

**Supplementary
Submission
No 157a**

INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 28 July 2017

Partially
Confidential

Submission to the NSW Rural Fire Service



24 JULY 2017

BACKGROUND

My name is . I'm a member of the Team .My first introduction to the Bush Fire Brigades was in . the then FCO of came to my high school looking for young radio operators to train. I became one of them. When I left school I went home and in I joined the local bush fire brigade. It was small; its last big engagement was in recent memory, the fire, its next was . Equipment was old like all brigades but was sprinkled with new tanker trailers and even two HF radios.

I went on to the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)

The FCO was also local; the brigades supported the shire and in turn were supported by the shire. As time passed became the FCO for the area, a role he would serve in for many years.

Over the years equipment improved, often driven by our FCO and oft as not, coronial findings. The service responded to needs and grew into an agency that was responding to the community's needs then,

Then it happened. The Bush Fire Brigade became the Rural Fire Service which in turn became a monster!

TRAINING

I was now an employee of NPWS and in the 's I completed RFS training and was issued a brown training passport. Through the years I have attended many wonderful training courses provided by the RFS and have nothing but praise for them, HOWEVER many members now look at attaining all levels of training to quickly reach a certain level. Once a level is reached the desire is to convert into the paid side of the service.

The downside of lots of training and little mentoring by skilled officers, leads to newly trained officers with minimal experience and in a lot of cases overestimated self capability being placed in charge of incidents. The result at worst catastrophic, is at best confusing, with tasks not completed or started which leads to demoralising of crews.

The RFS is a large RTO and spends time off season training. This is good. Better training would be a time period of completing one course before starting another. This would give the candidate time to compound their training.

Older members should be able to RPL and are invited to do so. However this process once entered into causes many not to complete it. This in turns causes many to turn away and in some cases leave the RFS.

Many RFS members see employment by the RFS as a culmination of their volunteer duties and use this training to attain that. It disturbs me that highly trained staff members with little experience with campaign type fires will be calling the shots and directing how things are to be done.

RECOMMENDATION

That the NSW RFS implement;

- The progress through the system is based on skill and knowledge and not reliant on Vocational Training as the main indicator of skill.
- That older members are valued and retained and not made to feel unwanted and out of date
- That training is not used to fast track to employment with the RFS

HEADQUARTER LOCATION

The reluctance of the Rural Fire Service to leave Sydney and move to a central regional area, disgusts me!

It only reinforces to me that it is the **Newcastle Sydney Wollongong Rural Fire Service**. The current commissioner comes from a Sydney area brigade, none of the staff want to move away from Sydney as they all live there and it must stay there. How many staff in headquarters lives in a post code not in close proximity of Sydney?

The cost of all the leather coats in Headquarters could have bought equipment to use on a fire line!

The disparity from the Sydney metro region to rural NSW

To begin with I feel as do many others, that RFS headquarters looks after the brigades closest to it and the further you get from HQ the lower the consideration. To further define this I would go so far as to say that there are two components of the RFS now, urban, within 100km of Sydney or headquarters and rural, everywhere else!

Regional businesses all use the NBN, communicate with their staff daily. A move to Dubbo, Parkes or Orange would show some desire to put the rural back into the name. A move outside of Sydney would show the management that they listen to the members. The Premier may even venture to your new HQ and meet the "rural and regional Australians" that we hear about in the press so much but are never seen. The same "rural and regional Australians" that are affected by uncontrolled wild fires that take their crops, maim their stock and destroy their communities.

Post non urban large fires, attended by task and strike forces from the urban brigades, the heartbreaking scenes (recorded on phones and posted to face book) are only witnessed by those still in the community and the rural brigades.

But the urban crews are safely back in Sydney, when old mate is digging a hole and shooting the last of his well bred ewes, they're down the club, or on the beach telling all and sundry about how they and their team saved West Gorkilthall, while the local people left in that area now grow steadily angry about what could have been done to stop the fire in the first place. The urban member's house, stock and family were never in danger. They didn't drive past their burning shearing shed to try and protect their mates shearing shed! This rural brigade located here is not a club like the urban brigades are.

If the RFS were located well outside the metro area and was placed in a community that may be affected by fire, chances are they may take a keener interest in it and not the remote and clinical one they have now.

RECOMMENDATION

That the NSW RFS implement;

- That the majority of the members are not located within 100km of Headquarters and should have access to a headquarters within a reasonable distance from them
- A centralised headquarters within the state
- If unable to do so, **split the RFS into Urban and Rural divisions with separate headquarters.**

INTERACTIONS WITH THE RFS MANAGEMENT TEAM

I went to a RFS school in a few years ago and a member had travelled two days to get to it! When a Sydney based member (urban) asked her how many bays their shed had (having told us that their shed nearly operates 24/7) one was the answer! Next to tree as the brigade didn't have the funding for a shed! She showed commitment to the service, why can't the service show commitment to us and put the rural and funding back into it?

Being in a region that experiences snow and frost our brigades had design elements in the tankers to be frost resistant. This capability of local design and innovation was removed from us and centralised or urbanised. When the matter of below zero storage of equipment was raised, we were told that to overcome the frost issue, the heaters should be left on in the sheds!

Most of our sheds are remote and don't have mains power!

Trust of rural brigades by our urban headquarters is nonexistent.

I once had to call an officer in Sydney

days later I got a call from one of my managers. He had been contacted by this gentleman from headquarters and directed to inform me that I was not to contact him in the future. I had not been rude or unprofessional at any time; however an inquiry from a volunteer member elicited a strong reprimand from a paid, important cog of the urban rural fire service.

