



New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union

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Working towards integrated Command and Control

Outcomes of the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU)

Command and Control workshop 7-8 May 2018

Introduction

Over a two-day period a working party of NZPFU delegates and members came together to determine the position of the union in regards to command and control issues facing the integration process of Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ). The working group was made up of elected representatives and Career officers from a range of locations within New Zealand; they included personnel from both metropolitan and provincial brigades and individuals who have been heavily involved in officer training and command and control work streams within the current organisation and the New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS).

During the course of the workshop the group kept central to its discussions the philosophy of inclusiveness in relation to integration and change management, the culture of volunteerism within New Zealand and the altruistic nature of both rural and urban volunteers within the organisation. There was a complete understanding within the group of the role volunteers play within FENZ and the reciprocal relationships of support between career and volunteer personnel that currently exist, and must continue to, to ensure the future success of emergency response in New Zealand.

The members of the working group identified a number of barriers to integration that we felt must be overcome to allow for forward movement in this process. When considering these barriers and their possible solutions the NZPFU took an approach that incorporated a number of influences, these included:

- Current NZ legislation and our interpretation of various Acts of parliament.
- What was considered best practice as evident from research into overseas fire and rescue services.
- Published articles, reports and other literature.
- What we considered to be the new organisations responsibility to the NZ public in terms of emergency response.

These barriers to integration and any proposed concepts for their possible solutions are as follows.

Training

Discussions in relation to training focused on the fact the organisation currently runs separate training and progressions systems (TAPS) for career staff and volunteers, in addition to this rural staff has a training system based on New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) standards.

In relation to the two TAPS programmes the NZPFU is of the opinion that they differ vastly for very valid reasons. Career staff are justifiably required to undertake more comprehensive training and assessments throughout each stage of their career progression. In addition to this they are exposed to considerable competition when applying for promotion, ensuring the right candidates are selected for career officer

positions. The current status of Rural staff qualifications are still largely unknown, not only in regards to who is qualified in what, but also as to the actual level of learning required to attain NZQA standards in this area. This raises questions about differing levels of command competency in relation to Career, Volunteer and Rural staff. The NZPFU's position is that because of the differences in training, qualifications and assessment levels career officers must either, assume command when they arrive or use their discretion and be "in support" for other officers. We feel that the high-level design statements, "new FENZ rank system directly reflects demonstrated competency that can be relied upon by all personnel to identify competency levels" and a "single competency model" are currently unachievable. The discussions in regard to training during the workshop focused on how these statements could be conceivable, or even possible, given the amount of work it would entail to bring Rural and Volunteer officer training levels up to that of Career officers.

Lateral entry into the career ranks was also discussed, and given the above statements, it was widely considered unacceptable within the working group that individuals could enter career ranks without following the due process of recruitment. Any lateral movement would only serve to subvert any future rank system, undermine the importance of respect for rank and raise questions in regards to the credibility of individuals. With that said the NZPFU does recognise that Volunteer fire-fighters still attain certain skills that align with the role of a Career fire-fighter. Currently a large number of staff recruited into the career ranks have a volunteer background, and the NZPFU is open to discussions around expediting the entry of Volunteer fire-fighters into Career fire-fighter roles given that certain conditions are met. These conditions would require further discussion beyond this paper but may go some way to addressing the high-level design statement "external fire and emergency experience can contribute to career progression".

The working group also identified with the logic of utilising individuals who may possess certain skills or knowledge, enabling them to fill a technical advisor role at an incident management level. This is already practiced in its simplest form at an operational level utilising the knowledge of tradesmen who currently reside in our Career fire-fighter and officer ranks, it also occurs at specific incident types, such as ship fires where the captain and crew's knowledge is utilised within the incident management team to develop strategy and tactics. Therefore, the concept is not unusual to our members and current career officer training promotes such a concept.

