

Submission
No 67

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

Parliamentary submission into RFS

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to your enquiry. I'm currently an active volunteer of the NSW Rural Fire Service. I hope that this enquiry instigates change and breaks the culture within the service. I am happy to discuss any items I have brought up with members of the committee.

Bullying

Whilst the service as a definition of bullying, it isn't well advertised or policed. Perhaps it would help the service to re-define bullying. Any references I've heard made about cases which I believe are bullying seem to fall outside the definitions of bullying which senior management use.

I've witnessed firsthand an administration officer being bullied by the district manager. This is totally unacceptable for a paid staff member to be bullied at all, let alone in front of a volunteer. The process of reporting bullying is to report it to your manager. If it is your manager, then you report it to their manager. This often leads to people feeling uneasy and in most cases the individual just puts up with it and shuts up. There appears to be a lack of training for senior management in this area. I personally was asked by the regional manager about issues within my brigade since things had been escalated to him in the past. I went to tell him what was going on, he didn't even wait till I finished, just said, "Oh" and walked away from me in mid-sentence. Since the brigade is still in turmoil, I'd suggest there is no ability of management senior or otherwise to resolve conflicts within any areas of the Rural Fire Service.

A group officer in our brigade manipulates others into performing bullying of other members sometimes rather than doing it himself. He will white ant decisions made by the brigade until he gets his way. This will even include lying to members or not telling the whole truth so people can't make informed decisions.

Around 2 years ago [redacted] joined the RFS as manager of Community Engagement who was well qualified for the role with experience on the world stage regarding Community Engagement. Community Engagement needed someone external to the service with great ideas, [redacted] fitted the bill. Challenging the "we've always done it this way" mentality. We needed a mover and shaker in community engagement and [redacted] was it, community engagement had been stagnating for years, nothing worthwhile had come out in a long time. What did come out in the past wasn't effective and in most parts a waste of money.

Unfortunately, because [redacted] wasn't part of the old boy's club or a fire fighter, everything put forward was stopped or put on a go slow. Back to the same old tired recycled stuff which hadn't been very effective. [redacted] later went on extended leave and never returned. Health of family was given as the reason although I do not believe this was the real reason.

A male has now taken on this role, with new ideas, not too dissimilar to [redacted] ? And these seem to be OK. I ask myself, is that because it's a male?

Rank Review

The service is very much the old boy network. The rank review cemented this ideology even more where district officers must have Group Leader qualifications. In my opinion there is no need for many of the district office staff to have Group Leader qualifications. The district manager doesn't need to know how to fight fires. They need to be good managers, the service train the volunteers and certain staff to have the firefighting experience. The current standing is that district office staff must have fire fighter experience. This locks out a huge pool of resources from the Rural Fire Service and promotes old boys network and jobs for your mates.

Having a district officer with the same emblems on their shoulders as volunteers is demeaning. In an operational environment working out of area you don't know if you're dealing with a District Officer (staff) or a group officer (volunteer). How the process was implemented also left a lot to be desired.

Local brigades, most are fine, as with all volunteer type organisations there can be factional problems. The problems with my brigade have been going on for a long time. District has tried to sort it, Region has had a go. The current district manager is distancing himself from the issues and now has the brigade basically reporting to a Group Officer who is a volunteer. Volunteers being expected to fix problems that RFS staff can't fix sounds a little perplexing to me.

With the current ranking/job requirements structure of the service the service has greatly restricted the ability to pull in great managers. Great managers don't need to be able to put out fires. This current process actually promotes the boys club mentality as the service has few female firefighters and excludes most externals from the service due to lack of firefighting experience.

Not many females high up in the organisation. Whilst the overall number of females is over 50%, they are mostly administrative and hold minimal authority.

Homebush Bay relocation

The arguments used against relocating to rural NSW I believe don't hold water.

Diverse Power feeds and communications infrastructure in towns and single points of failure whilst important before 2000, with technologies today and the number of carriers available are no longer an issue. Large inverters with battery banks can power buildings with Generator standby. Video conferencing allows for remote access to ministers and senior bureaucrats during emergency situations.

With the NBN rollout with Fibre to buildings and two carriers who still put in their own infrastructure, communications can be sorted for redundancies.

Loss of staff, most organisations these days see a 100% staff turnover in 5 years anyway, with the lead time involved with moving the organisation this risk is even smaller.

The importance of being near Parliament is solved with video conferencing. If physical face to face is required, then that's only an hour anyway. What's parliament going to do with a big fire anyway? In most cases the politicians go to the evacuation points where the disaster is anyway.

I believe it is more about keeping it comfortable for the people within the organisation, rather than what is best for the state.

Maybe the government should look at an all agency response centre, rather than having one for each agency.

