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ACT Rural Fire Service Volunteer Brigades Association

Submission to Government – ESA Treasury Review



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On behalf of the ACT Rural Fire Service Volunteer Brigades Association (VBA) it is with great pleasure that I present the VBA's submission to government in response to the review of the Emergency Services Agency by ACT Government Treasury. This document outlines the VBA's position on the ACT Emergency Services Agency Financial Review.

I would also like to take a moment to thank the review committee on behalf of the broader membership of the Rural Fire Service for your consideration of the input from the VBA. I hope that you are able to engage with the ideas laid out in this submission. The exhibition contains detailed information on the workload of volunteers, potential government savings and options for a more efficient utilisation of the Rural Fire Service. The VBA has also sought to present information regarding the high level of training and experience of our service and the benefits that the members of the Rural Fire Service provide to the Canberra community and the ACT Government.

This exhibition was put together by the membership of the Rural Fire Service and outlines our ideas in regard to ways the ESA and ACT Government can create savings by consolidating as well as expanding the capabilities of the Rural Fire Service.

The VBA has consulted with the senior members of the Service, the Captains of the brigades in the ACT, training officers and the broader membership to map out the considerations highlighted in this submission. The VBA wants to ensure that the over 700 volunteer fire fighters across the Territory are supported by the ESA and utilised efficiently in the work they do for the community.

The ACTRFS VBA is contactable at any time for future consultation around this document and presentation.

Kind Regards,

Max Cullen



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1. SUBMISSION

1.1. Submission objectives

The Rural Fire Service is a committed and highly trained organisation that offers an exemplary service for a minimal cost to the ACT community, an area with a fast growing bushfire threat.

Through this submission the VBA seeks to ensure the ongoing commitment of the ACT Government to an appropriately funded and equipped Rural Fire Service that is utilised efficiently in protecting the Canberra community.

This submission outlines a number of considerations for the review committee that demonstrate areas where the Rural Fire Service is currently underfunded and requires additional support as well as areas of potential savings.

The VBA urges the review committee to consider any expenditure by the ACT Government on the Rural Fire Service in the context of the substantial implicit and explicit cost savings generated by the willingness of RFS volunteers to provide an essential service to the community without remuneration.

It should be noted by the committee that this submission relates to the volunteer component of the Rural Fire Service and not the Parks brigade.

1.2. Outline of proposals

The VBA presents in this document an outline of the Rural Fire Service's capability and areas where the service can improve the financial performance of the ESA.

Rural Fire Service volunteer brigades have the capacity to be utilised far beyond their current level. This relates in part to existing training, equipment and capacity that is under-utilised in the current mode of operations and in part to substantial potential gains from minimal additional investment in training and scope of use of volunteers.

Increased utilisation of the RFS could generate significant cost savings in relation to the more efficient utilisation of ACT Fire and Rescue.

In addition to this, we outline information that supports a need for a larger RFS headquarters full-time staffing arrangement to help with ongoing administration of this vital organisation.

The VBA considers the following proposals should be considered as a priority by the review committee:

- An increase in the capability of the RFS through the utilisation of the service in the urban interface regarding grass and bushfire.
- The utilisation of the RFS in defensive rural structure fire fighting.
- Greater utilisation of the RFS in supporting ACT Fire and Rescue operations
- The cross-utilisation of RFS volunteers on ACT Fire and Rescue grass and bushfire appliances
- Employing 5 additional staff within the RFS and filling the role of Deputy Chief Officer

1.3. Impact if the proposals are not implemented

The VBA considers that the proposals outlined in this submission are sensible, practical and relatively straightforward to implement. Many of these proposals would also be very easy to 'trial' to determine their effectiveness and measure cost-savings of efficiency gains. Failure to reasonably consider these proposals would be a wasted opportunity on the part of the review committee to realise potential cost savings.

The Rural Fire Service has already faced substantial cuts in recent years. The decision not to replace the vacant positions within the paid staff of the Rural Fire Service has seen their number fall from 13 staff to a low of 8, a 40% reduction in effective staff numbers.

