

Submission
No 98

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Mr Barry Aitchison and Mr Peter Bottom

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Partially
Confidential

We wish to submit the following points to the NSW Parliament's Legislative Council Legal Affairs Committee.

The persons that have prepared this submission are:

1. Barry Aitchison, ex FCO Snowy River Shire from 1981 through to the transfer from Local Government to State Government in 2003, then becoming Operations Officer Monaro Team until 2014; and still a member and Deputy Captain of Rocky Plain RFB.
2. Peter Bottom who over the past 45 years has held numerous positions in the Bushfire Brigade organisation as a member, Captain of the Berridale RFB for 15 years and Group Captain for Snowy River for around 15 years and still a current active member.

We know the whole organisation and how the changes that have occurred in the past 10 years have changed the structure at all levels of what was once a great and well respected organisation – “the egg has been scrambled and cannot be put together” unfortunately.

To provide adequate fire prevention, suppression and mitigation to communities across NSW a more simplistic perspective for rural people, run by practical people and not bureaucrats or academics is needed.

Here are some of the points we would like to raise:

- RFS Headquarters – should be located in rural NSW with rural people employed in the key position.
- The need to review Regional Offices and the number of staff that are employed to run them – what do these offices provide to our local communities, district staff and volunteers? In our experience, since the State Government became responsible for all staff in 2003, this is where most of the harassment, and standover attitudes developed, in particular with Examples could be given supporting this, resulting in the loss of key personnel at all levels.
- Bushfire Brigades once were a community based organisation, community driven and community supported both financially and with manpower. This has changed dramatically over the past years from a community based organisation to a “Service” which promotes Service Standards and Procedures written by bureaucrats in Head Office, based on standards from Sydney brigades, and not suiting rural/country people or Brigades. All Service Standards should be reviewed.
- What is evident from when the organisation transferred from Local to State Government is the loss of practical/local people at all levels who knew the local conditions and community requirements. The Service today is one of many public servants with the number increasing out of control at all the wrong places and levels.
- Uniforms on some staff become offensive and turn rural/country people off. Uniformed officers, in some cases, use their nice white shirts with epaulettes to intimidate and harass rural people.

- The 2002/2003 fires in Kosciuszko were the biggest fires that our area had faced since 1939 with the majority of high country in Victoria/NSW burning. What did we learn? Not a lot, the key point was that local people, with their involvement at all levels were the lynch pin.
- The State Government Enquiry into this fire was a complete waste of time. The one recommendation that came out of this State Government Enquiry was for more money to be spent on fire trails on private land and yet this still has not happened. This Enquiry was a joke to so many people on the Monaro and another reason why people and volunteers have walked away from the organisation and could not be bothered contributing to this Enquiry.
- The Federal Government Enquiry (Gary Nairn) was much more productive with a number of recommendations being made. The Committee actually listened to the volunteers and Group Captains and physically inspected areas and supported the volunteers, communities and landholders wherever possible.
- Due to the amount of landholders, who are volunteers, walking away from the organisation freelance firefighting is and will increase. Landholder helping landholder or neighbour helping neighbour will always occur and due to lack of respect for senior or district management this will occur more often. The organisation needs to keep landholders and volunteers on side, but uniforms, harassment and standover tactics does not help.
- The question must be asked – out of all the staff employed by RFS in key roles, how many have had “hands on” experience, involvement and exposure to fires, major fires or even good hazard reduction? Do they understand the different vegetation types around the state and do they listen to local knowledge and understand rural people?
- Research should be a high priority given that fires are getting bigger (why)? It’s not climate change but an increase in fuel loads and a decrease in good prevention practices using practical people. The Highfire Project has been kept alive in the High Country by people like ourselves and a team of Scientists - but where are the senior staff from the RFS who should be involved in fire research to give them a better understanding of our changing landscape.

In summary, if the Service is doing all the right things – how and why are there so many disillusioned volunteers walking away from the organisation? Rural brigades are becoming a smaller workforce, not solely because of an aging population, but because younger people that we need and that are here don’t want to put up with the bullshit.