SES in Wollongong works well from what I see. When it is time for that to move, I bet they want to keep it in Wollongong, because that's where most the people who work there live now. It might not be the best place.

It has also been heard from within head office, that it is all too late anyway, that Head Office will remain in Sydney because contracts have been signed. My response to this would be it needs to be located in the best interests of the state, not for the people currently employed by NSW RFS.

Financial controls.

In the past, logistics officers during Section 44 declared emergency bushfires, could purchase lunches with approval by the Incident Controller or Deputy Incident Controller (these people are on site with the incident management team), now approval must be gained from head office. This can mean if ordering lunch for 100 people, approval may be gained after lunch time has been and gone. Or ordering lunch the day before you don't know how many people you're feeding, so you would have to order extra, which leads to waste, or not enough and then hungry volunteers. The system doesn't work. Incident management teams need to be autonomous and better checks and balances need to be enacted.

White Cedars Fire

This fire started with power lines touching. Two aircraft were on standby at Mudgee airport because of the catastrophic fire conditions forecast for the area. The service is to be congratulated for having the foresight to place personnel in place for rapid response to fire. The problem is, even though some services are put in place, they cannot be activated quickly. The local incident controller or District Manager could not activate these aircraft without it going through the State Air Desk. Because of the huge delay incurred as paperwork was generated and processed, the fire became larger quickly because of the fire conditions. Initial reports by air back to the incident controller said that if they could get the two aircraft up and commence bombing immediately they had a chance to pull the fire up. This didn't happen and the fire ended up consuming 5897 Ha over 6 days. Most of this ground was covered in the first day. The whole point of having the aircraft on standby at this location was so that a fast response could be initiated, but paperwork still prevented that happening.

Because of the larger Sir Ivan fire nearby, this probably won't be investigated so processes can change.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is treated as a very poor second cousin by the RFS. If a truck is used for training no paperwork is required. If it is being used for community engagement, paperwork must be signed off and approved at a district level. It is community engagement that keeps the public safe. Getting them aware of the dangers and how to protect themselves from fire. All too often we are telling the public don't expect a fire truck at your place when the fire front comes through.

Legislatively, community engagement is just as much a part of our role as firefighting. However, apart from the Commissioner saying that "Community Engagement is core business" every year or so, nothing is put in place to enable coordinated and productive engagement across the state.

I personally believe this is only ever given lip service. If the government is serious about having the community protect itself, then the minister needs to put pressure on the service to do this work. In our district, the officer responsible for community engagement is over run with other jobs which are rated as a higher priority, so once again community engagement suffers. I think in most districts; community engagement is very close to a full time role. When you consider other duties like on call, then there would be very little time left.

Registered Training Organisation

We are promised new course material regularly and volunteers now see it as a joke when new material is promised. Not one time frame has been met by the Rural Fire Service in the last 5 years to my knowledge. There appears to be very little project management skills or anybody held to account. If this was private industry, many people would have been performance managed out of the organisation.

Brigades

At least 4 deadlines have been missed by head office for the release of the new Constitution for brigades. These lengthy delays and missed deadlines are now considered quite the norm for any new project that the RFS says it will undertake.

Volunteers are treated like a protected species by the RFS. Many district managers seem afraid to make the decisions that they believe are the best, in case a volunteer might complain to the Commissioner. Volunteers have more chance of getting a response and particularly a positive response from Head Office than staff. I have offered on several occasions to make representations to Head Office knowing that if staff raise the issue they probably won't be able to get the matter considered.

Something needs to be done at a head office level to ensure that brigades are run properly and to the standards set by the service. All that seems to come from head office is don't upset the volunteers.

Conclusion

If you've made it this far I'd like to thank you. I've taken a great deal of time to put my thoughts down. It probably appears that the service doesn't work. This is not correct. The service works very well at putting fires out, although as the volunteer workforce ages, there will be less and less boots on the ground out west. There seems to be no concerted effort in growing the volunteer base, what works near Sydney doesn't work out west. A different approach is needed.

When other departments have been moved out West by the government it has provided a lot of opportunity to refresh the organisation. Moving the Rural Fire Service out to a major regional town would give the service that opportunity. Head office could even be divided up, engineering doesn't need to be next to community engagement, I understand they have existed in separate buildings for years. Staying in Sydney is all about the incumbents who currently hold the power to make the recommendations and more about them keeping their jobs, rather than what's best for the state.

I'd suggest the government needs to invest some money in sorting out what is going on inside this agency. This enquiry is centred around bullying. I believe it is right through the service, both staff and volunteers. I'd suggest that a 360 degree feedback survey needs to be undertaken and appropriate action taken with the outcomes. It is the responsibility of the minister to dig deep and find what's going on, not taking the Commissioner's word for it, that everything is OK. It is NOT!