

Report 99.561

File: F/6/1/2

4 October 1999

geoff\reports\LC99561.doc

Report to the Landcare Committee
from Geoff Cameron, Principal Rural Fire Officer

Future of the WRC Rural Fire District

1. Purpose

This Report describes the status of the Wellington Regional Council Rural Fire District (WRC RFD) for the 1999/00 fire season (1 October 1999 - 1 April 2000), and proposes the disestablishment of the WRC RFD by 30 September 2000.

2. Fire Season Readiness

Report 99.163 noted that the Committee would be advised of fire protection measures in place for the new fire season, commencing on 1 October.

In accordance with the Rural Fire Management Code of Practice, the WRC's Principal Rural Fire Officer prepared the Rural Fire Plan for the Rural Fire District. This Fire Plan was peer reviewed by a sub-committee of the Wellington Rural Fire Co-ordinating Committee and then formally approved at a meeting of the full Committee on 24 September. The approval of that fire plan means that the Council meets Code of Practice requirements and may apply to the Rural Fire Fund for reimbursement of fire fighting costs within its RFD.

As well as fire plan preparation, the WRC has implemented the following readiness measures:

- organised a 24-hour contact roster
- fire training for staff who may be called out to fires
- continued with the approved maintenance regime for fire equipment
- ensured that the Hutt Valley Bush Fire Force volunteers are keeping their equipment maintained and staff trained
- continued to receive fire weather data to gain a picture of fire risk in our area.

The Council's state of fire readiness thus meets Code of Practice requirements.

3. Rural Fire District Disestablishment Proposal

Report 99.163, presented to the Landcare Committee on 20 April 1999, described the proposal to disestablish the WRC RFD. The details of the proposal are:

- the WRC would enter into the formal process of disestablishment by advertising a Scheme, and distributing copies to the affected adjoining rural fire authorities.
- the National Rural Fire Authority would hear any objections to this Scheme, and if it judged that the Scheme had merits, it would gazette the disestablishment of the WRC RFD to take effect from a given date.
- the four local authorities over whose boundaries the WRC RFD lay would take responsibility for rural fire control in the land area so “released”, and adjust their rural fire plans and other rural fire business accordingly.
- the WRC would remain on the Wellington Rural Fire Co-ordinating Committee, either as a co-opted member, or as a voting member in its own right when the revised Code of Practice comes into effect.
- the WRC would enter into contracted relationships with the four affected local authorities as rural fire authorities to ensure that WRC had continued access to volunteer rural fire forces to suppress any fires on WRC lands.
- the WRC would continue to own and maintain a basic level of fire equipment, and train its own staff in fire suppression and rural fire management.
- the WRC would offer to pay the administration cost of any fire on WRC land.

To justify this proposal, the Report described the emergency management principles behind rural fire control in the Wellington metropolitan area, and submitted that the WRC RFD was now an additional and unneeded layer in the fire control system on the western side of the Region because:

- rural fire is part of the local hazardscape, and therefore should be dealt with by the appropriate local authority;
- emergency management policies should be implemented by the local authorities responsible;
- WRC forest assets and Regional Parks can be protected against fire under a local authority rural fire authority;
- the WRC, as a significant forest asset manager, can still contribute to rural fire co-ordination without being a rural fire authority;
- the WRC can enter into contractual agreements with local authorities for access to volunteer rural fire forces.

Councillors agreed in principle with disestablishment, but noted the long history of WRC involvement in the rural fire business, and endorsed consultation with affected local authorities.

4. **Consultation Process**

The proposal represents a major change for some rural fire authorities, and because all rural fire authorities in this area have close working relationships with each other, consultation on the proposal was appropriate and in keeping with the nature of that relationship.

Consultation was on two levels. Firstly, I discussed the idea, then the detail with Principal Rural Fire Officers from affected local authorities. Secondly, between Chief Executives and amongst councillors.

