

# Auditor-General of Queensland

## Executive Summary

### Report to Parliament No. 3 for 2008 Management of Rural Fire Services in Queensland

#### A Performance Management Systems Audit



# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Management of rural fires

Under the provisions of the *Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990*, government has a responsibility to protect persons, property and the environment from fire emergencies. The government has established within the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) two distinct models to deliver this service; the paid staff urban 'red truck' service model, to protect major cities and towns across the State and the volunteer rural fire 'yellow truck' service model, to protect rural areas and minor townships and villages. Rural fire services are responsible for protecting approximately 17 per cent of the population and 93 per cent of the land area of Queensland.

The rural fire service consists of 1,525 rural fire brigades, involving approximately 35,000 dedicated volunteers. These volunteers commit their time and effort, not only in dealing with incidents, but also toward training and fundraising to ensure the success of this service.

The rural service model is funded from a number of sources. The State Government provides funding through the provision of grants toward the acquisition of appliances and for the construction of rural fire stations. The State also provides training and protection equipment to brigade members and the subsidisation of general fire fighting equipment that brigades may purchase. In addition to State funding, Local Governments may collect a rural fire levy from their ratepayers and remit this to rural fire brigades within the local government area. Other sources of brigade funds include grants from non-government organisations, fundraising and donations.

## 1.2 Audit opinion

After auditing the performance management systems of the rural fire service, I consider that while the rural fire service currently provides effective management of fires within rural communities, the service is at risk of becoming unsustainable due to the combination of a number of external and internal factors.

Within QFRS, there is a lack of comprehensive forward planning and risk management processes as well as inadequate systems to effectively assess the funding and resource requirements of the brigades. Effective decision making is also hindered by inadequate performance measurement. There are limitations in the systems to ensure training and workplace health and safety standards are met. In my opinion, these deficiencies become even more critical when allowance is made for: the potential for increases in the frequency and intensity of wildfire incidents as a result of climate change; urban encroachment; and difficulties in

recruiting and training new volunteers to replace the ageing volunteers.

I note that QFRS recognises these sustainability issues and has taken a number of positive actions toward addressing them. This audit highlighted however, that QFRS needs to improve its existing management systems to not only provide an appropriate level of governance and accountability now, but to ensure issues affecting the continuation of this service are identified and included in future planning.

In addition, one issue that requires urgent clarification is the financial accountability framework of rural fire brigades. Rural fire brigades appear to be managed as separate entities with their own financial accounts operated independently of QFRS. However the legislation provides for brigades to be part of the QFRS structure, with QFRS responsible for the liabilities of these brigades. As outlined in section 3.3, the framework for the financial management and audit of these brigades needs clarification.

The significance of the need to maintain a volunteer based service delivery model is highlighted by the cost to Government of alternative models of fire service delivery. QFRS estimate that in the past two years, (which have been relatively quiet years with respect to bushfires given the drought conditions across Queensland), at least 350,000 hours of service have been undertaken by rural fire service volunteers within the most populated areas of Queensland covered by the rural fire service.

## **1.3 Key findings**

The primary focus of this audit report is to examine the QFRS systems which enable QFRS to manage rural fire services. The audit identified a number of systemic issues requiring improvement, including planning, risk management, performance measurement, brigade funding and resourcing and training. These issues are addressed more fully in section three of the report.

### **Forward planning**

There is a lack of comprehensive forward planning processes to identify and manage all future risks to the sustainability of the rural fire service. In addition, there are limited forward planning processes at the regional level and there are no formal mechanisms to ensure significant brigade issues are taken into account in the planning process.

### **Risk management**

Current risk management processes are informal, ad-hoc or inconsistently implemented across the State. Further, there is no system to ensure key risks at all organisational levels are identified and managed effectively by QFRS.

