

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

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The Hon. Robert Borsak MLC
 Chairman Portfolio Committee No. 4
 Enquiry into Emergency Service Agencies

Submission

Dear Sir

I make the following submission with sadness that the Rural Fire Service has become the dysfunctional, autocratic bureaucracy that it is today.

Please note: I have provided my personal details so that my submission evidence can be corroborated, however all possible identifiers (including but not limited to: my name, address, date of birth, email address, phone number, brigade, district) must be redacted prior to public release. I am happy to present myself to the enquiry to give in-camera oral testimony.

Until recently I was _____ of _____, in the _____, having previously held the positions of Deputy Captain, Brigade Training Officer, District Trainer and Senior Deputy Captain. My current rank is Deputy Captain and member of the Brigade Management Team. I joined _____ in _____. My residence in _____ was threatened in the 1994 fire and as a consequence I made the decision to join a Rural Fire Brigade as soon as I moved to a rural area, my family moved to _____ in _____ and I joined the local brigade within days of moving to that rural location. Please note the important distinction that I have made; that is, I joined my local Rural Fire Brigade – I never joined the Rural Fire Service which is a NSW Government statutory authority. It is my understanding that the Rural Fire Service was established to provide support to volunteer Rural Fire Brigades. I think for a time, that is the way it was – not anymore...

So, what's wrong with the RFS?

While the problems are many, the underpinning problem is that of culture. The culture of the RFS has become such that the volunteers are treated by the paid staff as nothing more than the most junior employee, the views of volunteers are not just unwelcome but routinely ignored. My own brigade has a proud history of over _____ years service to the community, it should be remembered that the Rural Fire Service has only been around for less than 20 years, I have made the observation before and I'll say it again here – we don't need the paid staff, they need us. Indeed, my brigade along with most others, provided outstanding service to the community without the paid staff for many years. We've all seen the devastating consequence of ignoring local knowledge, the Wambelong fire enquiry

recommendations seem to have been largely ignored by the government and I note that a new enquiry will be held into the 2016 Sir Ivan fire, where I, have no doubt, almost identical problems will be identified – that is, a bunch of “white shirts” ignored the advice of volunteers and land managers which led to inaction and significant property, asset and stock losses. It seems incredulous that the government can continue to hold enquiries, ignore the recommendations, and repeat. All the while, throwing more and more money at the problem which does nothing to fix any of the problems.

Certainly, since the establishment of the RFS in 1997, equipment and training for volunteers has significantly improved – this is exactly the type of support I expect from the paid staff. I also expect that the paid staff should deal with all government “paperwork” and leave me to manage my brigade as seen fit by my members, unfortunately that is not what happens, Captains and brigade managers spend many hours doing government paperwork that has slowly been delegated over years by district managers and RFS Service Standards to volunteers such that the volume of work is overwhelming and exacerbated by paid staff consistently failing to provide any support or assistance including not even responding to official written communication (at least that is certainly the case in my district). There are now so many service standards and SOPs that it is impossible for anyone to even be aware that most exist, yet the paid staff are perfectly happy to hold a volunteer accountable to every single one of them, especially if they don’t like you! And they don’t like me.... I have been an outspoken critic of the way volunteers are treated by the paid staff for a long time, as a consequence I have been bullied by the paid staff who have manipulated others into lodging the most incredible allegations against me, all of which have been subsequently dismissed – but not until my family and myself have been to hell and back, except for the latest disgraceful fit-up by RFS paid staff which is still under investigation based on allegations made against me more than a year ago. The RFS grievance procedure is a disgrace – the RFS paid staff, make the complaint, appoint the investigator, appoint the discipline panel, determine guilt, sentence the deemed guilty and determine the outcome of any appeal! This is all done in secret, zero accountability for those making vexatious claims, zero transparency. While lip service is paid to matters of procedural fairness and natural justice, the truth is there is none. I can provide in-camera testimony and documentary evidence of these claims should you require it.

