

MEDIA RELEASE

FRIDAY 23 JUNE 2000

**NSW UPPER HOUSE COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE**

The Hon Richard Jones MLC, Chair of the Legislative Council's General Purpose Standing Committee today. *Report on Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service*, in the Legislative Council

The Inquiry was self-referred by the Committee on 18 November 1999. The terms of reference for the inquiry related to the adequacy of fire suppression services provided by the NSW Rural Fire Service to rural communities in NSW and in particular: the appropriateness of the Government's expenditure on tankers and equipment; the adequacy of fire fighting apparatus; the adequacy of stakeholder representation; and the appropriateness of the command and control system in the suppression of bush fires.

The Committee received over 600 submissions, which is by far the largest number of submissions ever received by a Legislative Council Committee. The Committee held four hearings at which 49 witnesses gave evidence. The submissions and evidence reflected a diverse range of views expressed by volunteers and other stakeholders.

Mr Jones said "Many of the issues raised in submissions and evidence related to funding and communication. The RFS took action in relation to a number of issues during the course of the inquiry, including the implementation of a communications strategy and grievance procedure and the announcement of changes to the method for assessing workers' compensation payouts for self employed

Mr Jones said "The key recommendation of the Committee addresses one of the central concerns that arose during the inquiry – the issue of dual accountability or dual management of Fire Control Officers by the Rural Fire Service and Local Government. This issue has been of ongoing concern for many years. The Coronial Inquiry into the 1994 bushfire emergency, headed by the then Deputy State Coroner Hiatt, recommended that Fire Control Officers be employed permanently by the Rural Fire Service. The Government chose not to implement this recommendation at that time."

"Having considered the weight of evidence, the Committee has recommended that Fire Control Officers and other Rural Fire Service staff be employed directly by the Rural Fire Service."

The report contains a total of 13 recommendations. A list of these is attached.

Mr Jones said " I fully expect the Government to implement the recommendations of this unanimous report within the next twelve months which will bring further improvements to the effectiveness of the Rural Fire Service".

For comment ring the Hon Richard Jones MLC, Committee Chair 9230 2858 / mobile 0419 252 926

Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service - Terms of Reference

That General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 inquire into and report upon the adequacy of fire suppression services provided by the NSW Rural Fire Service to rural communities in NSW, and in particular:

- (a) The appropriateness of the Government's expenditure on rural fire tankers and other fire fighting equipment for the NSW Rural Fire Service;
- (b) The appropriateness and adequacy of fire fighting apparatus available to the Rural Fire Fighting Service in NSW;
- (c) The adequacy of stakeholder representation in the operations of the NSW Rural Fire Service within:
 - (i) Various statutory bodies at the State level;
 - (ii) Executive management level;
 - (iii) Technical level.
- (d) The provision and adequacy of fire fighter training and personal protective equipment to:
 - (i) Meet the health, safety and welfare requirements of rural firefighters;
 - (ii) Perform effective fire suppression.
- (e) The appropriateness of the command and control system in the suppression of bush and other fires on:
 - (i) Providing effective coordination of resource allocation within the NSW Rural Fire Service;
 - (ii) Providing for accountability arrangements for Fire Control Officers to both the Commissioner of the NSW Rural Fire Service and General Managers of Local Councils;
 - (iii) Selecting and appointing those people charged with the responsibility and management of suppression action against fires;
 - (iv) Taking into account the recognition and utilisation of appropriate local knowledge and skills.
- (f) Any other matter arising out of or incidental to the above.

Committee Members

The Hon Richard Jones MLC (Chairman)	<i>Independent</i>
The Hon Ron Dyer MLC (Deputy Chairman)	<i>Australian Labor Party</i>
The Hon Tony Kelly MLC	<i>Australian Labor Party</i>
The Hon Richard Bull MLC	<i>National Party</i>
The Hon John Johnson MLC	<i>Australian Labor Party</i>
The Hon Malcolm Jones MLC	<i>Outdoor Recreation Party</i>
The Hon John Jobling MLC	<i>Liberal Party</i>

Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service - Recommendations

- 1.** (a) The Committee recommends that in order to reduce inequities in the distribution of resources, that the revised Standards of Fire Cover Methodology be applied across the state.
(b) The Committee views the actions of some property owners who fail to insure, or under-insure, their properties as unsatisfactory, and recommends to the Government that this matter be reviewed.
- 2.** The Committee recommends local builds to Rural Fire Service specifications, subject to price and quality, in order to assist in the generation of rural employment.
- 3.** The Committee recommends that the existing provision of personal protective equipment and training, to volunteer fire fighters, be extended to those volunteers in catering, welfare and other support functions.
- 4.** The Committee recommends that the Rural Fire Service give consideration to expanding the program whereby central committees meet from time to time in rural areas of NSW to facilitate a transparency of process, and better communication with volunteers.
- 5.** The Committee recommends that the Rural Fire Service communication strategy be reviewed to ensure its effectiveness.
- 6.** The Committee recommends that Fire Control Officers should ensure the dissemination of information and material (such as newsletters) from Rural Fire Service head office to volunteers.
- 7.** The Committee recommends that the Rural Fire Service provide a facility to allow local brigades to put individual home pages on the Internet.
- 8.** The Committee recommends that a Code of Ethics for Rural Fire Service Volunteers be adopted as soon as possible.
- 9.** The Committee recommends that local committees be established across New South Wales in order to facilitate greater efficiency and use of resources, and better coordination of bush fire services, personnel and equipment.

Inquiry into the NSW Rural Fire Service – Recommendations

- 10.** (a) The Committee recommends that further detailed protocols should be developed by the Rural Fire Service, in conjunction with Fire Control Officers and the Local Government and Shires Associations, to clearly define and delineate Fire Control Officer duties.
- (b) The Committee recommends that Fire Control Officers and other Rural Fire Service staff be employed by the Rural Fire Service.
- (c) The Committee recommends that local councils be involved in the selection process for Fire Control Officers.
- (d) The Committee recommends that local performance agreements be entered into between the Rural Fire Service and local councils regarding management and responsibilities under the *Rural Fires Act 1997*.
- 11.** The Committee recommends that the Rural Fire Service develop an appropriate industrial framework for salaries, conditions and employment for Fire Control Officers.
- 12.** The Committee recommends that the Rural Fire Service continue to promote an awareness of the section 44 appointment process.
- 13.** The Committee recommends that hazard reduction burns continue to be based on best scientific knowledge of the effect of burns on vegetation types to reduce the risk of increasing fuel loads.