinion, is required to undertake a rescue or assist in a rescue". It was open to Acting Inspector Keirs, the ranking police officer at the incident, to call in the turntable ladders at nearby Manly Fire Station. Maybe this appliance could have been used as a boom from which a rescuer can descend to affect a rescue, as has been the case in a number of other vertical rescues.

It is a bitter irony that some years back the NSWFB rescue unit at Narrabeen had vertical rescue accreditation but had it taken away by the SRB in favour of the ambulance rescue unit at St Ives. It was only post the North Head incident that vertical rescue was returned to Narrabeen Fire Rescue. It is inconceivable that for a number of years the heavily populated coastline from North Head to Broken Bay had no local rescue unit with vertical accreditation but had to rely on a unit responding from St Ives.

No action has been taken by the SRB or the Ambulance Service in accordance with the State Coroner's request.

2006-2007 Auditor General's follow up (Report No 167) of 2001 Performance Audit of Ambulance Service

The 6 June 2007 follow up report by the Auditor General into the recommendations made in the 2001 performance audit appears to be a complete whitewash of the rescue issue. It states that all recommendations made in the 2001 report have been substantially implemented. One of the 2001 recommendations was "*Review the contribution the Service makes to the State's rescue capabilities*". This recommendation is repeated in the 2007 report under the broad heading '2.6 Operational Structure' but there is no further mention made whatsoever of rescue in the report.

The response from the Department of Health on behalf of the Ambulance Service signed by the A/g Director-General also neatly sidesteps the rescue issue.

Provision of Rescue Services in Other Australian States and Territories

The respective fire service in every other state and territory is the primary provider of rescue services. The Tasmanian Ambulance Service once provided a rescue service. However, on 28 June 2006 the Tasmanian Government announced that the Ambulance Service would be withdrawn from rescue and that the fire service would take over its role effective December 2006. In some states the SES is also a primary provider, particularly in the more remote areas. Also, in some states the Police maintain a small search and rescue unit for the purpose of coordinating searches, bomb disposal and providing logistical, operational support to general duties and specialist police units but are not involved in general land rescue. That limited role is in alignment with the recommendations of the Tomkins Report, the internal review of NSW Police Rescue operations. In no other state or territory are the respective ambulance or police services involved in general land rescue.

The rescue role of the fire services is in some cases recognised in the name of the service, e.g. Queensland Fire & Rescue Service and Northern Territory Fire & Rescue Service.

Provision of Rescue Services in Other Countries

In the United Kingdom, United States of America, European States and most of the developed world the respective fire services are the traditional, primary providers of land rescue services. At all main airports a Fire Rescue Service operates to provide a combined fire and rescue response.

Police are generally not involved in land rescue other than providing support to fire services or operational police support functions in large-scale catastrophes such as the September 11 disaster in the USA. In most of the states of the USA ambulance paramedics are part of the fire services.

It is significant that a 'Google' search fails to reveal a single dedicated primary ambulance or police rescue service outside of Australia. World wide there are many thousands of fire/rescue websites on the internet. It would appear that NSW is the only place on Earth that has ambulance and police providing a primary rescue response. There are of course a number of police operational support units and ambulance service units supporting rescue operations and emergencies. In some places the ambulance paramedic service is part of a fire/rescue squad. Moreover, it would appear NSW is the only place on Earth that has five different agencies carrying out rescue work.

Rescue Services - The cost, the facts and the answers.

For many years the provision of rescue services across NSW has been the subject of much, unseemly rivalry, endless debate and a plethora of reviews, reports and recommendations, most of which have never seen the light of day. The current structure with five separate agencies delivering rescue services is unsustainable in the present economic climate.

On 10 April 2002 the then Premier, Bob Carr, issued a memorandum to all Ministers (Memorandum No. 2002-5) titled Departmental Savings Strategies Expanded Reporting Requirements. Of particular note is 'Attachment A' points 33-35 under the heading 'Agency Specific Initiatives':

- 33. Working with other agencies to achieve operational efficiencies and potential savings.
- 34. Duplication of functions across agencies.
- 35. Benchmarking against other similar organisations e.g. intra and interstate, government, non-government.