The statement that "relevant experience gained outside of FENZ is recognised as an important contribution" may well be valid, but the NZPFU feels it is subjective and depends on the context in which it is discussed. From a command and control perspective it is relevant to gaining the right information, so commanders can make informed decisions, it does not mean handing over control to individuals whose skill sets are unknown to us. Nor should it mean, from an employment perspective, that individuals can circumvent any form of recruit process or be accelerated through any future rank system, either of which would only serve to compound the potential subversion of such a system.

Volunteer time commitments and resilience

Sustainable volunteerism is a high-level design requirement and was extensively discussed at the workshop. The working group raised concerns in relation to the time commitment for volunteer staff should FENZ see a need to increase their training to achieve a single competency model. It was felt that despite initiatives for more flexible training models the time commitment would be well beyond what the average volunteer could afford. The NZPFU see this as a potential threat to providing consistent skills and competence across the organisation. That being said, volunteers wanting to attain career qualifications, should they be able to manage the time and workload, could work towards this and the NZPFU would be interested in working together to ensure equity and fairness whilst protecting the career staff process and CEA issues and the volunteers undertaking the training.

Issues in regard to sustainable volunteerism are not isolated to New Zealand alone. Fire and rescue services around the world are facing similar issues. Volunteer numbers decline as busy life styles are prioritised over any increased time commitments organisations place on their volunteers to meet training needs and health and safety compliance. These trends continue despite various initiatives being explored globally and this is something FENZ must take into consideration when designing its target operating model (TOM) in relation to command and control competencies.

For this reason, the NZPFU feel that the level of volunteer training needs to be carefully considered during the TOM design. We would support initiatives that focus on improving basic skill development of Volunteers. It is the NZPFU's opinion that on-going basic skill training for Volunteer fire-fighters has not been adequately prioritised for some time by the NZFS. Our members have a vested interest in the basic skills of volunteers that they often support, or are supported by, at incidents. Expectations of the skill and competency of employed fire-fighters is understandably high as they have more time for training, however competition for that time is increasing. Volunteer's training time is also facing competition with incident response, readiness checks, fire safety initiatives and various other duties that the modern fire-fighter is called upon to complete. The NZPFU feel that the level of training of Volunteer fire-fighters should be targeted to what they actually need to best serve their community. By narrowing this scope, the training can be fit for purpose and achieved within the time commitment a volunteer is willing to make.

A Career officers' progression from Qualified Fire Fighter (QFF) rank to Senior Station Officer (SSO) rank requires a minimum of 98.5 days of student investment over 74 months of training program time. This is just to attain the qualification and be eligible for promotion to the rank. In addition, the NZFS identified the need for career officers to attend a Tactical Command Course tri- annually to maintain and enhance command and control skills. Therefore, the NZPFU believe that the expectations of volunteer officers need to be more realistic. Volunteer officer skill sets should adequately represent the needs of the communities they serve and their command competency should equally reflect the FENZ resources likely to be commanded by them within their local community. Should the command and control demands exceed the ability of the local officers' further command and control support should be made available from outside the local community. A system for this needs to be identified under the TOM design. See, Command and Control Layers below.

Risks to the Organisation

The working group had discussion about what the NZPFU considered to be risks to FENZ.

Volunteer sustainability is a risk to FENZ and a concern to the NZPFU. We feel that current discussions around the TOM about training requirements for volunteers will be unsustainable and over time the already trending decline in volunteerism will only increase. It is the NZPFU's opinion that there is a focus on high level, costly, unrealistic and unnecessary training for our volunteers which is completely at odds with the reality of the modern face of volunteerism in this changing world. We acknowledge that a one size does not fit all and various approaches to volunteer training will need to be considered, however these approaches need to be achievable and it is felt that this is the time to refocus energies on the basics so that volunteers can best serve their communities given their local circumstances.