## **Brigade funding and resourcing**

There is a lack of adequate systems in place to capture, analyse and report the level of brigade funding. Brigade resource levels and needs cannot be effectively assessed due to the lack of systematic communication with members, therefore some brigade resourcing needs (including for essential safety equipment) were unknown to QFRS. Further there is a lack of appropriate systems for QFRS to monitor the condition and safety of rural fire brigade equipment.

## **Performance measurement**

Performance measurement systems within QFRS Rural Operations division were found to be inadequate to support effective decision making. This impacts on any management and resource allocation decisions made by executive management.

## **Training**

Currently there is a significant gap between QFRS accepted minimum standards of brigade training and the actual levels. This training gap has been recognised and prioritised by QFRS Rural Operations division and is subject to reporting and planning by management. Information collected during the audit suggests that the training gap reported by QFRS may be inaccurate.

There also needs to be adequate recognition of the changing nature of rural fire brigade activity and a change to the training of brigades to better reflect this. I noted during the audit that rural fire brigade activity is changing with some brigades reporting that only 50 per cent of the incidents they attend are traditional bush or grass fires. Rural fire brigades are increasingly dealing with incidents such as structure fires, motor vehicle accidents and other emergencies.

It was noted that QFRS have recognised a number of issues that may effect the sustainability of the rural fire service model and have taken a number of positive actions toward addressing them. Over the past two years there have been structural changes within QFRS, which increased the number of regional based brigade training and support staff. In addition QFRS has commenced the reclassification of rural fire brigades based on risk, and are focused on measuring the volunteer training gap and introducing processes to address this gap. Also, there has been significant investment over the past seven years in upgrading the rural fire fighting fleet including the introduction of a policy of replacing all fire fighting appliances before they reach 20 years of age.

However if QFRS do not take steps to address the issues noted above, the sustainability of the current rural fire service may be at risk. I have made a series of recommendations within this report which I consider to be important in ensuring the effectiveness of the current and future service.

## **1.4 Recommendations**

### **FORWARD PLANNING**

It is recommended that:

- 1. QFRS implement a forward planning process specific to rural fire management as part of the QFRS strategic planning process, which involves regional and area offices and incorporates:**
  - a process for identifying risks and opportunities**
  - the development of strategies to address the risks and opportunities**
  - a system to monitor and report on the implementation of strategies.**
- 2. QFRS provide guidance and support to rural fire brigades in the development of their one year operational plan and three year management plan.**
- 3. QFRS implement a process to review brigade plans and incorporate specific issues identified into forward planning at the area and regional levels.**

### **RISK MANAGEMENT**

It is recommended that:

- 4. QFRS establish a structured risk management process for rural fire management, which involves regional and area offices, to enhance decision making processes and ensure opportunities are maximised and losses are minimised. This process should be linked to forward planning and incorporate existing processes such as:**
  - brigade hazard identification and reduction plans (brigade fire management plans)**
  - brigade one year operational and three year management plans**
  - local action plans for iZone brigades (high risk areas).**
- 5. QFRS implement a brigade issues management process to capture, manage and report specific brigade issues.**

### **BRIGADE FUNDING AND RESOURCING**

It is recommended that:

- 6. QFRS ensure compliance with the brigade accountability requirements for funding received by rural fire brigades as specified in the Rural Fire Brigade Manual**
- 7. QFRS review the financial accountability and audit requirements of the rural fire brigades to reflect their status as part of QFRS**

8. QFRS implement a system to collate and analyse brigade funding information
9. QFRS provide assistance to brigades in determining and budgeting for their resource needs
10. QFRS utilise performance information on brigade activity as a factor in determining brigade resource and funding needs
11. QFRS implement a system to monitor the condition and safety of brigade buildings and equipment.

## **PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT**

It is recommended that:

12. QFRS determine the performance information needed to support effective decision making
13. QFRS establish a suitable process to reliably capture that information
14. QFRS introduce a system to collate and analyse performance information for use in management reporting and to support effective decision making processes.