It is clear that to date the mandatory requirements of the memorandum have not been applied to the area of rescue services. In the 3 August 2005 edition of the Sydney Morning Herald (page 1), new Premier Morris Iemma is reported as saying

"I am determined to find the savings. We will have a comprehensive look at our levels of expenditure...for areas of duplication and anything to make those savings."

The 10 February 2006 'NSW Audit of Expenditure and Assets Report' by Michael Vertigan and Nigel Stokes mandates the need for elimination of duplication and waste in the public sector. In particular see page 32 and the following criteria:

- *to reduce policy overlap, duplication and potential cross-agency activities and ensure clear agency objectives, with no two agencies trying to achieve the same result or delivering the same service or function*
- *to achieve economies of scale*

The second term of reference for the audit was:

"advise on options to reduce the cost of government services by improving efficiency through changes to administrative structures and by eliminating duplication and overlap between government agencies"

Given the Auditor General's report in regard to Ambulance Rescue and the Ambulance Service management's adoption of it as well as the internal report by NSW Police into Police Rescue, it is apparent that senior management of those two services do not regard rescue work to be a core function. They recognise that a single full time professional service can be the primary provider of

land rescue services in NSW supported by voluntary services where appropriate, such as in country areas.

Significant savings in terms of service delivery, infrastructure, resource allocation models, equipment and training would be achieved and have the positive effect of seriously reducing the current wasteful duplication in most areas. The resulting model would provide a highly professional, cost effective, better-managed and accountable rescue service. This proposed resource re-balancing would also bring all services in line with the Government's own duplication and efficiency policies.

Ambulance Service is not meeting core roles.

The Ambulance Service has struggled for many years to provide adequate patient care and reasonable response times (See Audit Office Report June 2007). This view is supported by both the Auditor General's 2001 report and the 2003 Pickering Coronial Inquiry referred to earlier, and the recent decision in Tasmania to have the fire service replace the ambulance service as the primary provider of rescue in that state. It should be noted that NSWFB has supplied two rescue vehicles to ASNSW to keep its rescue service viable.

The continuing inability of the Ambulance Service to meet its performance benchmark of responding to emergency calls within ten minutes is of concern. It increased from the abysmally low level of 52.8% in 2001/02 to 53.1% in 2002/03 only to go in decline again to 51.7% in 2003/04 and 51.4% in 2004/05. The method of reporting changed in 2005/06 to comply with the Productivity Commission's requirements and available data shows that since 2001/02 to 2005/06 the graph has remained virtually unchanged with an ambulance response to 50% of potentially life-threatening cases within 10 minutes and 90% within 20 minutes. This is damning evidence that the Ambulance Service is still not meeting response time targets of the community's expectations. Twenty minutes is too long to wait for an ambulance in an emergency.

It is incongruous that ambulance officers are diverted from core roles of emergency medical response and pre-hospital care in order to respond to cutting people from wrecked motor vehicles, freeing a hand caught in machinery, extricating a child's finger from a plug hole, rescuing cats from trees or relocating magpie nests.

Further evidence of the parlous state of the Ambulance Service is the decision of Health Minister Reba Meagher to order a review of the Service and its operations to be conducted by Graham Head, chief executive and director of the Performance Review Unit of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. He is to report back to Cabinet early this year. To date the report has not been released.

A report in the 2 October 2007 edition of the Daily Telegraph reveals that last financial year taxpayers of this State funded the Ambulance Service the incredible amount of \$105,392,147 for overtime payments to ambulance officers. One unnamed officer clocked up \$86,855 in overtime last financial year pushing up his base wage of \$49,244 to \$136,000. Notwithstanding this drain on the public purse the Ambulance Service continues to fund its rescue service that has been on life support for years.

An attempt to obtain details under FOI from the Ambulance Service in regard to the cost (salaries, overtime, training, vehicles and equipment) of running its 14 rescue units in the 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 financial years proved to be an exercise in futility. Initially it was going to take the Service at least 28 hours to collate the information and cost about \$840. On being requested to just provide the costings that could be readily identified the estimates were reduced to 18 hours and \$540. It beggars belief that in the current environment of fiscal accountability the Service cannot readily identify the cost involved in running its boutique rescue service, a function that is listed in its 2005/06 annual

report as one of four 'key result areas' along with clinical care, patient transport and retrieval services. No wonder the Minister for Health has ordered a review into the Service's operations.