A further consideration when deciding the level of training for volunteers is the organisation's need to meet its obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. Section 36; Primary Duty of Care of a person conducting business or undertaking (PCBU). Sub section (f) states that a PCBU must ensure so far as is reasonably practical the "provision of any information, training, instruction, or supervision that is necessary to protect all persons from risks to their health and safety arising from work carried out as part of the conduct of the business or undertaking". It would therefore be considered high risk, from a health and safety perspective, to put Volunteer officers in a position that they are not adequately prepared and trained for.

The NZPFU questions the logic behind even attempting to prepare Volunteer officers to perform at a level that is beyond realistic service delivery outcomes. If they are called upon to perform beyond their capacity it could possibly expose the organisation, and the board, as officers of the PCBU, to Work Safe scrutiny should an accident occur. The NZPFU has been informed by FENZ integration staff that it is unlikely that any investigation from Work Safe would target an individual. However, any policy and process designed under the TOM would be questioned. If this policy and process was scrutinised and found that it allowed for staff to manage emergency incidents that they were not prepared and trained for, or that more appropriately qualified and trained staff were not empowered to take command and control of incidents, then the organisation and its officers would surely be held to account.

The NZPFU also feel that it is unfair and irresponsible to expose volunteers to situations where they may feel out of their depth. Individuals who choose to serve their community should not have to respond to emergencies wondering what their liability may or may not be. They should be confident that they are trained to an appropriate level and not be expected to perform to a standard that would require a full-time training commitment. Regardless of whether or not an individual is scrutinised during a Work Safe investigation, the stress and anxiety it inevitably creates should not burden a volunteer who is selflessly trying to help their local community. This kind of occurrence or environment would also have detrimental influences on volunteer sustainability.

Command and Control layers

NZPFU feel that the new TOM design offers an opportunity to improve command and control processes and we have looked to overseas fire and rescue services for inspiration in this area.

Common overseas practices layer command and control into 3 levels, operational, tactical and strategic. These levels are usually linked to the number of operational resources responded to an incident and reflect incident management complexity and inter-agency coordination.

The NZPFU feel that this model may have merits within the new processes designed under the TOM.

It is unquestionable that timely and effective tactical decision making on the incidents ground is critical. Feedback from both Volunteer officers and our Career officer trainer's, highlights an increased level of exposure in this area. This exposure is fuelled by the combination of low value, low frequency training and the potential of low frequency high impact incidents that they may be exposed to.

We believe there needs to be significantly more support across the organisation at the tactical level.

The timely resourcing of incident management roles is challenging as senior officer response (Area and Assistant Area Commanders) sometimes requires them to travel great distances from their office or home. The NZPFU feel there is value in investigating initiatives that will enhance the tactical response layer to bridge the gap between the existing alert and arrival times of senior officers.

Operational Command - Existing officers on responding appliances

Tactical Command - New or enhanced layer of response

Strategic Command – Existing senior/executive officers

Enhancement of this layer will obviously have to be accounted for in any new rank system, either by a new rank or a role change in one of the current rank layers. The working party discussed the benefits to incident management and how it could be provided. Either, a new rank, or enhancing and adjusting the roles of existing Assistant Area Commanders or existing SSO's. No one solution was landed on and this could be a topic for further discussion.

The NZPFU would be interested in engaging in more discussion on this topic in the future. Our initial discussions have highlighted a few key areas where this concept may solve some of the barriers facing the integration of command and control within FENZ.

- **Operationally**

The working party felt that this additional enhancement of the tactical command response capability, responding in a metropolitan setting early, would ensure appropriate and timely command and control at more technical or challenging incidents that may escalate quickly. This would see incidents layering up to tactical level more seamlessly and allow leadership to remain with crews where required.

In the provincial setting it would provide for the timely arrival of a commander to provide additional command competencies. This additional command response would allow volunteer officers to concentrate on their command and control competency at a local response level and negate the need for onerous additional training commitments.

