

Thursday, 13 November 2014

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2013-2014 WAIRARAPA RURAL FIRE DISTRICT

In summary the Wairarapa Rural Fire District has had a successful year, if frustrating at times, furthering the delivery of efficient and professional fire services to our regional community.

Since my last Annual Report to our stakeholders there have been a number of changes in Local and Central Government that impact on the way the WRFD operates. It is perhaps pertinent to reiterate the purpose and scope of the WRFD.

The primary goal and purpose of the Wairarapa Rural Fire District (WRFD) is to supply rural fire management services to the Wairarapa region under the Forest and Rural Fires Act. Directing the process are government policies to improve the proficiency of fire service delivery in rural New Zealand, through the amalgamation of smaller fire authorities into larger entities. These larger entities are called Enlarged Rural Fire Districts, of which the WRFD is one. There are no rules around either the expected size or structure of these new entities but they are expected to be able to deliver an efficient, cost effective and professional level of service. Information is freely shared between the ERFD's to speed up the formation process and to establish consistent approaches to the level of service delivered to rural communities. However, the fact there are no rules and few templates as to how and what services are being delivered has complicated and slowed the process of introducing cost effective management.

Fire authorities, such as the WRFD, are independent organisations constituted under the Forest and Rural Fires Act. The board (or more correctly termed Rural Fire Committee) is responsible for the governance, strategy and standard setting of the organisation. Boards are appointed by stakeholder representatives. In the case of the WRFD that is the three District Councils, the Department of Conservation and the Forest Owners Association. The Board also has a representative from the New Zealand Fire Service and an independent Director sitting as full Board members. The fire authority's activities are funded by stakeholder organisations.

Last year I mentioned that the Board of the WRFD had determined the size of the organisation and geographic area it covers needed to increase to meet the desired goals and objectives of the enlargement process. The Board had no opinion as to whether that should be absorbing additional area or being merged with another fire authority. During the past year independent analysis to include the Tararua District Council fire authority into what would have been a new organisation that included the WRFD took place. It was deemed beneficial to all stakeholders, in both regions, that the enlargement take place but Tararua District Council chose not to proceed, claiming they could not see any benefits to them. This was unfortunate and runs counter to the government strategy of reducing the cost of rural fire management to all stakeholders and improving service delivery. Unfortunately this process was expensive and time consuming, for the WRFD, and highlights the inefficiency of the process.

As disappointing as the result has been, for the WRFD, it is the right of Tararua District Council to make decisions they think are best for their region. The Board and management of the WRFD will continue to liaise with the National Rural Fire Authority and Chair of the NZ

Fire Services Commission to bring about some resolution to the inequity that exists in the way enlargements are being handled.

The Board met with the Chair of the New Zealand Fire Service Commission / National Rural Fire Authority in August 2013 and the full Commission in November 2013. At both meetings the results of the government initiated Swain Report into future management of the fire related services in New Zealand were discussed. Strategies adopted by the WRFD in its Future Directions plan have been deemed consistent with the overall direction of future emergency service delivery in rural areas of the country. This is encouraging but highlights the need for the WRFD to regularly review its management systems, training and structure. One element that needs attention in the coming year is revisiting the way the organisation is funded by its diverse stakeholders. This will have to be done in conjunction with obtaining a clear picture of what services rural residents want and how that can be matched with current legislation requirements. The WRFD cannot be charged with functions it is not legally mandated to perform.

The WRFD's most important resource to respond to events in the region is in the organisations volunteers who staff the regions eight Rural Fire Forces. It has been critically important to the Board that all these volunteers are properly trained and equipped.

To ensure services are being delivered in a timely and professional manner and that the WRFD's volunteers are properly trained and equipped two additional staff were appointed during the year. The staff are working in the areas of education and training and operations.

The WRFD staff work on four key work streams. The four streams are Readiness, Reduction, Response and Recovery. Along with the Principal Rural Fire Officer the new staff are progressing well with developing and implementing strategies and plans to make the Wairarapa a safer place from rural fire.

The risks and liabilities facing all organisations and companies in New Zealand, including the WRFD, will increase when the government implements changes to Health and Safety legislation next year. There will be little time between the proposed change becoming legislation and enforcement of the new law. This is a vexing problem for all organisations managing employees and volunteers in a work place. All ERFD's and other organisations operating in the emergency service provision environment are facing the same problem. The WRFD is working closely with the NRFA and other ERFD's to determine changes needed in our operating and governance systems and processes going forward. There is currently significant speculation about the potential outcomes under the proposed legislation but little in the way of factual information. The WRFD will be making sure its stakeholders are kept up to date with progress on this important piece of legislation that will affect the way all emergency services operate in the future.

Despite a wet summer and the best efforts of everyone in the region to keep the region free of fire there were still more than 100 fires that the WRFD was responsible for. In the ten years that the WRFD has been in existence the annual fire frequency has not altered significantly, which is disappointing. This is a national problem where the severity of fires is diminishing, particularly in urban areas, but the frequency in rural areas is not. The WRFD has spent considerable energy concentrating its efforts on reducing the number of fires through education and ensuring our volunteer forces are ready to respond quickly to lessen the impact of incidents when they occur. Now the WRFD has dedicated staff resources in education and training we expect to see a reduction in the number of preventable fires over time.

The Board is pleased to report that the financial results for the year ended 30th June 2014 are within budget expectations and consistent with the long term Strategic Plan. Investment in new capital items to improve service delivery is on target including the purchase of a new fire engine, which has been placed with the Riversdale Beach Rural Fire Force. Capital was also spent on weather stations and telepager units to improve readiness and response information. The weather stations fill gaps in the regions warning systems and the telepaggers improve callout times for volunteers in rural areas. Because of the WRFD's compliance with national standards capital items are subsidised through the NRFA grant assistance programme significantly reducing the cost to the region.

Going forward the WRFD will revisit its funding arrangements with all stakeholders. Recent changes in the Department of Conservation structure have catalysed the need to revisit current "in-kind" services. DOC has traditionally provided services to the WRFD rather than pay a cash contribution to the WRFD. After their recent organisational changes they would prefer to pay the WRFD to provide the service rather than commit people. This more centralised cash model better suits the WRFD and brings it more in line with the national intent for Enlarged Rural Fire Districts. The WRFD Board look forward to the opportunity to simplify the organisation's funding arrangements.

After the Local Government election, in late 2013, Mr David Holmes (Masterton District Council) and Mr Max Stevens (South Wairarapa District Council) were reappointed to the Board representing constituents in those District Council areas. Mr Mike Ashby was appointed to represent constituents in the Carterton District. Council representatives are appointed by their respective Councils. Ms Kathy Houkamau replaced Mr Chris Lester as the Department of Conservation Board Member.

The other directors of the WRFD are Mr Ian Pickard (NZ Fire Service), Mr Alan Sadler (Independent) and Mr Dave Hilliard (NZ Forest Owners Association).

Understanding and managing rural fire in New Zealand is overly complicated and difficult for most people to understand with two completely different sets of rules applying to urban populations and those who live, work and invest in the rural environment. The WRFD Board are grateful for the dedication and hard work put in by all the volunteers, stakeholders and staff who are working hard to continuously improve rural fire safety in the region. Personally, I thank all those who have contributed to building a successful organisation especially the Board and our PRFO.



Dave Hilliard
Chairman