In the major cities of Newcastle and Wollongong the Ambulance and Police services share the primary rescue role in order to cover responses while the NSWFB is restricted to a secondary role despite having a 24/7 response capability, (NSWFB have primary response at night in Wollongong only). The NSWFB has also set up an urban search and rescue (USAR) capability in those cities with the delivery of state of the art equipment and Category 2 USAR operators. Unfortunately, with its additional USAR capability, the NSWFB is not being utilised as it should be in a primary rescue role.

At its May 2008 meeting the SRB at last made some decisions that will change rescue response in the Wollongong and Newcastle areas. As from 2 June 2008 the scope and response area of Wollongong ambulance rescue has been further reduced with NSWFB Bulli taking over the area from North Wollongong to Helensburgh. In the immediate future NSWFB Engadine is to jointly respond with Caringbah ambulance rescue. The SRB Chairman, Brigadier Philip McNamara, stated in a press release dated 4 June 2008 "The NSW Fire Brigades has the capability, equipment and trained personnel to provide rescue response in areas that will improve response times. This is good news for the community" he said.

In the Newcastle district, the response area of Hamilton ambulance rescue has been reduced with the establishment of NSWFB rescue units at Belmont and Toronto. Furthermore, the SRB media release gave a similar over-view for the Hunter region to that in the preceding paragraph.

On many occasions in both metropolitan and country areas the NSWFB is forced to act its secondary units up to primary in order to cover police, ambulance or other agencies' units when they were unable to maintain their rescue response role due to insufficient registered staff, broken down vehicles or other duties being seen as having greater priority. The NSWFB have always been able to maintain its fire and rescue roles even during major emergencies such as the 2001 and 2002 bushfires, the 1999 Sydney hail storm disaster, the 2007 Blacktown hail storms and Glenbrook and Waterfall derailments.

Recent data obtained under FOI reveals 194 occasions within a 15 month period where Ambulance and Police rescue units were unable to respond and had to be replaced by NSWFB rescue units. The duration of unavailability varied from a few hours to weeks.

Estimates of annual savings in the order of \$15 million to \$20 million could be expected if both the Ambulance and Police services divested their rescue role to the NSWFB.

Core roles of emergency services.

The NSWFB is the only emergency service that has a legislative role to carry out rescues involving fires and hazardous materials. The NSWFB is the recognised lead agency under the State Disaster Plan to carry out urban search and rescue (USAR), such as major building collapse. (This of course, being supported by multi-agency operations).

With NSWPF having 99 rescue operators, ASNSW having 181 rescue operators whilst NSWFB has 1833 rescue operators, it is clear that the Police and Ambulance rescue units are very much boutique players in the rescue arena. [Number of registered rescue operators in 2005-2006 SRB Annual Report]. The same report says that the SES has 840 rescue operators and the VRA has 429 rescue operators.

It therefore beggars belief that the NSWFB is prevented from carrying out general land based rescue unless accredited by the SRB. The NSWFB is the combat agency for rescues involving fires and

HAZMAT related rescues, is the lead agency for USAR, but is restricted and hampered by law from being able to carry out day-to-day rescues, such as simple MVA rescue. The assumption of NSWFB stations carrying out rescues under *Section 7 of the Fire Brigades Act* is acknowledged, but this still falls along way short of NSWFB non-accredited resources being accredited to carry out rescues under the SERM Act. (This is despite the provisions of *Section 59 of the SERM Act*).

It should be noted that every first response fire engine in the NSWFB carries hydraulic rescue equipment, rope rescue/vertical equipment, breathing apparatus and a large inventory of other rescue equipment that would allow the crew to effect most rescues as is the case in the rest of Australia and overseas.