- **Non-Operationally**

In both a metropolitan and provincial setting, we see this new or adjusted role taking over a portion of the administrative burden currently carried by the area management teams. Things like, combined crew training, leave approvals and roster management of minimum shift manning, managing career volunteer interface relationships, building ongoing rural and urban relationships and risk planning at operational and tactical levels. These are just to name a few advantages and a well thought out role description for such a position may identify more.

The NZPFU also feel that this concept may have significant benefits regarding volunteer resilience and sustainability particularly in provincial areas. This new or adjusted role would build relationships with local volunteer brigade and fire force leaders, enhancing the understanding of local volunteer issues and concerns. They could also work with the additional Volunteer Support Officers (VSO) and Training Officers (TOs) that are being supplied to areas to provide a better overall service to volunteers. The training and support of volunteers could be targeted to where it is needed within the area and managed more effectively than by a remote and geographically distant Area Commander (AC), they could essentially execute section 36 of the FENZ Act on behalf of the organisation.

Wherever provided the new and adjusted role would reduce some operational and non-operational burden from an area management team. This role would allow AAC's and AC's to "look up and out" as part of the strategically lead direction the organisation wishes to take, and allow them to concentrate on strategic concerns for their area of responsibility. This would include relationships with the Local Advisory Committees, relationship building with external agencies, risk reduction strategies, overall man management, succession planning, fleet and operational equipment initiatives and so on.

The NZPFU recognise that this concept may be dismissed by some as a return the old "Divisional Officer" (DO) role, and we understand their concerns, however that is not a reason to dismiss it without considering and investigating the merits of it.

Conceptual rank and Authorised Command Level discussions

The NZPFU are concerned with the present state within FENZ regarding the wearing of operational rank markings by non-operational staff. This includes the level 2 helmet and epaulettes worn by personnel who have no command and control qualifications. These rank markings are being issued to personnel in non-operational roles or on secondment to operational roles ostensibly to indicate equivalence to a pay step. We understand that this may be a position that has been inherited from the NZFS, none the less it is the NZPFU's position that this needs to cease under any new TOM design as it will undermine respect for any future operational rank system. We are concerned that this practice dilutes the operational rank and provides no tangible benefit to the organisation. Skills and expertise of non-operational staff could be represented in a more appropriate way.

Discussions around rank, the reflection of an individual's competency, and the inclusion of Career Rural staff proved difficult. However the NZPFU would like to suggest 3 options that may be refined in the future should the integration team see merit in either one of them.

1. Different rank markings and/or titles to distinguish between Career, Rural and Volunteer staff to reflect varying levels of command competency. This is common practice within Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) partners. The different rank systems would be similar in hierarchy, but alignment would be off set to reflect the varying levels of training and qualifications.

