

RURAL FIRE BRIGADES ASSOCIATION QUEENSLAND INC. ABN. 37 417 474 709

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RFBAQ Submission to the independent review into the future operations, structure and sustainability of Queensland Fire and Emergency Service conducted by KPMG.

The structure of the QFES goes back to 1666 and the Great Fire of London.

After the Great Fire, the first fire insurance company called “The Fire Office” was established in 1667. This commercial fire brigade employed small teams of Thames watermen as firefighters. Other similar companies soon followed and this was how property was protected from fire until the early 1800s. Insurance policy holders were given a badge, or fire mark, to affix to their buildings. If a fire started, the fire brigade was called. They looked for the fire mark and, provided it was the right one, the fire would be fought. Often the buildings were left to burn until the right fire company attended.

Before long insurance companies realised it would be more efficient to have a single, unified force to watch over London, and so in 1833 the London Fire Engine Establishment was created.

In about 1836 the first fire insurance companies began operating in Australia. These Brigades were largely local volunteers who used equipment supplied by the insurance companies.

In Brisbane during the 1860s no less than five volunteer fire brigades were formed and then disbanded due to lack of support and cooperation between the interested parties, namely the State, local governments and insurance companies.

Queensland town fire brigades continued to develop independently until they were amalgamated into the Queensland Fire Service (now known as the QFES) in 1990. This was also the same year that the Rural Fires Board was dissolved and the Rural Fires Act was emasculated into a few unempowering sections of the Fire Service Act 1990.

The culmination of 350 years of growth in the fire industry has seen Queensland adopt a fire service model that was created to support a high population density model in a constrained environment and has as a funding driver the ownership of property. This is why the emergency management levy is collected through rates notices.

Queensland is of course a large state with an enormous geographic footprint, low to very low population densities and the highest risk is posed from the areas that return the lowest revenue, so commensurately receive the lowest funding support; 5% of the QFES budget to defend 93% of Queensland.

The QFES Regulation 2011 is the enabler on how the QFES collects the whole of state levy (not the Rural Fire levy many brigades receive from local government). The current metro-centric regulation is a hardwired document that links increased funding to increased staffing and has no correlation to community risk or need. The driver under the current regulation is the communities capacity to pay and if a community can pay a lot then it receives a high service level of potential service delivery whether the risk is there or not.



A good example is Ascot in Brisbane. Very few house fires, doesn't flood, no bushfires, no major highways and associated car accidents; so what would be classified as low risk. Yet the householders in Ascot pay an annual levy of \$229.80 to receive a fire truck within 12 minutes 90% of the time as the population density supports the high-cost model.

Kilcoy householders on the other hand pay an annual levy of \$112.40 for exactly the same promised service within 12 minutes 90% of the time yet this town floods, has bushfires, a major highway and associated car accidents yet the community's capacity to pay is lower due to density.

The promised service in the same 12 minutes 90% of the time yet two distinctly different prices that householders have to pay. And this is where the feudal nature that stretches back to 1667 becomes apparent, as it is only landholders who subsidize the fire services in Queensland. Whether there is one person in the household or six it is the same fee. If your household has one car or six it does not matter as the funding model is driven by land ownership. If the QFES can drive around it then they will bill you for it.

A major difference in Queensland between now and 1667 is that Insurance Companies do not compulsorily contribute. Every household insurance policy that has storm or flood cover has a component built into the premium to cover the cost of storm and flood clean-up by commercial providers, yet during storm, flooding and cyclone clean-up, Rural Fire Brigade volunteers contribute their labour and equipment free to washout affected properties and chainsaw cyclone damaged households with no insurance company contribution.

In the 93% of Queensland that is covered by the 30,000 members of the 1,400 Rural Fire Brigades there is no guaranteed service, yet householders still are levied \$112.40.

And what do landholders in rural Queensland receive for their money?

60% of Rural Fire Brigades do not have a fire truck.