The staff of the Rural Fire Service not only support the training, equipment and infrastructure needs, administration, operational activities and general welfare of over 700 volunteers, but also have significant operational responsibilities in emergency management, a myriad of legislative responsibilities from bushfire and emergency planning through to the issuing of fire permits, community engagement and education responsibilities and the farm firewise program. To effectively complete these tasks, given that the volunteer base of the Rural Fire Service has increased by more than 50% in the last two years, this small group of ACT Government employees clearly needs to be appropriately staffed and resourced.

The VBA is strongly opposed to any funding cuts to the Rural Fire Service.

1.4. Expected output of proposals

The primary outputs of the proposed activities in this submission are a reduction in costs and an increase in efficiency.

Reduction in costs is likely to be achieved through the reduction in utilisation of overtime and additional shifts by ACT Fire and Rescue. Expansion of the scope of the Rural Fire Service may also lead to longer-term cost savings through a slower growth in ACT Fire and Rescue staff numbers.

Increased efficiency is likely to occur through the utilisation of Rural Fire Service volunteers. As an example, where volunteer fire fighters and appliances are utilised in place of ACT Fire and Rescue personnel and appliances in structural fire fighting operations in the rural area the capacity of ACT Fire and Rescue to respond to additional incidents is maintained at a high level. This is contrasted with the current mode of operations where the Rural Fire Service is not utilised in structural fire fighting operations.

There is also the potential for secondary benefits as a result of adopting these proposals. Additional utilisation of Rural Fire Service volunteers has the potential for increased experience, better retention rates of volunteers, enhanced inter-service cooperation, which in turn can lead to the identification of synergies as well as the development of trust and familiarity between the services, essential in large-scale emergencies.

1.5. Detailed consideration of proposals

The utilisation of the RFS in defensive rural structure fire fighting.

The Rural Fire Service is the legislated agency for the emergency response and suppression of wild fires and defensive attack on rural structure and motor vehicle fires.

While the VBA strongly supports the appropriate use of Fire and Rescue resources for offensive structure fire fighting, rescue and HAZMAT and other incidents clearly within Fire and Rescue legislated responsibility, there is substantial anecdotal evidence reported to the VBA that the RFS is not appropriately utilised in rural structural fire fighting.

RFS crews have the capability and training to work with Fire and Rescue during structural fire fighting operations. This is particularly the case where fire fighting operations are limited by access to water supply. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Fire and Rescue prioritise the use of additional urban pumpers, rather than Rural Fire Service vehicles in these situations. This leads to a reduction in fire coverage of the urban area, potential costs of overtime and costs of additional Fire and Rescue crews to back-fill stations.

Greater utilisation of the RFS in supporting ACT Fire and Rescue operations

Volunteers in the Rural Fire Service are willing and able to up-skill to increase their capability to assist in areas of responsibility currently restricted to Fire and Rescue.

The NSW Rural Fire Service and Country Fire Authority in Victoria, as well as other fire agencies around Australia have invested in training volunteer fire fighters in the use of SCBA and offensive structural fire fighting techniques. The VBA recognises that, to an extent, 'remoteness' has been a significant contributing factor to this development, with some regional communities substantial distances from paid fire fighting services. However many volunteer brigades in the urban fringe or city-based brigades are now fitted-out with this capability. For example, in Queanbeyan the Rural Fire Service has offensive structural fire fighting capabilities complementing Fire and Rescue operations.

The VBA recognises that in most circumstances Fire and Rescue is the most appropriate service to undertake offensive fire fighting operations. In general they have a faster response time as well as training and experience beyond that likely to be achieved by the Rural Fire Service. However, the VBA considers that there are long-term cost savings in investing in offensive structural fire fighting capabilities for Rural Fire Service volunteers. Examples would be the utilisation of Rural Fire Service crews in structure fires in the rural area and in back-filling operational Fire and Rescue crews during major operations (such as the Sydney building fire). Were two major urban fire operations to occur simultaneously, the Territory would be well-served by the 'surge' capacity of volunteers trained and equipped to support Fire and Rescue. Similarly, were the Territory to again be faced by a substantial bushfire impacting on the urban fringe, Rural Fire Service crews are currently unable to engage in offensive structural fire fighting. Homes would be lost that could otherwise have been saved.