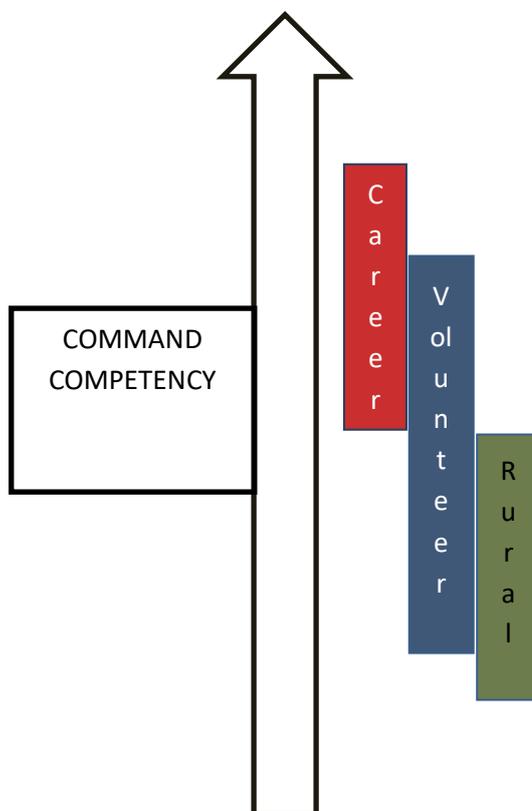


Fig 1: Possible staggering of differing rank systems

The above diagram reflects, in red, a career staff rank structure, in blue, a volunteer urban rank structure, and in green, a rural staff rank structure. The off-sets reflect the differing levels of command competency based on quantifiable training and the fact rural staff are not trained in structure, rescue, hazardous substance and various other events types. Therefore the off-sets for rural is set at a lower level purely to reflect their inability to take command at an incident other than vegetation events. The area of overlap between the differing rank systems reflect a Senior

Fire-Fighter (SFF) who may be Station Officer (SO) qualified, career and urban volunteer interface, or Rural staff who may have urban experience through membership of a urban volunteer brigade and the rural volunteer/career urban interface.

- Option 2 sees a singular rank system utilising an authorised command level (ACL) type numbering arrangement. This system would require helmet marking identification which would be determined by not only the individuals rank, but also by the level of training and qualifications they have attained.

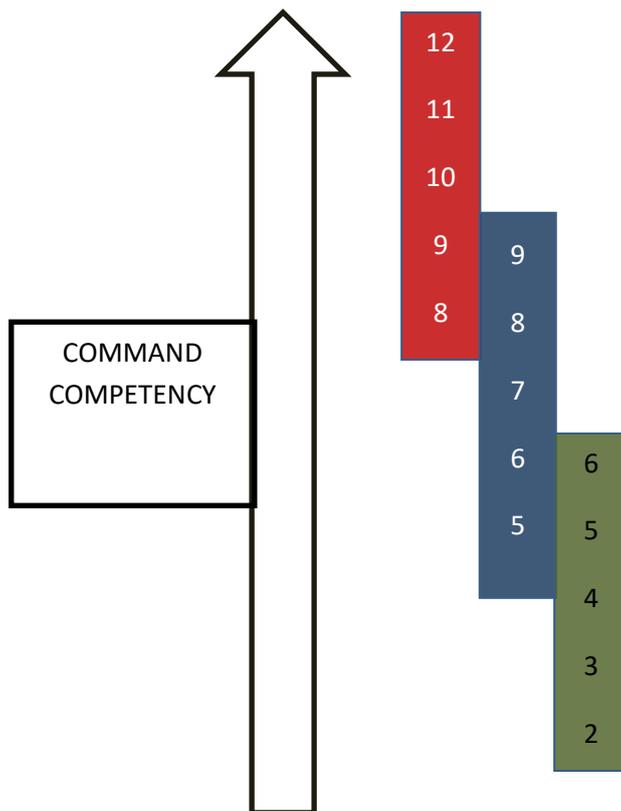


Fig 2: Singular rank system based on an ACL type numbering arrangement.

The same colours reflect Career, Volunteer and Rural staff as in figure 1, and the principles of overlap and offset between the three remain the same. The levels of command competencies are similar to those reflected in option 1 as well. The numbers in figure 2 are not indicative of the ACL system being proposed but are for example purposes only; the main variance here is that one identifying rank system can be used with an additional ACL policy that reflects the level of an individual's capability to take command at an incident.

- The third option discussed is compatible with either option 1 or 2. It involves fully assimilating Career Rural staff into any proposed career rank system and "grandfathering" their command competency to vegetation type events only. They would then be set training targets, over a determined period of time, to bring them in line with Career Urban officers in regards to being

able to take command at various other event types. Any transition of this nature would require Career Rural staff to eventually meet the same assessment levels that are expected of Career Urban officers. Initially it would also require an additional identification marking within any new rank system until such time as Career Rural staff are actually fully assimilated, and the term “rural” phased out by 2030. The level at which Career Rural staff assimilate into the career urban rank system would have to be determined in discussion with the Fire and Emergency Commanders Association (FECA) due to their vested interest in this area, and detail into what kind of training and assessments they would need to complete would need further exploration and consultation.