Many of the brigades that do have a truck do not have a fire shed to put it in.

Many of the fire sheds that are owned by QFES are not connected to electricity, running water or have a toilet.

Rural Fire Brigade firefighters are not supported in universal First Aid training even though fire trucks are fitted with defibrillators and as the pretext for Blue Card brigade members are classified as Health Care Providers.

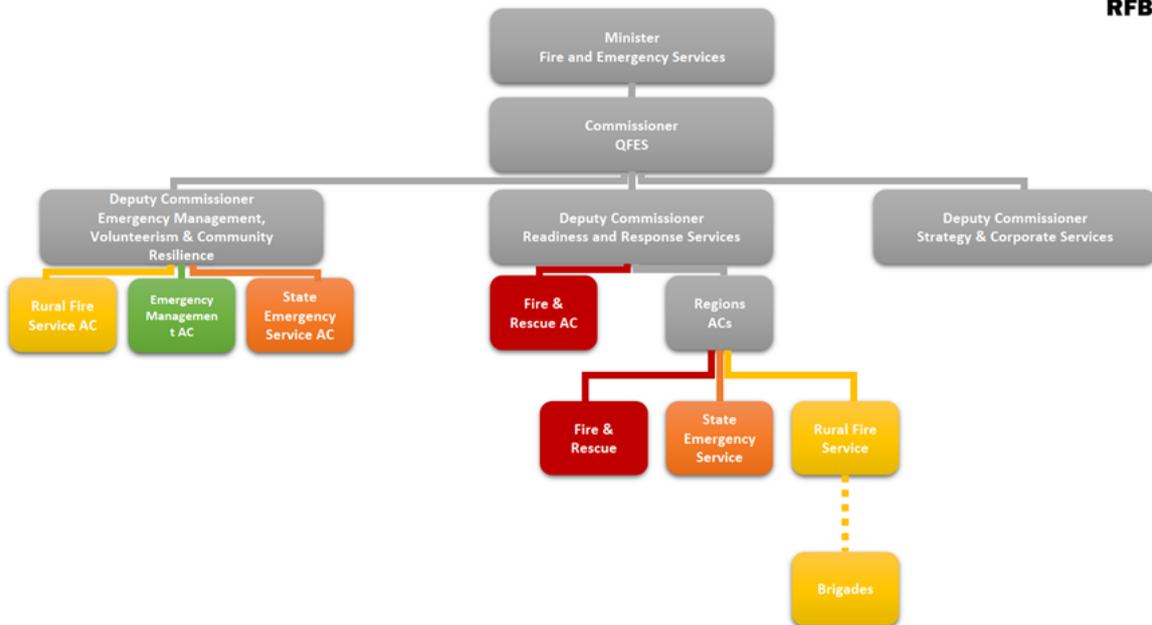
The lack of funding for frontline services is not replicated within The QFES, as there has been an increase in media and Frontline Enabler (Support) staff of 98 FTE over the last 3 years (QoN 2019/20 Estimates).

This is what the QFES has created and this is what the QFES supports and this is why the QFES should be dissolved.



The inequity of the QFES is again exemplified by the regionalisation structure imposed by Fire Service Senior Officers, without consultation, on the Rural Fire Service and Brigades in March 2019.

Current Structure



In the current structure it is easy to see that Rural Fire Brigades report to a regional Assistant Commissioner, and every regional Assistant Commissioner in Queensland is from a Fire and Rescue Service background. These Senior Officers report to a Deputy Commissioner for Readiness and Response who is also from a Fire and Rescue Service background. The Deputy Commissioner for Volunteerism and Emergency Management has no volunteers and the Assistant Commissioner for the Rural Fire Service has no direct support line to brigades.