Beyond offensive structural fire fighting there are a number of areas in which enhanced co-operation between Fire and Rescue and the Rural Fire Service (or potentially the State Emergency Service) could generate cost savings and enhance service delivery for the Canberra community.

An example of this would be the Platform On Delivery (POD) system operated by Fire and Rescue. This system consists of a series of shipping containers fitted out for a variety of roles such as search

and rescue, breathing apparatus support, logistical support and incident management (among others) and two hook lift trucks. Currently this system is only operated by paid frontline Fire and Rescue staff. The VBA considers that this platform could be operated by volunteers (either SES or RFS) either at a cost saving of the staff required for the operation of the POD or enhanced efficiency by the more appropriate use of those staff members.

The cross-utilisation of RFS volunteers on ACT Fire and Rescue grass and bushfire appliances

During high fire danger days, Rural Fire Service volunteers 'stand up' at their stations. 'Stand up' refers to the situation when volunteers are available, in fire fighting appliances or at stations, for immediate dispatch. This is contrasted with the more usual situation where volunteers are going about their normal lives at work or at home from where they might be called upon to engage in fire fighting operations.

Rural Fire Service volunteers consistently make themselves available on days where there is a high 'readiness level.' This level is indicated by a number between 1 (being the lowest) and 5 (being the highest), this level generally reflects the threat to the community from fire and as such higher readiness levels correlate with days of fire ratings such as 'severe', 'extreme' or 'catastrophic.' Readiness levels determine a range of processes such as the activation of fire towers, readiness of aviation and heavy plant and the shift length and work activities of Parks brigade fire fighters.

High readiness levels also lead to ACT Fire and Rescue increasing their staffing levels in order to crew bushfire tankers and Compressed Air Foam System (CAFS) Tankers operated by Fire and Rescue. The normal situation being that depending on the incident a Fire and Rescue station would man either a tanker or an urban pumper (such as would be required for a structure fire, MVA or HAZMAT incident) but not both.

The VBA proposes that consideration be given to utilising volunteers to crew ACT Fire and Rescue bushfire and CAFS tankers in lieu of the use of additional paid shifts by Fire and Rescue personnel.

ACT Fire and Rescue operate a number of Compressed Air Foam System (CAFS) Tankers and HINO tankers identical to the standard Rural Fire Service Tanker and the Rural Fire Service CAFS tanker. Rural Fire Service volunteers have extensive experience in the use of CAFS and unlike Fire and Rescue maintain their knowledge and skills in CAFS without the need for allowance payments. As such there are no apparent barriers, such as additional training, to implementing this proposal.

Alternatively the VBA recommends a review of the necessity for additional shifts by Fire and Rescue personnel on high readiness days given the extensive additional resources already available through the additional capacity of volunteer and Parks brigade 'stand up' arrangements.

An increase in the capability of the RFS through the utilisation of the service in the urban interface regarding grass and bushfire.

In addition to the use of Rural Fire Service crews on Fire and Rescue bushfire appliances, the VBA considers there is the potential for enhanced utilisation of volunteer fire fighters in the urban interface.

Fire and Rescue are being utilised on bush and grassfires in the urban/rural interface of the ACT where these roles could be undertaken by Rural Fire Service volunteers.

A Fire and Rescue appliance utilised over an RFS appliance for a bush or grassfire is a Fire and Rescue appliance unable to attend an urban structure fire, motor vehicle accident or HAZMAT incident. Such incidents require a quick response, which the VBA considers may be jeopardised by the overutilisation of Fire and Rescue in grass and bushfire incidents.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS

2.1. Overview

As is the case across Australia, and more specifically in the ACT's neighbouring states, the need for a large and active RFS is vital. This has eventuated from a heightened bush and grass fire threat.