It is worth noting that I don’t think the RFS staff are bad people, or are even aware that their actions are so detrimental to volunteers and volunteer relations. They are simply operating in a culture that has developed over many years, most significantly since the current Commissioner was appointed. Staff understandably don’t like criticism, none of us do, but the culture of the RFS is now so toxic that it must be addressed or you will continue to lose many more volunteers, most politicians and certainly the paid staff simply say “so what, we’ve got over 70,000 volunteers – we don’t need them all” except you don’t have that many volunteers at all, true volunteer numbers are probably around 15,000 to 18,000 state wide. Everyone knows that the 70k figure is ridiculous but for whatever reason no-one in public office wants to challenge it, maybe it’s just too hard to get accurate figures. Brigades are often very reluctant to identify true membership numbers because they fear repercussions such as loss of resources will result – our closet neighbouring brigade boasts about 100 volunteer members on their books yet during a recent fire campaign their truck was taken off the brigade because they couldn’t man it, the biggest brigade in our district

(on paper) boast over 200 volunteer members and yet their trucks routinely respond with a crew of just 2. My own brigade is a little more honest, we have about 60 on the books – but of those only about 10 are active. The sad fact that the huge discrepancy in real volunteer numbers not only gives government a false sense of security (it's ok to lose a few) but also costs the state millions of dollars every year administering and equipping these phantom members. The bigger problem is not that you're losing volunteer numbers though, but rather who you're losing. The volunteers that are walking away from the service are the most senior and most experienced, those that have the local knowledge, those that understand fire behaviour, traditional fire paths and historical data at immediate recall.

The paid staff, understandably, see people like me – those that don't agree with being treated as a minion, as trouble makers and to protect their positional authority will do whatever it takes to undermine and discredit such people. In my case that has manifested in years of bullying by the [redacted] District Manager, and [redacted] staff, and volunteer sycophants such as:

- Unjustified criticism and complaints.
- Excluded from activities and isolationist actions.
- Information essential to my volunteer role has been withheld.
- Consultation and resources essential to performing my role have been withheld.
- False rumours and negative comments about me have been allowed to be spread throughout the district and beyond.
- Micromanagement and excessive scrutiny of myself and my brigade are routine.

I have shared my evidence of the above behaviours with senior staff including the then Regional Manager [redacted], who to his credit did endeavour to address some of the problems in the [redacted] but sadly the culture is far too entrenched to be easily rectified. I am prepared to provide additional testimony and evidence to your hearing in person if required.

Of greatest impact on my family has been the cover-up, by the RFS paid staff, of the sexual misconduct of a senior male volunteer member (34 years old at the time of the offence) with a child volunteer member (16 years old, at the time, female). RFS staff at the most senior level of the service were made aware of this matter over 12 months ago and yet rather than protect its junior female member they instead reinstated the offender to the same brigade without referring the matter to police. This matter will not be further discussed here, but testimony and documentary evidence is available and I am happy to expand on these remarks in-camera.

So how do you fix the problems in the RFS?

The answer is simpler than you may think – the RFS needs to be restructured with new leadership sourced externally. Quite simply this is most easily achieved by taking the opportunity to relocate the RFS head office to a regional location – I note that in the last 24 hours it has been announced that a new RFS training facility is to be built at Dubbo (presumably to try to get Troy Grant re-elected) but what a great opportunity to announce the progressive relocation and restructure of the RFS to that same location. A new Commissioner is vital and whoever is ultimately appointed to that position must be an external appointment. The "Warringah Mafia" must be disbanded; that is, the top-heavy management of the RFS by Shane's Warringah mates club needs to stop. A restructure of

the RFS will allow the size of the paid staff to be progressively reduced including the dissolution of "Shane's Mowing and Slashing Service" (SMSS) which is a massive money pit and is seen by most volunteers as nothing but a cynical move to replace volunteers with paid firefighters – indeed the words of the then Emergency Services Minister, David Elliott, are still ringing in my ears "we can't leave it to dad's army". If anyone still seriously doubts he said it – he did, he said it to me in response to my question regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of using NPWS staff at fires. The SMSS is nothing more than a huge money pit, the work they do in preparing containment lines and maintaining fire trails cannot be overlooked but don't forget this work was all done by volunteers protecting their own communities in the past, why do we need a huge number of paid employees doing that work at all? And if we're that keen for the work to be done by employees then why are they doing it out of the latest and best fire-fighting appliances costing hundreds of thousands of dollars each and across their fleet, millions of dollars.... The work done by SMSS staff could be done out the back of a ute, give the best resources to the volunteers – not the paid staff who aren't even in a front-line firefighting role!

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to your enquiry. In summary:

I have been ritually bullied by paid staff and their cronies.

I fully support restructuring the RFS by relocating to a regional centre.

I am prepared to give further testimony and provide supplementary documented evidence in person and in-camera.