5. **Consultation Results**

(1) **Department of Conservation**

I met with the Regional Conservator, and correspondence followed. DoC were concerned to ensure on-going support of volunteer rural fire forces, continued and active support of the Co-ordinating Committee, and that the future financial implications were transparent.

The disestablishment proposal, as outlined in Section 3, meets these concerns.

(2) **Hutt City Council**

Their Chief Executive Officer wrote that Hutt City “has no objection to the disestablishment of the WRC Rural Fire District, subject to the following administrative conditions:

1. *... does not take place until the end of the 1999/2000 fire season.*
2. *that agreements for fire cover to the WRC area are satisfactorily resolved.”*

The proposal is now timed to take effect after the 1999/2000 fire season, and discussions to ensure a continuing level of fire cover are progressing satisfactorily. A Section 14 Agreement has been re-signed for this coming fire season and the continuing level of cover after 2000 will reflect the intent of this Section 14 Agreement.

(3) **Porirua City Council**

Their Principal Rural Fire Officer has written that Porirua City is not opposed to the disestablishment in principle, but requested that the implementation be deferred to the 2000/01 fire season. That would allow consideration of the cost and resource implications in time for the new budget year and rural fire season.

No further action needs to be taken as the timing requested is being followed.

(4) **Kapiti Coast District Council**

No official comment had been received when this report was prepared. However, I did attend a meeting of their Community Affairs Committee and discussed the proposal. The only question related to the impact on rates. A report was going to their Council.

As with Hutt City Council, discussions to ensure a continuing level of cover for WRC assets in Kapiti Coast District are progressing satisfactorily.

(5) **Upper Hutt City Council**

Upper Hutt City is the local authority most affected by the proposal. A letter from the Upper Hutt City Council stated that “it very seriously views the applications of the WRC’s proposal to disestablish the WRC RFD, particularly with reference to the financial implications to Upper Hutt.”

I have written to obtain more details, in particular whether the Upper Hutt City Council was aware of the proposed financial support from the WRC, particularly in the early stages of any new arrangement. Further comments from Upper Hutt City Council will not be available until after their next Council meeting, which is 3 November 1999.

6. **Local Authorities are Now Established in Rural Fire Control**

All the affected territorial authorities have up-skilled their staff in rural fire matters, and all have now passed National Rural Fire Authority audits of their compliance with the Rural Fire Management Code of Practice. Hutt City, Porirua City and Kapiti Coast District Councils already issue fire permits for small burns on behalf of WRC. In addition, the Principal Rural Fire Officer from Wellington City was elected Chairman of the Rural Fire Co-ordinating Committee when I stood down after four years in the chair. This reflects the significant advances made by the territorial authorities in rural fire matters.

7. **WRC Rural Fire Involvement in Future**

The WRC is not abandoning rural fire control, but is proposing to pass the legal, administrative and co-ordination aspects over to territorial authorities who are demonstrably able to meld them into their Emergency Management Plans. The four territorial authorities involved have rural fire control responsibilities already; this proposal will simplify the issue for their rural ratepayers.

WRC environmental asset protection is a vital part of asset management planning. The level of service for fire protection is for the WRC to maintain its fire suppression capacity at present levels. It is not appropriate asset management for this level of service to decline as it could expose the assets to greater risk.

We have consulted as requested. The final decision on Rural Fire District disestablishment is part of the next process and will be taken by the NRFA.

8. Financial Implications

The following budget expenditure table shows the financial impact of the proposal:

	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03
Personnel	23,600	10,000	8,000	8,000
Materials	31,900	25,000	9,000	9,000
Transport	15,400	5,400	5,000	5,000
Contractors	48,000	15,000	15,000	15,000
Overhead Charges	48,400	48,400	48,400	48,000
Total	167,300	103,800	85,400	85,400

The budget for the 1999/00 year is already in place. There will be no impact from the proposal.

