

Rural Fire Administration in 1991

1. On December 19, 1990, Government passed the Fire Service Amendment Act 1990. In addition, subsequent to the adoption of the Hensley Report*, there have been the impacts of two major events which have had a profound influence on the effectiveness of rural fire administration:
 - (a) The Government has proceeded with the sale of the NZ Forestry Corporation forests, the management of which had carried on with many of the attributes of the NZ Forest Service commitment to rural fire protection in the rural communities near major State plantation forests.
 - (b) The restructuring of local government, with increased emphasis on regional structures and erosion of traditional County and District administration, was implemented. This coincided with the requirement by Transit NZ (the body set up by Government to allocate central government funds for road construction and maintenance) that subsidised work on roads, whether construction or maintenance, had to be by competitive tender. As many Districts found that to restructure their plant and employees into the required company form of a Local Area Trading Enterprise was unduly difficult and clumsy, they took the decision to disband their wage gangs and dispose of plant.
2. Prior to passing the Act, the Minister of Internal Affairs used the device of written directives to the Fire Service Commission to set in action the recommendations of the Hensley Report. The following changes occurred in quick succession.
 - (a) The Minister ordered the Fire Service Commission to set up urgently a National Advisory Committee with a membership reduced from the Hensley Report recommendations.
 - (b) The National Rural Fire Authority proceeded with the appointment of National Rural Fire Officer M. Dudfield and the appointment of two RFD Technical Officers, J. Walker and I. Millman.
 - (c) The Minister required changes to the criteria governing access to the Rural Fire Fighting Fund (RFF) for refund of costs of fire outside commercial or semi-commercial forests. Three categories were set out as:
 - (i) Major over \$5000 with 95% costs over \$5000 to be met by the RFF Fund.
 - (ii) Minor over \$1000, accumulated on an annual basis and treated as a single major claim.
 - (iii) Petty – under \$1000 – no costs refunded.This compares with the previous RFF Fund where costs after the first \$2500 were met.
Changes to funding are projected to result in the Department of Conservation contributing up to \$400,000 per annum and the Fire Service Commission up to \$800,000 in the year to June 1991 or such contribution needed to result in the fund having a 20% balance at end of year.
 - (d) The Minister has directed that regional co-ordinating committees will comprise Principal Rural Fire Officers of each Rural Fire Authority plus one representative from Regional Council, one from Ministry of Forestry and the Fire Service area commander or commanders if more than one area is included. In addition, each committee has to be provided with technical support from one of four Fire Service regional rural fire officers (two North Island, two South Island). The officers appointed are C. Smithies, J. Rassmussen, A. Jackson and J. Barnes. The Regional Committees will approve fire plans of an RFA. To have access to the RFF fund the RFA has to have such approval.
3. The situation for rural firefighting over the next summer is expected to reflect the new administrative structures.
 - (a) The new regional co-ordinating committees are improving in effectiveness, although many Regional Authorities have been slow to co-operate. The Fire Service Commission has appointed four regional rural fire officers to ensure the completion of this process; their effectiveness depends on there being sufficient incentives such as access to the RFF fund, to persuade Rural Fire Authorities to implement the new structures.
 - (b) The Rural Fire Fighting fund is now in place. However the changes recommended by Hensley have been subsequently amended. The Minister has now adopted a definition of "commercial and semi-commercial forest" which has the effect of precluding owners of these claiming from the RFF Fund. The excesses (para 2(c)) are seen by smaller districts as a burden, particularly where their workforce has been disbanded and plant sold, so that they are dependent for first strike capability on contractors who will require to be paid for all costs incurred.



Mr P.F. Olsen, of Rotorua, who wrote this article.

* The Hensley Report recommendations and comment on the report were published in the February 1990 issue of NZ Forestry.

(c) The disorganisation at local level was added to by the piecemeal process of the sale of NZ Forestry Corporation forests. New owners have a willingness to contribute to rural fire prevention but in many cases are concerned as to the burden, particularly where RFAs are ineffective.

(d) The NZ Forest Owners Association appreciates all the above, and shoulders a large part of the burden of fire prevention publicity. The 1990/91 programme combining TV, radio and print media was rated by many RFAs and DOC as extremely effective in raising public consciousness of the fire hazard in summer. The Fire Service National Rural Fire officer appreciates the need for effective prevention publicity. The Service assisted the 1990/91 programme. It is expected the 1991/92 programme will be of similar scale to the previous season, with increased National Rural Fire Division input.

The forest industry have for a long time provided much of the effective rural fire fighting capacity, and there has been passive acceptance of this "good corporate citizen" role by local authorities. It is increasingly obvious that the willingness of the forest industry to provide this capacity on a "good citizen basis" in addition to their requirement for the payment of rates, insurance and levies to protect their own interests, is being eroded. Cost recovery by government departments such as DOC and Ministry of Defence will see local authorities being required either to provide fire fighting capabil-

ity, or to securely fund contract capability.

4. Achievements

With new legislation and new structures in place we could expect some time for settling down prior to new processes being effective. However, there has been a surprising degree of acceptance by all concerned of the need to adopt practical and effective administrative procedures to ensure success.

The new National Rural Fire Authority through the National Rural Fire Officer, M. Dudfield, have been able to provide a good framework for Rural Fire Authorities to adopt and conform to procedures to the extent practicable.

(a) The new Rural Fire Management Code of Practice has been adopted after a round of consultation with accepted practitioners. This, together with the new structures themselves, will be tested by actual experience.

The undermanning of County capability as a result of Transit NZ's requirement for competitive tendering is of increasing concern. There is evidence that the sale of equipment has eroded the capacity of many RFAs to maintain a first strike capability based on their own resources.

(b) Training. A working party has been convened and is working through the needs for training at all levels with a lively appreciation of the declining capability of many rural fire officers through lack of experience of wild fire conditions and fire line practice. This applies to both rural officers and urban fire service personnel who have been drawn into vegetation fires on the periphery of urban responsibility.

(c) Research. As a first step a Canadian, Marty Alexander, has made a quick survey of the rural fire scene in NZ and has presented a report on those elements in the practice of prediction of fire risk and control of fires where Canadian experience can show that current NZ capability needs strengthening. He is presently undertaking a PhD degree in Canberra, Australia, and intends revisiting NZ at the completion of his academic work to follow up application of some of his recommendations.

Funding of research which has been suggested by Alexander has been accepted by the Forest Research Institute. In the current year it expects to have a programme developed which will be funded by NZ Forest Owners Association and FR I to provide an initial pilot study of fire research requirements for New Zealand. These will seek to construct a data base to ensure that an integrated rural fire management information system can be developed. The research programme will address the weaknesses in understanding of Fire Weather Index, fire behaviour, and fire occurrence, and the statistical basis of fire occurrence, cost and behaviour, and encourage the provision of adequate resources.

It is expected that a skilled overseas observer, such as Alexander, would link with a New Zealand fire researcher to put in place a programme of research which could be expected to last three to five years before the necessary data and systems are in place for national adoption.

There is still, however, concern that despite practical and enthusiastic support from the National Rural Authority and the forest owners, there are many regions where administrative and suppression capability are inadequate for any real stress under a full fire emergency. A lot of the shortcomings could be corrected if adequate funds were earmarked for training and equipment. However, these will not be effective if there is not an assured commitment by Rural Fire Authorities to pay more than lip service to the responsibility they have increasingly thrust upon them.

P.F. Olsen

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