It is the VBA's understanding that the review committee is looking for ways to ensure fair financial performance management is achieved to save costs from what is an extremely important role within the ACT Government, the ESA. Our submission clearly shows how the current use of the RFS is already saving the ESA large amounts and can increase this through a changed capability and a strengthened in-house administration, logistics and operations team.

The major need for the consolidation and expansion of the RFS comes from the increasing danger our environment is presenting.

2.2. Service Analysis

Evaluation of activity:

- **Current growth of incidents (reflects need for higher budget).**

Along with the financial benefits of increasing the capability of the RFS in the ACT, there is also a specific need to increase the allocated budget for the RFS due to the increased fire activity and call out rate. Below shows the reflection of the service's output growing over the past few years.

The specific growth in the numbers is not only in line with the obvious increased danger of wild weather, but also due to an expanding city. With an expanding city and a combined effort within the ESA we can see evidence of how the RFS' capability and commitment to a higher responsibility would be invaluable. The RFS is unable to increase its commitment without the prior funding needed to do so regarding its head office at ESA headquarters.

- **Fires currently handled by RFS**

Due to the influence of ACT Fire and Rescue in ESA Comcen the 'stand down' or 'second station negative' call rate to the RFS when responding to calls in their area is extremely high. This is due to an informal culture that has been created through an unmanaged process costing the ACT Government large amounts of money. In addition to this it can also cause volunteers being stood down from an incident in their area, at times as early as 2am in the morning.

With a higher capability, in tandem with a strict outline of the new capability of the ACT Rural Fire Service regarding their jurisdiction, the ACT RFS can manage a much higher number of calls.



Picture – ACTRFS Fire Fighters suppressing a fuel fire in training 2014.

- **What is the average response time to a fire for the RFS.**

Response times for incidents vary between brigades, but data will show this does not vary dramatically.

A small case study was undertaken for the Molonglo brigade in the North West of the ACT.

CASE STUDY

Molonglo RFS Response time CS:

The results showed: (whilst the RFS is available)

*Between the hours of 0800 - 1700 during the week and the weekends – Average response time of 15 mins.

*Between the hours of 1700 – 0800 during the week and the weekends – An average response time of 10 mins.

If the brigade is stood up or at the Molonglo station the response time is more than halved.

In conjunction –

In conjunction with this case study, the brigade highlighted an issue that is reflected and supported by a majority of the RFS brigades and Captains Group. If other agencies including the ACTF&R are attending incidents in the rural and outer urban interface, this is leaving the urban fire area exposed.

This will limit the response time of ACTF&R which is a high risk due to the importance of response time when concerning the offensive fire fighting of structure and HAZMAT in the Canberra urban interface.

2.3. Situation Analysis – increased threat of bush and grass fires

Short Term

The move from a La Nina over the past few years of wetter weather, associated with flooding and which in turn has a strong negative correlation with the number size and impact of bushfires to an El Nino¹ associated with drier, warmer weather (drought) which is strongly correlated with increased quantity, size and impact of bushfires.

Medium Term

Despite the la Nina weather system, fire conditions during the peak danger of January-February (2013/2014) were severe with heat records for Canberra being broken, including 20 days of 35+ degree weather.

The fire season is starting earlier and becoming more intense. Fires that started in NSW in October 2013, at the very beginning of the fire season, destroyed 200 houses in the Blue Mountains. In addition to this we've seen significant fires starting in the Hunter, Central Coast and Southern Highlands. Given this trend the ACT may not be able to rely on support from NSW RFS or other fire agencies should large areas of the East Coast be simultaneously affected by fire.

Long Term

The Climate Council estimates that Australian fire services will need to double by 2030 to meet the changing demand for fire fighters.² Given that the supply of trained fire fighters, especially fire fighters with the skills, experience and training to fulfil leadership roles both on the fire ground and in performing incident management roles at larger incidents is relatively inelastic, investment needs to be made now to meet this future demand.

¹ <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso/>

² <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/be-prepared>

– **Size of jurisdiction i.e. ACT and surrounding regions**

With a growing ACT, it is vital that the Rural Fire Service has an increased urban grass and bushfire fighting capability if the ESA wishes to improve its financial performance and effectively keep the ACT Community safe.