## **TRAINING**

It is recommended that:

15. QFRS continue to support area training staff in the development and implementation of brigade training programs and calendars
16. QFRS improve the capacity to address the brigade training gap by continuing to encourage and facilitate the accreditation of volunteer trainers within brigades where appropriate.

# **1.5 Department of Emergency Services response**

The Director-General, in his response dated 6 May 2008, stated:

*“Strong community involvement has been the feature of rural fire brigades for the past 60 years. This feature was encompassed in legislation from 1947 and provided the basis for service provision to rural communities. As a result, rural fire brigades were established as community based organisations. Since 1990 the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) continues to treat brigades as community based organisations and strives to ensure that the relationship with the community is maintained.*

*Since its beginnings in 1947, the Government has taken positive steps to reinforce the role that rural fire brigades play in protecting the Queensland community. This has been through the provision of additional*

resourcing and support, through restructuring of the organisation to better meet the changing needs and an increased focus on risk management. QFRS Rural Operations continues to monitor the profile of rural fire brigade volunteers and all indications are volunteer numbers continue to be sustainable and the age profile is being augmented by the recruitment of younger volunteers.

QFRS Rural Operations took the initiative in 2007 to develop a Future Directions Paper, identifying key organisational risks specific to QFRS Rural Operations and strategies to address the risks. This document was endorsed by the QFRS Commissioner in March 2008.

Rural fire brigades are community self-help organisations with brigades expected to assist with funding their own operations, purchases and expenses. Legislation was enacted in 1994 that enables, but does not compel, local governments to raise a levy for local rural fire brigades. Currently in Queensland, local governments collect a levy for a total of 392 rural fire brigades (25%). The levy amount is decided by local government in consultation with ratepayers, rural fire brigades and the QFRS. Instead of raising a separate rural fire levy, some local governments choose to support its local brigades with funds from general rates.

Rural Operations is currently in the process of developing the Rural Operations' State and Regional Business Plans for 2008-2009 with appropriate performance measures identified to measure the effectiveness of the strategies outline in the plan. Rural Operations is also currently developing a Quarterly Performance Review – Area Report for measuring performance at area level for implementation in financial year 2008-2009.

Fundamental to the training strategy being implemented by Rural Operations is the recently released Volunteer Learning and Development Framework (VLDF) and the processes of training targets and volunteer roles. The willingness and availability of volunteers to engage in training events is at the discretion of volunteers themselves and is a major consideration as a limiting factor in closing the training gap. However to further improve training engagement and completion rates, flexible learning methodologies that include e-Learning are being developed and introduced through access to specific government election commitment funding. These alternative learning resources aim to encourage and support self directed learners with a resulting reduction in the demand for face-to-face training,

*thereby freeing up both volunteer and staff trainers to provide skill development training and assessment and to deliver supervisor and management courses and programs.*

*It should be noted that the report did not recognise the role the 'Permit to Light Fire System' and the 2650 volunteer Fire Wardens covering 2634 Fire Warden Districts play in mitigating the impacts of bushfire in Queensland. The Fire Warden has a pivotal role in addressing changing community attitudes to the use of fire, particularly in higher density population areas of the state. The future impacts on climate change, the continuing migration into Queensland and changing societal values over smoke and environmental burning are all pressures that are placing greater demands on the skills of Fire Wardens. QFRS Rural Operations has recently undertaken a review of the permit to light fire system, including the role of the Fire Wardens, to ensure its viability into the future."*

## **Auditor-General's additional comment**

During the audit Departmental officers indicated that the role of the Fire Wardens was being reviewed. Initial advice to audit was that while the Fire Wardens are an important part of rural fire management, they operated at arm's length to QFRS Rural Operations.

The lack of integration of the Fire Warden network with QFRS Rural Operations was reinforced during the audit with no substantive references being made to the links between Rural Fire Brigade and Fire Warden operations during the discussions between audit and QFRS staff and volunteers.

For the Fire Warden network to play a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of bushfires would require a significant enhancement to the current communication, operational and planning systems within QFRS.

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