Major recent failings such as ‘Regionalisation’, the Blue Card rollout debacle, the disempowering of Brigades to put ‘fire on the ground’ during fire season, Rural Fire paid staff not industrially allowed to progress beyond the rank of Superintendent in the regions, the dismal build numbers of Rural Fire trucks, the complete lack of legislative support for volunteer firefighters (the word Volunteer does not figure once in the whole 216 pages of the Fire Service Act 1990), the list just goes on and on, is an indictment against the QFES.

Another prime example is the 30-minute delay in responding Rural Fire Brigades to fires. On the 8th of this month (August, 2021) this resulted in a Rural Fire Tanker not being sent to a house fire in a Rural Fire area and the house was lost.



The QFES for many years has been delaying the callout of brigades or not calling them at all for fires in their brigade areas and the QFES have stated that due to the callout computer programme being purchased to support Fire and Rescue it is unable to track brigade appliances or know where brigade stations are. The CARA report into the RFSQ from 2016 recommended that the QFES start sending the right fire truck to fires, yet at the time of writing this is still not possible.

On the topic of Reviews into the QFES that make recommendations that never happen, the Public Accounts and Public Works Committee review of 2011, Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland *Recommendation 2 – that QFRS include consultation with rural fire brigades as mandatory when boundary changes are proposed and Recommendation 14 – that the for Minister for Police, Corrective Services and Emergency Services undertake a thorough review, including consultation with rural fire brigades, regarding the proposed formula for distribution of funding.* These recommendations have been so thoroughly ignored, that at the time of writing the QFES has defunded 5 brigades in the vicinity of Brisbane without consultation or an ongoing future funding model. As has been happening since the report of 2011, the QFES will say sorry, try to do better next time and then keep on truckin’.

The QFES would have to be the most reviewed department in the State and at great cost we have had the above-mentioned Public Accounts and Public Works Committee review 2011 and;

Report to Parliament No. 8 for 2011 Follow up of four audits completed in 2008 and 2009 by the Queensland Audit Office;

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry 2011;

The Malone Review by Ted Malone MP 2013;

The Keelty Review 2014 by Mick Keelty AO APM, Former Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police;

The Allison Review 2014 by Margaret Allison;

The unfinished CARA review 2016 - ;

Follow-up of Bushfire prevention and preparedness Report 5: 2018–19, Queensland Audit Office;

C4I Foundations Review 2018 by Maurie McNarn AO Major General (retd);

2018 Queensland Bushfire Review by the Inspector General Emergency Management;

The Blue Water Review 2018 by Campbell Darby DSC AM Commodore (Retd);

SES Review 2020 by Campbell Darby DSC AM Commodore (Retd);

and now the Independent Review by KPMG 2021.



These are the headline external reviews conducted publicly and calling for submissions. The QFES has undertaken multiple internal reviews with companies such as Deloitte Australia and other paid consultants and we are unaware of how many, when and at what cost; but we are aware of the ramifications when the QFES announces changes to the department based on these anonymous review recommendations.

Speaking of internal QFES reviews and audits, the RFBAQ was asked to participate in a Legislative Changes programme run by QFES. The first meeting we attended was on the 19th February 2016 (yes, well over 5 years ago) where we put forward our proposal to better empower brigades and brigade members. As mentioned above, the current Act does not mention volunteers once in its 216 pages and is so dis-empowering that Queensland volunteer firefighters are not classified as fire officers. To best show the lunacy of this was during the Commonwealth Games where the local Rural Fire Brigades were part of the co-ordinated state emergency response and recovery plan yet had to drive their fire trucks on the highway in the left-hand truck lane as they are not classified as emergency vehicles. The RFBAQ offered to bring up volunteer firefighters from NSW or Vic, or any other state or territory, as these volunteer firefighters in Queensland are classified as Fire Officers but a Queensland volunteer firefighter in Queensland is not. The QFES attempted to solve this issue by giving a note to go in the glovebox of each truck to show to police if requested. This is a perfect example of how the QFES Senior Officers and bureaucrats do nothing to enable brigades rather reinforces the status quo or actively go out of their way to disempower brigades. After years of meetings and submissions the best that the Legislative Review team and the QFES could come up with was an attempt to change the Fire Act to allow the Commissioner to sack a brigade member. Thankfully a number of Members of Parliament from a number of political parties contacted the RFBAQ with their offers of support in fighting the draft amendments and the whole thing died away during the state election process.