Below are a number of findings outlined with data collected by volunteers that show the savings the RFS can create through a more innovative approach and capability regarding the ESA's financial performance and rural/urban grass and bush fire fighting responsibility.

2.4. Environmental Analysis

As read above, there is a large amount of conclusive evidence that a better financed and better-staffed RFS in the ACT is needed. This stems from the increased bush fire risk that is prominent in the ACT.

2.5. Conclusion

The ACT will be left exposed to the increasing threat of grass and bush fire without a greater utilised and properly resourced RFS.

The separate services sharing an urban interface capability (bush and grass fire) will mean increased safety to the ACT community surrounding structure, MVA and HAZMAT incidents, increased safety around fast spreading fires such as grass fire as well as an increased positive financial performance outlook for the ESA.

The RFS should have an increased defensive rural structure and vehicle fire fighting capability within this to ensure that long distance response times are cut from the ACTF&R agenda to ensure offensive urban fire fighting times are maintained.

3. CONSULTATION

The VBA has, in conjunction with the ACTRFS Captains Group, conducted detailed consultation with the service and the Emergency Services Agency regarding this document.

3.1. Internal Stakeholders Consultations

Who was consulted?

The VBA and the RFS Captains Group were the main forms of consultation for the data in this report. The VBA and the Captains Group will provide, in tandem with the ACTRFS Staff, consultation on the increased capability for no further cost regarding introducing new innovations to increase the budget for a cost saving ACT Rural Fire Service.

Following the production of a draft submission, the broader RFS membership was consulted and asked for input via dissemination of the draft submission to the broader membership.

What is their role?

The Captains group is the main volunteer operational officer group of the RFS. The VBA is the committed advocacy organisation that supports the increased flexibility in the legislation to improve the organisation's financial performance.

What contribution do they make?

Both internal groups will ensure a professional consultation with the ESA and paid RFS office to ensure the newly introduced/heightened capability of the RFS is introduced correctly in line with ESA policies and national training.

The training group was consulted.

Below is a list of the training already undertaken and managed purely by volunteers – (this is already saving the ESA a large amount of funding, but to the detriment of volunteers and the time they give)

PUAFIR319A Take local Weather observations
PUAOHS002B Maintain Safety at an Incident site
PUATEA002B Work Autonomously
PUAEQU001B Prepare, Maintain and test response equipment
PUAOPE003B Navigate in Urban and Rural environments
PUAFIR309B Operate pumps
PUAFIR202B Respond to isolate/remote structure fire
PUAFIR303B Suppress Wildfire
PUAFIR407A Conduct Prescribed Burning
PUAIFR406B Develop Prescribed Burning Plans
PUAOPE004A Conduct Briefings/Debriefings
PUALAW001B Protect and preserve incident scene
PUAFIR201B Prevent Injury

PUAFIR204B Respond to Wildfire
PUAOHS001C Follow Defined Occupational Health & Safety policies & Procedures
PUAOPE002B Operate Communications Systems and Equipment
PUATEA001B Work in a Team
PUATEA004D Work effectively in a public safety organisations
PUACOM001C Communicate in the workplace

In addition to these courses, which are nationally recognised, there is a number of further qualifications, which the members of the Rural Fire Service are continually managing.

Who will be required to contribute time and resources into this activity?

The RFS Captains Group and the VBA, in partnership with a grown internal RFS HQ team of approximately 5 extra staff, will ensure the introduction of an increased capability and better-staffed organisation to maintain what is already a highly professional organisation.

Commitment –

The VBA and the RFS as a whole are committed to this reform and cost saving innovation. With an extended internal staffing requirement, the RFS as a volunteer group believes, with the Service's commitment, the ESA will see a dramatic, positive change in the ESA's savings.

4. COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS

4.1. Case Study – Rivers Station

The Rivers volunteer bushfire brigade, situated on the Cotter Road at the foot of Mount Stromlo, is made up of approximately 80 active volunteers operating 6 fire-fighting appliances and a command vehicle. This is complemented by a rural membership equipped with 'slip-on' fire fighting capability.

