

Report 06.273
Date 9 June 2006
File WO/04/07/01

Committee Rural Services and Wairarapa
Author Tom Ward, Senior Conservation Forester

Rural Fire Involvement in Wairarapa

1. Purpose

To inform the committee of the background to, Greater Wellington's (GW) current and involvement in Rural Fire within the Wairarapa.

2. Significance of the decision

The matters for decision in this report do not trigger the significance policy of the Council or otherwise trigger section 76(3)(b) of the Local Government Act 2002.

3. Background

Fire is covered by two pieces of legislation. Urban structural fires are the responsibility of the NZ Fire Service covered by the Fire Service Act 1975. Rural fires are the responsibility of 86 individual Rural Fire Authorities covered by the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977.

The New Zealand Forest Service provided nationwide rural fire management and coordination until its demise in 1987.

Statutory responsibility for delivery of rural service remained with Territorial Authorities, Department of Conservation, and Rural Fire Districts (largely based on exotic forest estates and including the Wellington Regional Council Rural Fire District).

The Hensley Report (1990) identified some deficiencies and variability in Fire Authorities performance. The Mount Adams fire which burnt for three days and travelled from one Fire Authority's jurisdiction into another where the fire was extinguished is a local example. The National Rural Fire Authority was formed to fill the role that the Forest Service had vacated.

A Code of Practice was developed under which Rural Fire Coordinating Committees were formed linking Fire Authorities and other interested parties (including Regional Councils). Tom Ward, Senior Conservation Forester, chaired the Wairarapa Rural Fire Committee for its first 5 years. Access to a rural fire

fighting fund to cover costs incurred was made available to those Fire Authorities meeting audited standards.

The Wellington Regional Council Rural Fire District was disestablished in 2000. The Council has however retained its involvement in the Wellington Rural Fire Committee and has an operational capability through owning equipment and maintaining staff skills in fire fighting and fire management.

Similarly within the Wairarapa, the Tora/Tuturumuri Fire party was established at Stoney Creek with training being provided to local volunteers. Limited equipment, (two pumps, hose and hand tools along with the Fire Party's two fire appliances) are held in the shed as a first attack resource. A remote automatic weather station located at Stoney Creek provides daily weather information into a network covering the Wairarapa.

An enlarged Rural Fire District covering the whole of the Wairarapa and incorporating South Wairarapa, Carterton, Masterton and Department of Conservation (all Rural Fire Authorities) was formed in 2004 following the perception of deficiencies and operational inefficiencies. GW officers supported the concept of the enlarged Rural Fire District, but not the proposed format which expected GW carry a significant share of the costs.

A governance board (Wairarapa Rural Fire District Board) was formed with political representation from the three District Councils, an Officer from DOC and the Forest Manager from Juken Nissho representing Forest Owners. This Board appointed a Principal Rural Fire Officer (PRO).

An operating committee was formed to work with the PRFO to deliver rural fire services. Nominations to this committee were requested with Tom Ward being nominated and duly appointed to represent GW. The GW contribution is largely a liaison role, with any operational requirements being under delegated authority as a warranted Rural Fire Officer.

In January 2005 the Greater Wellington Regional Rural Fire Committee was reconstituted to include the Wairarapa Rural Fire District. The GW CEO and Wairarapa Divisional Manager were asked to nominate a GW representative. Tom Ward was nominated and duly appointed.

4. Comment

Fire is used as a land management tool, such that fire managers need the skill to 'work' a fire as well as control and when necessary extinguish it.

Vegetation fires pose considerable risks to property and life (including fire crews) that vary greatly with particular situations. These risks are normally identifiable to skilled vegetation fire fighters who have the ability to read the characteristics of the fire, the terrain, the vegetation, the climatic conditions, the infrastructure and the personnel at their disposal.

Experience is a vital ingredient in managing such highly variable conditions, and specialist training is required but does not substitute for experience. In addition local expertise is as important as vegetation fire expertise.

Basic vegetation fire training is a prerequisite of all Forest Industry qualifications. Available training ranges from personal safety and the use of hand tools through to the highest specialist levels of Incident Management. GW officers are trained and experienced in Coordinated Incident Management which is the standard adopted by Emergency Services including Civil Defence.

No single organisation within the Wellington Region has the trained personnel or equipment and resources to manage a wildfire that burns for more than 24 hours. Planned cooperation between Wairarapa organisations and indeed throughout the region ensures that by being available to assist others if required, assistance would be available if GW had a major fire within its Parks, Forests or Reserves.

5. Maringi Fire

In the case of the Maringi fire, the Wairarapa Rural Fire District hired Tom Ward as Operations Manager from day 3 of the fire. Working under delegated authority as a warranted Rural Fire Officer Tom Ward acted on behalf of and reported to the Principal Rural Fire Officer who was the Incident Controller.

In a similar manner Kevin Burdan (GW staff) was hired as a Crew Boss / Sector Boss and a crew of 4 fire fighters made up of 2 contractors and 2 GW field supervisors.

Major incidents such as this are rare (the previous Wairarapa wildfire of this scale was 12 years ago). Following the Maringi fire there has been a debrief, and an independent Operational Review conducted by the Northern Regional Rural Fire Officer and the Principal Rural Fire Officer, Lake Taupo Rural Fire District on behalf of the National Rural Fire Authority. The post fire debrief and Operational Review recorded a wide range of issues requiring focus. Feedback has indicated that a full Coordinated Incident Management System (including Tom Ward) should be implemented much earlier in any future major wildfire incident. The NRFA will receive the Operational Review report and implement the recommendations it decides are appropriate.

6. Review of Fire and Rescue Services

In December 2004 the Department of Internal Affairs prepared a discussion paper titled New Fire Legislation: the Functions and Structure of New Zealand's Fire and Rescue Service.

Key issues are that the 30 year old fire legislation is outdated and is focussed almost solely on fire rather than a wider rescue role. This leaves volunteers, especially from Rural Fire Forces, exposed to potential liabilities when required as first responders to carry out rescues from structures and motor vehicle accidents.

The two fire management systems (urban and rural) have evolved an effective cooperation process at a local level which is acknowledged in the discussion paper.

The current system is unfair from a funding point of view. Insurance levies fund the urban system while the rural system is largely self-funded by levies or through TA rates.

One option, favoured by the majority of submissions considers a regional tier.

A relationship between regional council's natural hazard management and sustainable management roles that may interface with rural fire management activities has been identified. It is acknowledged that regional councils do not currently have a significant role in fire and that if their role is to be expanded further consultation will be required. Note the Hensley Report (1990) identified regional councils as having a potential role to play.

7. Summary

- GW is not a Rural Fire Authority.
- GW has membership of the Wairarapa Rural Fire District Operating Committee and the Greater Wellington Regional Rural Fire Coordinating Committee.
- GW has highly valued, trained Rural Fire Fighting staff in Wairarapa and Upper Hutt who assist in Rural Fires as called upon.
- In return for GW involvement we can expect to receive support for any fires on GW land.
- A review of Rural and Urban Fire Services is underway.

8. Communication

The purpose of this report is for the Committee's information, therefore no external communication is required.

9. Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. *Receives the report.*
2. *Notes the content of the report.*

Report prepared by:

Report approved by:

Tom Ward
Senior Conservation Forester

Ian Gunn
Land & River Operations Manager

Geoff Dick
Divisional Manager, Catchment Management