Staffing

Today the NSW RFS comprises over 2,100 rural fire brigades with a total volunteer membership of approximately 72,000. <http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/about-us/structure>

So we have over seventy two thousand (72000) volunteers, but do we. It is common practise for a member to be retained on the books of one brigade and placed on the books of their new brigade. Brigade numbers are huge around the urban areas and so they should be, however the numbers in rural area are declining. How many are there really capable and able to turn out to an incident. How many “members” have passed on but still listed? We need to clean the books out and be truthful with our selves and the public who place faith in the 72000 to protect them.

Or are 72000 a number that keeps the RFS best funded and headquarters close to the government coffers?

Identification

In the current climate of high security I would believe it difficult for me to gain access to the control rooms and offices of the RFS Urban Headquarters. And so it should be. No doubt full time employees are issued with the appropriate levels of identification and access.

As a large organisation the question must be asked, why isn't a central registration of members existent? In a time when Working with Vulnerable People is a must for an organisation such as this, why hasn't it been done? How many members carry significant criminal histories that would not allow them to be in the employ of a body with the powers of the RFS (power of entry, flood assistance and entry to homes etc?)

RECOMMENDATION

That the NSW RFS implement;

- That the service collect and collate the correct information regarding brigades, including Working with Vulnerable People and remove members who cannot provide appropriate referencing.
- Issue an Identification card with photo Id and micro chip with skills embedded. This can be accessed at major incidents by reader when assembling crews.

- This will assist staff, government and the public to know who protects us and how much it costs.

Functional Assessments

Can staff actually do the job? Fitness and functional capability for duty should be at the forefront of recruitment. *I was on multiple deployments to _____ in _____ and witnessed several members of the NSW RFS who had difficulty in functioning as frontline fire fighters.*

This included members having physical difficulty getting in and out of a Cat 1 tanker, many officers were overweight to the point of morbid obesity and others appeared to have difficulty with fire control other than tanker based, as walking off road would be an issue.

Why isn't the service doing something about this? It must reduce the amount paid in compensation for injuries on the fire line.

RECOMMENDATION

That the NSW RFS implement;

- Functional assessments at time of recruitment. With assessment for fitness for duty post injury before resumption of active duty.

Use of local knowledge

During the 2003 fire fighting operations it was good to see the use of local knowledge to assist out of area fire fighters. This is not always the case though. Older fire fighters with good local knowledge should be sought by fire control officers to assist in fire fighting operations.

RECOMMENDATION

That the NSW RFS implement;

- Identification of fire fighters with good, sound local knowledge, to be recognised as an important resource in fire fighting.

Hazard reduction

From first nation use of patch work burning to recent times with mountain graziers, we have seen good fire management practises. Patch work burning is being used on lands within the Northern Territory as I write, to great effect. The amount of damaging heat and smoke from large fires has been reduced.

<http://aboriginalcarbonfund.com.au/savanna-burning/>

However the NSW RFS has made hazard reduction an oxymoron. Thirty three pages of standards for hazard reduction to be met by brigade members. All of it is common sense practice but to cover the service's future and business case for the publication section, we must abide by it.

By the time all the paperwork and risk assessments are completed, all stakeholders involved and ready to move forward, the small window of opportunity available to reduce is, in most cases gone.

However research does show that hazard reduction does little to slow fire progression in catastrophic fires, but good, consistent hazard reduction work helps to control and reduce the impact of fires in nearly all of the incidents attended.

Previous generations saw the importance of fuel reduction why have we lost the focus? Is it too hard so we make it hard with all the paperwork, thereby strengthening the argument it is too hard to do?

But why is it that we hear of record fuel loads now? Why are fires more fearsome now than before? Why are we warned of an always catastrophic upcoming fire season? Why are there more big fires and uncontrollable fires now than before? How did we manage fire so well until now?

SIMPLY FOR THE REASON THAT THE RURAL FIRE IS BIG BUSINESS AND THIS BIG BUSINESS IS THE CORE OF THE NSW RFS.

THE BUSINESS IS FIRE OF COURSE!

Because a simple hazard reduction on the scale of what is currently needed will never be as soul stirring to a commissioner and his minions as a single pass of a Very Large Air Tanker (VLAT) can give.

Priorities are spending, spend on aviation, and spend on the shiny stuff, cos that puts fires out!

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the NSW RFS implement;

- A move to a decentralised location to lose the urban persona, make itself available to all members not just the urban members
- Move back to core business of fire fighting, hazard reduction

The White Fleet

The white and the red fleet. Or is it the have and they have not? I currently work in an organisation where there is an operational front line fleet marked accordingly. There is also a support fleet, marked in fleet livery. The use of this second fleet (a white fleet if you will) is heavily regulated to its use. Use of a company or government car can lead to FBT costs I believe.

It's demoralising to see our money frittered away on a useless fire fighting fleet and then to see taxpayer's money wasted on cars for personal use.

RECOMMENDATION

That the NSW RFS implement;

- That the white fleet be made part of a pool of cars and regulated to their use
- That the white fleet to made up of four wheel drive units only
- Special case to be made why a sedan needs to be purchased.

Perhaps less of the Highway Patrol image and more of a working fire fighter may help to unite the Urban and Rural fire service.

CONCLUSION

The NSW RFS has become a business that feeds off of people's most primal fear, fire. From humble beginnings of leather beaters, 4WD Blitzes, 6WD Studebakers, white overalls and the beginning of uniform, training, better communications and a vision for the future.

What wasn't foreseen was the juggernaut that the NSW urban RFS became.

Get back to the basics, put the bush back into the RFS, stop making this a big business for all your mates and show some guts!

Or we could start this thing called a bush fire brigade, minimal training and equipment and a desire to help our fellow man, all controlled by a FCO and supported by our shire!

Sound familiar?