A 4th option was discussed by the working party and it is worth mentioning not only because of its simplicity, but because of what we know has happened with this type of integration within AFAC partners. The NZPFU would suggest maintaining separate rank systems for career and volunteer urban staff as outlined in options 1 and 2. However rural would undertake a “specialized function” alongside normal service delivery whilst still operating under a FENZ umbrella.

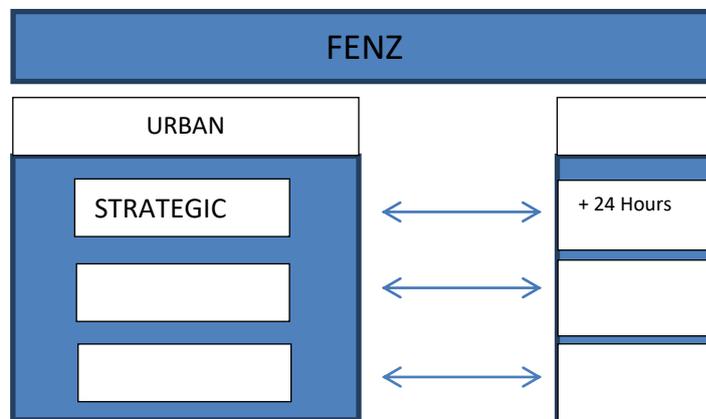


Fig 3: Rural remain independent temporarily under a FENZ umbrella for the purposes of C&C

This option was raised during discussions because of failings in similar integration attempts on the east coast of Australia. The working party deliberated that perhaps this may not be the right time to introduce, what could be considered an urban command and control system, to the rural arm of the organisation. This could be misconstrued as a forced measure and may lead to resistance of acceptance from rural staff. It may be something that needs more time and generational change to occur more seamlessly and perhaps a more federated model where rural is considered a more specialised function and urban command and control links are kept to event type and are connected at event escalation levels as portrayed in figure 3. This temporary model could be reviewed periodically heading towards 2030 and slowly refined, and the separation diminished, making integration between urban and rural a more gradual process.

The NZPFU working party obviously did not come up with one definitive answer here, but whatever the TOM design decides on, the NZPFU is adamant that it should reflect the individual’s command competency and that competency must be evidence based on quantifiable training, assessment, qualifications and skills. At this point in time it is only amongst career staff that that the statement “new FENZ rank system directly reflects demonstrated competency that can be relied upon by all personnel to identify competency levels” is actually

accurate, due to the nature of staff progression and the checks and balances put in place by previous collective employment agreement negotiations and arrangements made with the former NZFS.

Hand Overs and Take Overs at Incidents

The NZPFU was involved in drafting, and adhere to, the current Interim Command and Control Policy, however we believe that moving forward there is room for more clarity. In particular we would like to see changes to when and how a Career officer can and should take over an incident. We understand the “conversation” philosophies, and although they are serving a current purpose, we see a link to the fore mentioned tactical command layer enhancement as a factor here. Fundamentally, we believe that due to the recognised assessed competency of Career officers, there is an obligation for this to be reflected in any command policy moving forward.

The working party discussed ideas about how this may look in the future, this discussion kept in mind that we did not want to see our officer members over powering local volunteer urban and rural leaders, but working alongside them with the ability to take over immediately should it be needed.

The NZPFU acknowledges that this will also require personal maturity from our members as well, but it was felt that this is necessary to avoid risks to the organisation and any external scrutiny should an incident not have a successful outcome.

