

REVIEW OF FIRE SERVICE FUNCTION AND FUNDING

SUBMISSION OF THE N.Z. PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTERS UNION To the FIRE SERVICE REVIEW PANEL

1. Introduction:

The N.Z. Professional Firefighters Union (the Union) represents some 99% of the country's front-line Professional Firefighters.

Along with this written information, the Union would be pleased to meet with the Review Panel to discuss, expand further on matters raised, and to answer any questions.

The Union has long had an interest far wider than simply the Wages and Conditions of its members – although this obviously is a critical matter.

In this regard, the Union notes the explicit exclusion of “the industrial relations framework applying to firefighters should be reformed”.

The Union has long been an advocate for, one of the first advocates for, the Fire Service becoming a broad based Emergency Service Responder. Often this advocacy was in an environment, from the then Fire Service management/Commission and other government agencies, of considerable hostility.

Similarly, the Union identified many years ago, that the funding mechanism of the Fire Service was flawed and advocated change.

Historically, the Fire Service Emergency Role response has expanded by default – into the vacuum that existed. This is what communities have both expected and demanded.

No other emergency service was available. There can be no doubt that this expansion however is both common sense and also makes sense economically.

However, this existing expanded role highlights even more inadequacies with the funding mechanism. Many - most of these new roles are completely unfunded.

2. Summary

The principal purpose of the Panel is to advise the government as to how to achieve the following:

- That New Zealand Fire Services have a clear mandate and operating platform for the functions they perform, and that it is clear how these interact with functions performed by other Emergency /Service providers.

- That the N.Z. Fire Service Commission and fire services are organized and operating as effectively and efficiently as possible and will provide value for money in the future; and
- That there is sustainable, stable and equitable funding for fire services, with the source of that funding aligned with the functions they perform.

With these objectives in mind, the Union submits:

- The Fire Service currently responds to many non-fire emergency incidents and that this expanded role is not specifically legislatively provided for or funded for.
- That this expansion of the role has not been the result of any specific policy decision – it has developed by default, by expansion into a vacuum.

Communities have both expected and required the Fire Service to respond to these non-fire emergency incidents.

- Because the resource – manpower, plant, equipment – exists, it is economically efficient for the expanded role to occur.
- However, there are some additional costs – for example – training – as well as operational costs that have to be accommodated and that are not provided for with the present funding model. This is particularly apparent with major events such as the Christchurch Earthquake.
- Legislation needs to specifically mandate a responsibility to the Fire Service as the lead agency in these non-fire emergency incidents.
- The present funding mechanism has a major problem with the “free loader issue” – those who do not insure, under-insure, or take advantage of any number of avoidance schemes. As well, the Union notes the large amount of Crown property that is protected and frequently responded to, and the lack of anything in the present funding mechanism to pay for this.
- There are fewer front-line firefighters today than there were 20 years ago, but the Fire Service is responding to 80% more incidents than 20 years ago. The Union doubts that any organization or agency can match this productivity increase.
- Professional Firefighters respond to around 75 – 80% of these emergency responses. As well, the non-emergency work of the Fire Service – Fire Safety/Risk Reduction – is overwhelmingly provided by the paid workforce.

3. Value to the Country

The value returned to communities by the Fire Service and Firefighters has proved very problematic to calculate.

The Union has recently sought advice from an Economic Consultancy to attempt to determine this figure. The analysis received indicates a conservative figure of around \$177,000 for each Firefighter.

What is probably difficult to quantify is the value created by the expanded role into the non-fire area. This is the support provided to Ambulance Services – both in emergency and non-emergency roles, road safety, hazardous substances, floods, earthquakes and other natural emergencies.

If specific stand-alone agencies were to be established instead of the Fire Service response, the cost would be very large indeed.

The Fire Service and Firefighters devote considerable time to in effect propping up other inadequate or failing services. It is very common for Ambulance Services to require the assistance of Firefighters as well in non-emergency situations to lift/transport persons.

The conclusion the Union makes is that on any number of considerations, Firefighters and the Fire Service deliver both efficient and effective value to their communities, but there is considerable scope to increase this value.

4. Resource Requirements

As communities grow and develop and some communities become smaller, there is a need for an objective model which can advise of the necessary resources needed in any particular locality.

As noted above, the Fire Service employs many less front-line firefighters than it did 20 years ago. Communities are growing and major metropolitan centres are expanding.

This means that some, particularly provincial towns, have resource requirements and response demands that need addressing – for example – towns the size of Blenheim and Queenstown have no professional fire fighting response.

There are a large number of Volunteer Brigades that respond to less than 10 calls a year.

Wherever the Fire Service recognizes the increasing response requirement at localities purely served by volunteers, the Volunteer Brigade has strongly opposed the involvement and support that the provision of professional firefighters would provide, and the consequent improved service to the community.

4.

5. Operating Platform

The Union presumes this refers to the specialised structures provided in the present Act.

As an absolute imperative, the Union submits that any new legislation must provide for the joint role of Chief Executive and National Commander.

This is vital for the efficient and effective operation of the Fire Service and previous history when the roles were held by two different people, was a complete disaster.

The current structure provides for Regions, Areas and Districts and respective roles – Regional Commander, Area Commander, Chief Fire Officer.

The Union supports these structures continuing. There is considerable flexibility with the current arrangement with the number of Regions and Areas not being specified.

In recent times the Fire Service has moved from 6 to 3 to 8 to 5 Regions.

The Union would be opposed to providing any further flexibility for, presumably, the Commission to be able to change structures – Commission/Management comes and goes, but the Fire Service goes on.

This also applies to other prescriptive provisions of the current Act – e.g. command hierarchy, delegations, powers of Chief Fire Officers – should not be up for determination by a transient Commission/Board.

6. Amalgamation of Rural Fire Authorities

The Union understands the present strategy proposes reducing the number of Rural Fire Authorities to fewer than 20 by December 2014. This process is apparently to happen voluntarily.

Although the logic of such amalgamation is self apparent, the Union would suggest there is no evidence that anything approaching a “carrot and stick” approach is in evidence.

At the very least, if the objective of fewer than 20 RFAs by December 2014 is not achieved, the strategy needs to provide that somebody – e.g. Commission or the government should be able to require amalgamation.

The Union would submit that in any event, the distinction between Urban and Rural is at the least somewhat artificial.

Many vegetation fires occur in or adjacent to Urban Fire Districts. Similarly many – probably most – incidents responded to by Rural Fire parties are identical to those responded to by Urban Fire Services – structural fires and motor vehicle accidents.

In this regard, the Union notes the Tamihere Cold Store explosion/fire occurred in a Rural Fire District, although only a few kilometres from the centre of Hamilton City Centre.

Consequently, nominally/legally, the Principal Rural Fire Officer should have taken charge of this incident. As the Union understands the provisions of the present Act, the Fire Service was under no specific obligation to respond to this incident. As well, given this large industrial complex was outside the gazetted Urban Fire District, the responsibilities for incident planning etc. are at the least not clear.

7. Appropriate Funding Mechanism

As noted above, there is a consensus that the present funding mechanism is flawed – although the same level of consensus does not surround the appropriate solution.

Put briefly, the present problems surround:

- “Free loader” problem including non-insured, under-insured, avoidance schemes, government property not insured; and
- In any event, a levy on Fire Insurance does not address the funding of the broad range of emergency responses expected/delivered by the Fire Service.

The Union is very aware of the reviews/inquiries into Fire Service funding that have been commissioned in the past.

The Union has this year commissioned an established and respected Economic Consultancy to again review matters relating to Fire Service Funding.

This report is attached and is endorsed by the Union.