In the 2000/01 year:

- Staff time requirements will be reduced. Staff fire training will continue, but mostly staff time will be redirected to environmental asset work.
- Materials reduce as the full rental payment for Hutt Valley Bush Fire Force accommodation is programmed to cease in March 2001. At present the WRC pays the rental for the Hutt Valley Bush Fire Force station in Messines Road. The lease is for two years, which gives a new fire authority time to consider the best location for this Force.
- Transport costs decline with staff time.
- The decline in contractors reflects removing the requirement to pay for fire fighting costs. Provision remains to pay for Rural Fire Force support, and fire administration costs on WRC land. For each fire, the first \$1,000 plus five percent of approved fire costs are deducted as National Rural Fire Authority administration costs.

For the year 2001/02 and beyond, the materials category reduces to provide a contribution to regional advertising, plus some minor equipment purchases.

These figures demonstrate the “soft landing” being offered to affected local authorities, and the on-going commitment the WRC will have to rural fire control.

9. **Disestablishment Process, if Agreed**

There are published guidelines on how to disestablish a Rural Fire District, which we propose to follow.

- With Committee approval, a scheme proposal (to disestablish the WRC RFD and transfer responsibility for rural fire control to the relevant territorial authority which is already a rural fire authority for the balance of its rural land) will be prepared and sent to every fire authority affected by the proposal.
- A copy of the proposal will be deposited in appropriate public libraries and Council offices.
- The proposal will be advertised twice over a two week period; affected persons with “any well grounded representations” may object to the National Rural Fire Authority.
- The National Rural Fire Authority, or an appointed Rural Fire Mediator, will hear objections at a nominated time and place.
- Then “on completion of the procedural necessities ... of disestablishment of any Rural Fire District pursuant to the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977, the Notice will be approved by the National Rural Fire Authority.” The Notice (of Rural Fire District disestablishment) will be published in the New Zealand Gazette, and come into force 28 days after publication.

10. **Rural Fire Fighting Reserve**

This proposal, plus the pending Long-term Financial Strategy review, has provided the opportunity to consider options for the Rural Fire Fighting Reserve account, currently standing at \$255,000.

This Reserve was set-up a number of years ago to cover extraordinary fire fighting costs for rural fires on Council lands. It gradually increased in size in the early 1990s as surpluses from rural fire budgets were added to it. In 1996, \$50,000 was transferred to the newly created Plantation Forestry department to cover the insurance excess.

The Reserve has not been required in recent times as fire fighting costs were accommodated within the Natural Forestry rural fire budget for fire fighting. It was not considered appropriate to use the Reserve for other rural fire costs, such as equipment purchase or rental payments.

Given the fact that there have been only three wild fires on WRC forest lands in the last 10 years (Mangaroa, Pakuratahi and Belmont), and no application to use the Reserve, there is no case to keep the Rural Fire Fighting Reserve. The existing and future budgets contain a provision to assist each rural fire authority by payment of the administration costs of any fire on WRC land outside the commercial forests. As there is no other specific purpose within the fire fighting area for the funds, it is appropriate that the future of the reserve be considered through the LTFS process.

11. Recommendations

- (1) *That the Report be received and its contents noted.*
- (2) *That the Committee, as the Rural Fire Authority:*
 - (a) *Notes that the 1999/2000 Rural Fire Plan has been approved, and readiness measures are in accordance with the Rural Fire Management Code of Practice.*
 - (b) *Recommends that the Council approve advertising a Scheme notifying the intention to disestablish the WRC Rural Fire District, in accordance with National Rural Fire Authority guidelines.*
 - (c) *Recommends that the Council consider the future of the Rural Fire Fighting Reserve of \$255,000, as part of the LTFS process.*
 - (d) *Recommends that the Council Chairman writes to each affected territorial authority confirming the proposal to disestablish the WRC RFD and offering the opportunity to discuss the proposal before the Scheme is advertised.*
 - (e) *Notes that cost savings from the exercise will be built into the Natural Forestry LTFS model for Environmental Asset Management.*

Report prepared by:

Approval for Submission:

GEOFF CAMERON
Principal Rural Fire Officer

ANDREW ANNAKIN
Divisional Manager, Landcare