This was not the first time that Rural Fire Brigades have needed the protection of Parliament from the QFES. In 2015 the QFES championed unfair and discriminatory cancer coverage and this necessitated the RFBAQ having a fair cancer coverage private members bill tabled that allowed all members of Parliament to show their support for volunteer firefighters. Now Queensland volunteer firefighters have the highest level of presumptive legislative cancer coverage support in Australia and this was thanks to Parliament and no thanks to the QFES.

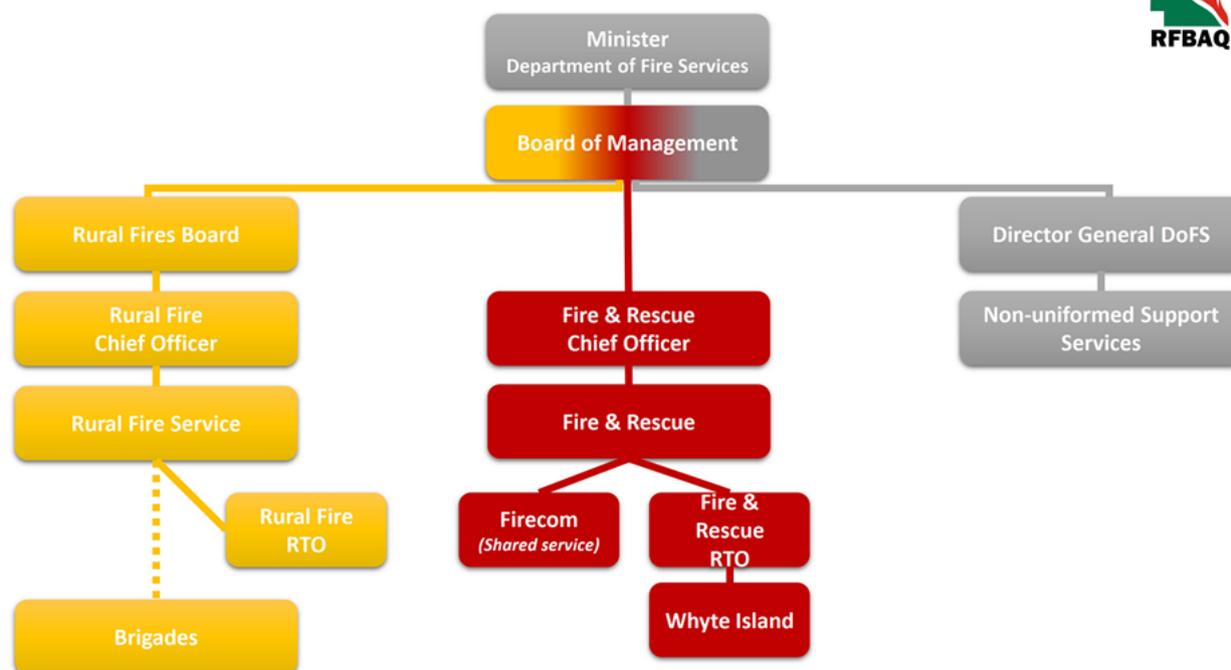
To empower the Brigade Members, Brigades and Rural Fire Service staff and ensure that 'Rural Fire' is supported and enabled by a model that meets both current needs and future community requirements the RFBAQ recommends a restructure of fire services in Queensland.



At a Special Meeting of the RFBAQ held on Saturday 1st August 2020 there was overwhelming support for the creation of a Department of Fire Services (below).

Of note, at the Special Meeting, not one RFBAQ Representative voted in support of The QFES in its current structure.