My research has taken in various fire rescue departments in the United States where most paramedic services are provided by the local fire department / service. Private ambulance companies operate in areas not run by fire departments. Senior officers I spoke to at various fire halls / stations emphasised that although a fire department paramedic vehicle turned out with the fire rescue truck when responding to a rescue incident, the paramedics did not perform the rescue extrication but were there to provide clinical advice only. The same officers said that their paramedics would be compromised if they were to act as rescue operators as they could not objectively perform the dual roles of rescue operator and paramedic. They said that during a rescue operation decisions have to be made that may cause conflict between the perspectives of the rescue operator and paramedic and for the same person to wear both hats has the potential to cause a conflict of interest that may result in the wrong decision being made.

The union campaign run by ambulance rescue officers in late 2001 to retain its rescue units was based on the premise that paramedic skills were required to effect a rescue and that the public would suffer if ambulance rescue units were withdrawn. Based on that premise all 323 general land rescue units in NSW should be run by ASNSW and not just the token 14 units it presently operates.

Should ASNSW withdraw from general land rescue, the same high level of ambulance officer clinical input that occurs at rescue incidents attended by the 309 non-ambulance rescue units would continue.

I also draw your attention to para. 2.09 of the State Rescue Board Policy which states that the ASNSW is to provide pre-hospital triage at rescue incidents. Any campaign by ambulance rescue officers (not the vast majority of non-rescue ambulance officers) for the ASNSW to retain its 14 rescue units is simply a non sequitur.

Conclusion

This document gives a broad overview of the poor state of delivery of rescue services in NSW. The involvement of five separate agencies is indicative of a poorly managed, duplicated and costly community service that is unnecessarily diverting scarce Government funding and resources.

The indisputable facts are that over a period of three decades there have been a litany of reviews and reports recommending that ASNSW and NSWPF withdraw from general land rescue and their roles be taken over by NSWFB which is already the main provider of permanent rescue services. If the recommendations were implemented they would provide the community with a world class rescue service whilst saving many millions of dollars in the public purse..(Estimates of over \$15 million). It is reported in the NSWFB 2002/03 Annual Report (page 25) that "*significant whole-of-government savings would be realised if the Ambulance and Police Services decided to transfer their relatively small rescue responsibilities to the NSWFB.*"

In the NSWFB 2005/06 Annual Report, it is reported at page 4 that *“the NSWFB’s core competencies of rapid reliable response and multi-skilling mean that there is significant capacity to assist with expanded/new roles, for example rescue and basic life support to assist NSW Ambulance response.”*

At page 81 of the same report it is stated that *“The NSWFB provides primary and secondary rescue services at 161 locations throughout NSW, making us the largest rescue provider in the State. Every first response fire appliance carries rescue equipment and every firefighter is trained in rescue. This means that the NSWFB has significant latent capability to assume more rescue responsibilities quickly and efficiently, which provides the potential for significant efficiencies and significant savings to Government.”*

NSWFB Commissioner Mullins emphasises the readiness of his service to have an increased role in rescue with the 2006/07 annual report stating at page 82 that *“The NSWFB responds primary and secondary rescue units from 169 locations throughout NSW, and around 2000 of our fire officers are registered as rescue operators with the State Rescue Board. This makes us the largest rescue provider in the State. Every first response fire appliance carries rescue equipment and every fire officer is trained in rescue”.*

Under the heading of ‘Future Directions’ at page 13 of the said report, the NSWFB identifies *“Explore possibilities for rescue service rationalisation arising from the audit of the State Rescue Board”* as a critical capability.

In the report, ‘Coordination of Rescue Services - State Rescue Board of NSW’, released in July 2005, the Auditor General found that *“NSW is unique in having five emergency services involved in rescue, whereas most jurisdictions divide the role between urban fire brigades and the state emergency service”.*

There has been a spectacular lack of action by the Government and SRB in adopting the overarching strategies recommended by the Auditor General in relation to rescue services generally and major reviews and recommendations such as the Tomkins Report have not seen the light of day.

The withdrawal of the 14 rescue units operated by ASNSW would enable almost 200 ambulance officers around the State to return to full-time duty as paramedics. Some may also train as special casualty access team (SCAT) officers to bolster its ranks if so required. I would have thought that people join the Ambulance Service with aspirations to provide front line medical assistance rather than being a rescue operator which is the natural domain of the NSWFB and SES. Indeed, many ambulance officers have secondary employment with the NSWFB as retained firefighters or volunteer with the SES.

Frank Fitzpatrick