

## **Opening statement**

### About RFSA

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this inquiry on behalf of the NSW Rural Fire Service Association. The RFSA is the representative organisation for the volunteers and staff of the RFS with over 40,000 members, the overwhelming majority of which are volunteers. While we do count some staff among our members, we are not a union, and do not represent staff members in relation to the terms and conditions of their employment.

The RFS has a proud history, dating back to the first Bush Fire Brigade being formally established in Berrigan in 1900, and has grown significantly over the decades since. The establishment of the RFS as we know it today in 1997 was the last major reform to the Service's structure, bringing members across the state together into a single chain of command. It is the system established at that time we still operate under today, although our equipment and training has improved considerably in that time.

### Personal introduction

If I could just briefly explain my background. I am a volunteer firefighter, former Brigade Captain and currently a Group Officer in the Clarence Valley, as well as being President of the RFSA. I've been involved in more incidents than I care to remember, and in the process have collected commendations I never wanted. I've been involved in most aspects of the RFS over the years – I was the Divisional Commander in Nymboida when the town was ravaged by fire in November 2019 (and so many other places during that season); I've pulled stranded motorists out of floodwaters; I'm a trainer and assessor; I'm a qualified bush fire, village, and remote area firefighter; and I sit on the Clarence Valley Bush Fire Management Committee and the State's Bush Fire Coordinating Committee.

### RFSA priorities

In approaching this Inquiry, the RFSA's most important priority is to ensure that RFS has adequate funding to support our volunteers and the work we do for the community. We are not here to advocate to a change in the current funding structure of the RFS, nor do we seek to defend it. That said, there are some anomalies arising in the context of the current system that are problematic for our members and which ought to be addressed in some way.

Insurance is a particular challenge within the current system, with many Councils maintaining policies with very high excesses. As a result, most brigade purchased items – that is, items purchased by brigades from their own fundraising efforts – are effectively uninsured. If there's a \$10,000 or even \$20,000 insurance excess, which are common, then any loss has to be greater than that to be claimable. For most brigades across the state, the equipment they've fundraised for often isn't worth that much, so they bear the whole of that loss. There has to be a better way.

We are also concerned to ensure that if there are any changes to the current system the RFS retains local flexibility in its operations. There is such a significant variation in the geography of our state, and the fire risks differ significantly from one area to the next. With that, the equipment and training needs of our members varies considerably. There can be very good reasons why the Service needs to look different from one region to the next, but those differences should be driven by the needs of the community and our members, not by factors external to the RFS.

We acknowledge that in some areas local councils contribute more to the functions of the RFS than they might be required to. If there are to be any changes to the current system, it is important that these additional contributions are recognised and captured in any new funding model to ensure our volunteers don't go without.

#### Other submissions

Finally, I need to address some of the misleading information put before the Committee in the submission of the FBEU.

First, I have to respond to the nonsense of their repetitive references to "professional firefighters". I accept there's a technical sense in which a person who is paid can be described a professional, but when thinking about the emergency services being professional shouldn't be about whether you're paid – it should be about the job that you do. Our members are highly trained to go about their duties professionally, as appropriate for the particular roles they undertake. For example, the FBEU points out that only a small proportion of our members are trained in offensive structural firefighting, but that is because the bulk of the work undertaken by members of the RFS relates to bush and grass fires, and that sort of training simply isn't relevant to what they do.

Our brigades are classified according to community risk and standards of fire cover. Village 2 brigades are CABA trained, structural firefighter trained as well as bush and grass fire trained, and trained to deal with motor vehicle crashes (but not rescue). Village 1 brigades are trained in village-based incidents, defensive structural firefighting, motor vehicle crashes, power pole fires, tip fires, grass and bush fires. Many of these brigades are also taking on CABA capability for advanced respiratory protection. Rural brigades are those that predominantly deal with grass and bushfires, but may also deal infrequently with motor vehicle crashes and structure fires, and Rural Remote brigades are those that deal with grass and bush fires. All brigades are equipped according to the types of incidents that they deal with. On top of these, some districts have specialised brigades that focus on remote area fire fighting (helicopter winch qualified), road crash rescue where community needs can't be met by other agencies, and of course all RFS brigades respond to requests for assistance by Ambulance NSW, Police, SES and Fire & Rescue.

The FBEU submission suggests that Fire & Rescue is propping up volunteer efforts in volunteer response areas in road crash rescue. But the Committee needs to be aware that this does not relate to the RFS. There are 184 Fire & Rescue units accredited by the State Rescue Board to undertake road crash rescue across the state – the rescue part is in their name! Rescue has never been the focus of the RFS. There are only 10 RFS brigades in NSW with road crash rescue accreditation. These brigades have that accreditation because they're situated in very remote areas, and are typically the **only** emergency service within one hour of a potential incident. Rescue is an area where the RFS has expanded in recent years to meet the needs of the community in remote locations such as Pooncarie, Louth and Menindee, and I'd note that the Committee has previously heard from the Menindee Brigade. If there are shortcomings anywhere in road crash rescue responses, they are not the responsibility of our members, who are stepping to fill gaps that would otherwise persist.

The important message for the Committee is that in many areas of rural NSW the RFS and Fire & Rescue respond to motor vehicle crashes and work together. Whether its FRNSW or SES doing the work of rescue, RFS volunteers are providing fire protection to the crews dealing with the patients. Whilst Sydney may enjoy a full complement of FRNSW crews and appliances, that can't be said for the rest of NSW. The RFS covers over 90% of NSW in relation to fire events. To use the Clarence Valley as an example, FRNSW has 4 retained stations, where the RFS has 38 brigades with upwards of 100 appliances.

Despite some of the comments from the other parties, our members on the ground generally work very well with Fire & Rescue when we have joint responses, and their members work well with ours. That's certainly been my experience in the Clarence Valley, and I know it's shared by members across most of the State. Indeed, it is often the case that our members are the first on scene at incidents, even in Mutual Aid Zones where both services respond.

For example, at a recent fire on Woodford Island the Woodford Brigade were first on scene, followed by me in my Group vehicle, ahead of the arrival of the retained Fire & Rescue crew from Maclean.

In July, when a truck went into the Clarence River while trying to drive onto the Bluff Point ferry, I was the second emergency responder on scene after the local Police officer. The Police officer and I were performing CPR on the driver before we were joined by the Lawrence Rural Fire Brigade, followed by NSW Ambulance and then Fire & Rescue.

At the end of the day, when something happens and the community needs us, members of the RFS and Fire & Rescue, indeed all emergency services, work well to get the job done.

I'm happy to take any questions the Committee may have.