Department of Fire Services

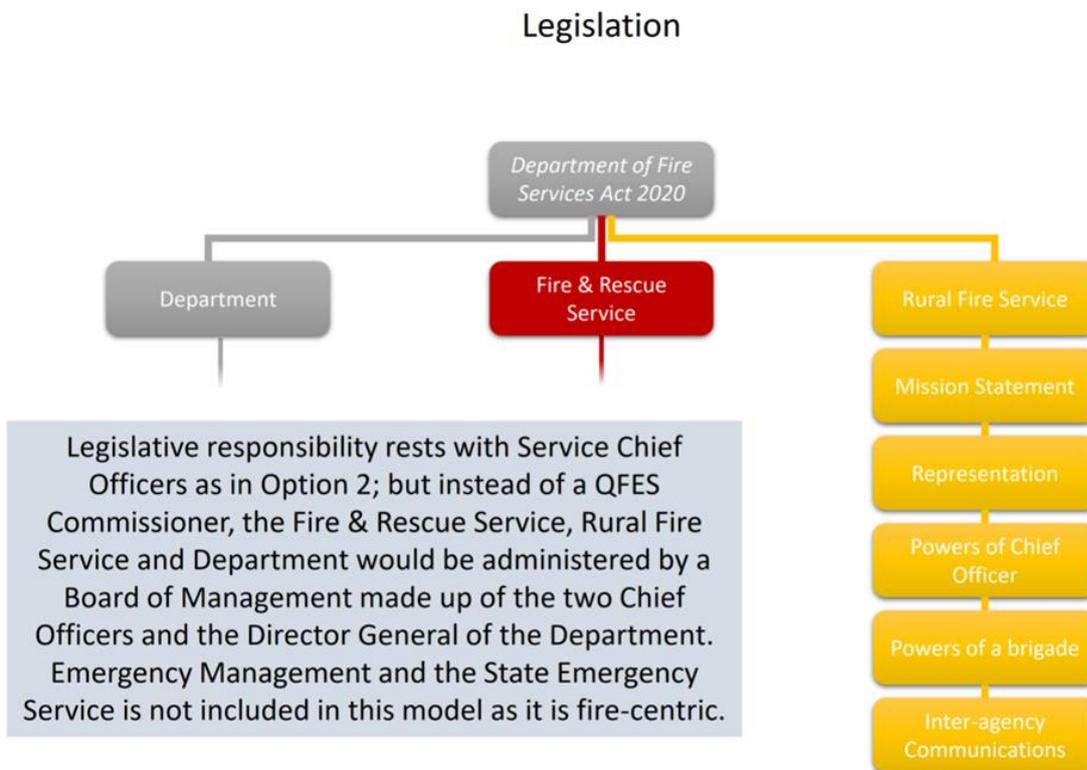


To enable this it is imperative that the Department of Fire Services structure as detailed in the above diagram be implemented.

Rural Fire Brigades are volunteer unincorporated community organisations and Fire and Rescue firefighters are career officers in a paramilitary organisation. These are two sociologically different groups who need to be treated separately while acknowledging that they both exist to defend their communities, yet the support that is required for each is different. This is the other major failing of the QFES, where for the bureaucratic convenience of chair bound Senior Officers and the burgeoning QFES public service, the Brigades and Fire and Rescue Stations were lumped together.



To acknowledge the differences of the services within the same department, we suggest that both Fire and Rescue and Rural Fire Service have separate sections in legislation (as below) and that this new legislation have a section for the departmental component that is separate from the defined services.



The RFBAQ would like to thank KPMG for the phone interview of Friday the 13th and for accepting our submission outlining the failings of the current model and our recommendation for a way forward.

The brigades exist to defend their communities and we need to get back to having a fire service that supports the brigades in doing that.

Regards,

Justin Choveaux
General Manager
Rural Fire Brigades Association Qld