In the 2013/14 financial year to-date (28/03/14) the Rivers brigade has committed 3058 volunteer hours directly to the suppression of bush, grass and forest fires, well above the 1088 hours in 2012/13.

So far 120 volunteer hours have been committed to undertaking hazard reduction burning in the 2013/14 financial year. However, given that significant hazard reduction activity generally occurs April-July, the 2012/13 year figure of 870 volunteer hours is a more accurate reflection of the total hours likely to be committed to hazard reduction burning by the Rivers brigade.

An additional 386 hours have been committed to community events which have supported community education on fire and reputation building for the ESA and the ACT Government and developed links between the brigade and a range of community organisations.

While the adage goes that 'volunteers are not paid because they are worthless but because they are priceless' it is a necessary exercise in this instance to quantify the direct savings to the ACT Government from the operations of the Rivers brigade.

In order to quantify these savings an estimate of \$29.38 per volunteer hour was determined³. At this rate the ACT RFS has saved the ACT Government \$89,836 in costs for fire suppression, \$22,237 for hazard reduction (using 2012/13 figures) and \$11,340 had ACTF&R taken over the community engagement activities of the Rivers brigade. This totals \$123,413.

Work done by the Rivers bushfire brigade in supporting ACT F&R operations (such as Mulch fires at Parkwood), SES operations during floods and storms, members response to false alarms, smoke sightings and time spent at the fire station during times of severe-extreme fire danger days has not been factored in to this assessment but would certainly run into the hundreds of volunteer hours.

Further, Rivers brigade members train for a minimum of one night per week during the fire season for between 1 and 3 hours with additional training on weekends and as part of exercises. Rivers members assist in the preparation, delivery and assessment of training provided through the ESA as a registered training organisation without remuneration. As well as training, substantial time is spent in the administration of the brigade, again without remuneration.

Staffing as an extra cost –

There is further funding needed for the RFS for training and staffing.

Currently the RFS office is dramatically under-resourced. An additional 5 staff members in the RFS HQ team will ensure a decrease in overload to ACT Government workers and will also ensure the commitment of the RFS volunteers can be managed accordingly.

For example, currently the RFS has one paid member for the administration and organisation of training of the 700 plus fire fighters, meaning a bigger ask of the community of volunteers to run training. F&R have 13 dedicated staff members facilitating training for ACT F&R.

4.2. Budget

A budget including all identifiable costs, including staff, on-costs, legal, media, travel etc. will be clear on a defined and approved capability plan supported by the ESA Commissioner and Minister if our innovation is deemed appropriate for further consultation.

4.3. Staffing Requirements

- What are the current staffing requirements for RFS?

There is a current need for a further 5 staff members in the RFS office. These roles are vital.

They include roles such as –

* **Deputy Chief Officer** – *the second in command of the service (this role should never be re-considered due to the operational pressure it relieves).*

* **Community Liaison Officer**

* **Operations Officer x 2**

* **Mitigation Officer**



Molonglo Rural Fire Service Crew Protecting property near the ACT - 2012

IN CONCLUSION –

The commitment of the ACT Rural Fire Service and its volunteers is invaluable.

This proposal has shown a large amount of data that highlights the Rural Fire Service can improve the financial performance of the ESA regarding fire suppression in the rural and urban interface, with an increased capability in –

- Attendance of grass and bushfire in the RFS jurisdiction
- Attendance for defensive rural structure and MVA incidents
- Further utilisation for urban interface grass and bushfire (using ACTF&R vehicles at times)
- An increased staffing arrangement internally at ESA
- Increased financial support for training
- An improved partnership with ACTF&R

The VBA asks the review committee to read this submission and review it in conjunction with the presentation from the VBA and Captains group concerning the need to have a better financed Rural Fire Service. The VBA also asks that any questions be forwarded to the VBA President.

The VBA and the RFS Captains Group will be available for further consultation around plans in this document.