The NZPFU are conscious of the need for Career officers to assist in the developing the command and control skills of Volunteer officers at appropriate incidents and we felt that there needs to be a more formal record of when a more suitably qualified officer in attendance elects to support the current incident commander. Some suggestions arose from these discussions about additional “K” codes. Currently K45 means that command has been handed to a certain individual, usually of higher rank, but it may be a lower rank on de-escalation of an incident. The working party considered additional “K” codes to reflect the position a career officer may choose to adopt, based on their experience, training and qualifications, on arrival at an incident under the control of an urban or rural volunteer officer. They include:

K?in support of

K45 command transferred to.....

It was felt the terms monitoring and mentoring, as are currently used, were too generalised and “providing support to” narrowed the meaning to actually state that he/she is running beside the Volunteer officer and actually coaching them through the incident as needed.

Summary

Using an evidenced based approach and analysis to address command and control questions in a new organisation has led us to the following conclusions/insights

The NZPFU takes the position that:

- That training differences between career staff and urban volunteers and rural staff are wider than management realise or wish to acknowledge.
- These differences will have an effect on any future rank system and high level design statements in regards to “single competency model”.
- The current system does not support any form of lateral entry into career ranks.

- We recognise the fire fighter skills gained in service to volunteer brigades but maintain that individuals looking to transition into career ranks should still have to complete a recruitment process and the Union is open to discussions on this subject.
- We recognise the logic of utilising subject matter expert knowledge at all levels of command and control but the NZPFU does not support handing over command of FENZ resources and personnel to such individuals.
- We believe FENZ run a risk of undermining volunteer sustainability by asking volunteers to take on excessive training requirements.
- We believe that if FENZ allow individuals to take command of incidents without the necessary quantifiable qualifications its' policy and processes will come under external scrutiny. In the interests of minimising the organisations exposure to risk and safety on the incident ground we believe that the person with the most extensive level of training and assessed competency must have the clear authority to take charge if required.
- We believe there is an opportunity to improve how incidents are managed within the organisation and overseas best practices should be explored.
- We believe there are opportunities to better support area management staff and local volunteer leaders, brigades and fire forces during the new design process.
- We believe current practices of issuing rank to non- operational staff and as a tool for pay scale alignment should cease under any new design process.
- We believe all staff must be distinguishable in any new rank system and their skills, qualifications and training recognised in such a system.
- We believe career staff should have the ability to immediately take command or control of an incident, if required, under any new command and control policies and processes and are able to decide not to and act in support instead should they see fit.

The NZPFU acknowledges that not a one size fits all, and being a fit for purpose organisation will require flexibility. It is because of this we have presented a number of options in some areas. We feel that what we are proposing may be adaptable to FENZ's needs given more discussion and more information from FENZ integration personnel about what is actually trying to be achieved here. Area or Region geographical outlines will assist in the design of rank systems as would an understanding of what the actual burden of responsibility local volunteer urban and rural brigades are willing to shoulder.

Conclusion

The NZPFU feels that FENZ needs to consider a number of factors within the design of command and control policy and process and the evolving landscape of New Zealand should be one of them. A rapidly growing population and declining volunteer numbers mean that career staff involvement and flexibility will be paramount to the success of the organisation.

As stated earlier, the NZPFU acknowledge volunteers and what they do for New Zealand, not only in service, but also the immense economic benefits that goes along with that service. However FENZ needs to be realistic about volunteer time commitments and what is actually achievable in regards to upskilling current volunteer and rural personnel.

In its 42 years of existence the Fire service Act 1975 was out stripped by the variation of incidents firefighters attend. Incidents have become more complex and diverse and they require adequately trained staff to deal with them. Any policies and processes designed under TOM should not only target 2030 but keep in mind the change and development that could be seen over the next 40 years.

We feel now is the time to have the brave conversations, in the interests of a better service, a more supportive service, where all staff are recognised for the varying levels of skills, qualifications and training they bring to serve the public of New Zealand.

We look forward to discussing these issues, concepts and more with you in the future as we work towards a successful organisation that can provide the New Zealand public with the emergency response it deserves.

The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union.