



WAFARMERS

Voluntary Registration of Firefighting Units

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Background

The Western Australian Farmers Federation Inc. (WAFarmers) is the state's largest and most influential rural advocacy and service organisation. Founded in 1912, WAFarmers boasts a membership of over 3,200 primary production businesses and individual farmers including grain growers, meat and wool producers, horticulturalists, dairy farmers, commercial egg producers and beekeepers. Collectively our members are major contributors to the \$5.5 billion gross value of production that agriculture in its various forms contributes annually to Western Australia's economy. Additionally, through differing forms of land tenure, our members own, control and capably manage many millions of hectares of the state's land mass and, as such, are responsible for maintaining the productive capacity and environmental wellbeing of that land and the animals that graze it.

Introduction

WAFarmers welcomes the Office of Emergency Management's discussion paper on harnessing the available assets of farmers and their firefighting units in the event of a fire emergency. The Ferguson Report highlighted the under-utilisation of local knowledge and equipment throughout the fires that devastated Waroona and Yarloop. Throughout the Ferguson Review, WAFarmers advocated for farmers to be formally recognised as a valuable asset, and called upon if they are available to leave their properties. Furthermore, it is essential that farmers with approved firefighting units be able to pass roadblocks so they can assist in saving properties, livestock and human life.

Many of the issues identified in the Ferguson Report were related to cultural issues, particularly the relationship breakdown between career firefighters and volunteers, many of whom are farmers. The volunteers and community bring a whole raft of knowledge of personnel, local topography and weather patterns; any top-heavy hierarchy which oppresses the community-level decision making will only lead to increased angst.

Under the *Bushfire Act 1954*, landowners are compelled to respond to a fire on their land. With this in mind, there should be no obstruction preventing a farmer from implementing their fire management plan. If a farmer also possesses livestock, they must also observe strict duty of care for animal under Animal Welfare legislation. This predicament was apparent during the Waroona Fire when feed-lotters struggled to provide feed for cattle. This provides an opportunity for the state to review the Bushfire Act and absolve the Incident Controller from responsibility when a farmer wishes to return to the property and defend their asset.

The proposed mechanism for auditing, inspecting and registering firefighting units has the potential to become time consuming and costly. WAFarmers believes this responsibility will best lay with a Rural Fire Service (RFS). However, until the State Government announces its policy on a Rural Fire Service, there are other local means available. Local Government Authorities with use of the Rangers may be able to assist, but understand this could be seen as an impost to individual Local Governments. Additionally, utilising local fire brigades should be an avenue worth exploring as this will further bolster community involvement and morale. Locations that have a Community Engagement Service Manager will be able to employ this person to carry out inspections of firefighter units.

WAFarmers supports the comments made in Section 5.1. The State cannot adequately suppress fires without farmers' involvement. In many smaller fires (levels 1-3), it is often a farmer who is the first respondent to the fire. Farmers arrive at fire grounds with only one intention; to put the fire out.

WAFarmers does not, however, support all the comments made in Section 5.2. The majority of farming machinery and vehicles are fitted with UHF radios. This meaning that they can adequately communicate with all firefighters in the area. As farmers regularly attend fire events in their communities, many have clothing that is appropriate for firefighting. WAFarmers does not believe that involving farmers will foster a culture issue. Many farmers are involved in their local brigades and, additionally, in small towns farmers are well known, as are identities within their communities. This familiarity with local people will increase local knowledge and assets which will only assist in firefighting efforts rather than hinder them.

In regards to Section 5.3, WAFarmers is of the opinion that a farmer can be under the direction of a brigade member. However, for a community-centric model to be integrated successfully, the first respondent to the fire is responsible for the decision making until the fire has been extinguished. WAFarmers is supportive of a farmer's assets coming under the insurances outlined within the Act.

There is a need for better processes surrounding contractors supplying machinery or earthmoving. DFES and DPaW (now the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions) need to notify Local Government Authorities and necessary stakeholders of what machinery is available. All DFES regions should have contract arrangements in place well before the fire season, and this information should be supplied to local governments. In the case of the Great Southern Region there should be contractors in Esperance, Albany and Narrogin to cover all contingencies. DFES State Operations Centre should not be able to override the regional request for machinery. It should be solely the responsibility of the region working with Local Governments to ensure Incident Controllers have the appropriate machinery or water bombers they require without being challenged by DFES.

WAFarmers recognises the requirement for safety in an emergency situation. Most farmers have access to flashing beacons due to the requirement of having them on machinery and equipment around the property. However, an asset should not be refused for the lack of a flashing beacon. An asset can still be deployed in an area that is not heavy with smoke and utilise a combination of head lights and hazard lights (6.1). The requirement for a helmet is excessive. Most fires in the regions will spark in open areas i.e. a paddock. This requirement should be up to the individual, however, it does pose to be a costly hurdle to be overcome if enforced as mandatory (6.2).

The fires of Waroona and Esperance demonstrated that farmers are very proactive and eager to assist their neighbours and community. Issues began to arise when farmers began to move around the district to assist with firefighting or agistment of livestock and were not allowed back onto their properties. The advent of a sticker will allow farmers to move around the district in which they are familiar to assist in firefighting, protecting assets and saving communities.