

Submission to Fire Services Review: Discussion Document

Attention: Department of Internal Affairs
PO Box 805
Wellington 6140

Ashburton District Council (ADC) wishes to thank the Department of Internal Affairs for the opportunity to submit on the Fire Services Review: Discussion Document.

Introduction

In the Ashburton District, rural fire currently responds to many non-fire emergency incidents. This expanded role is not protected by legislation, and does not receive equitable funding to meet the needs of our community.

Council agrees with the first issue identified in the review that community expectations are changing and the responsibility of rural fire has extended to include non-fire emergencies. Lack of coordination and variable leadership, the second issue, is not one that needs addressing in the Ashburton District. Council does agree with the third issue of investment being inconsistent with the growing needs of the community.

Council would like to identify two core issues which need addressing in our district:

1. Lack of legal protection – rural firefighters attend non-fire incidents without a specific mandate to do so.
2. Inequitable funding – rural fire currently receives inequitable funding to meet community needs, compared to the level of funding received by the NZFS.

Governance and Support Option

Council supports a variation of the proposed governance structure of Option 2: Coordinated Service Delivery for the Ashburton District but requests a stronger and more defined role for local government.

Council believes that implementation of Option 2 will contribute to addressing the issues of legal protection for rural firefighters, and of inequitable funding. Rural firefighters will be better resourced to meet the needs of the community in responding to non-fire emergencies under Option 2 as Council believes there are significant governance and operational benefits.

Council would, however, like to see further clarity in regards to accountability. More detail is required over the role of local government in regards to the appointment of the new board and in monitoring of rural fire authorities. Council is of the strong belief that as a financial stakeholder, accountability must be clearly defined and local government should have specific responsibilities. Council also needs to maintain a close working relationship with the rural fire service for the purpose of civil defence. Council would like to request that more information is provided on the role of local government in Option 2.

Council also has serious concerns that should local government have no further mandate for rural fire, there is likely to be a loss of significant specialist experience and expertise in large vegetation fire management held by Territorial Local Authority staff additional to the PRFOs. These staff do not have rural firefighting as their core job and it is therefore unlikely that Councils will be interested in allowing these people to be contracted to the new service (as the discussion document suggests) if local government has no other involvement or mandate with regard to rural fire. Any new structure should be cognisant of this risk.

Council wishes to be consulted on the process that decides the boundaries of the new Rural Fire Authorities. It is likely that ADC will merge with South Canterbury Rural Fire District and the boundaries will be based on distinct geographical features. The new boundaries will run from the Rakaia River to the Waitaki River. Council therefore requests that those boundaries remain unchanged for the new Rural Fire Authority, and that consultation with stakeholders occurs during the process.

Funding Option

Council supports Option 2: Mixed Funding Model in so far as there needs to be multiple funding sources to cover the various facets of service delivery other than fire, and believes that there should be a significant increase in funding for rural fire. Council strongly agrees that there is inconsistent investment in resourcing rural fire to meet the needs of the community in responding to non-fire emergencies. More funding is required for training and to upgrade equipment. Council would like more clarity in regards to how the Mixed Funding Model will be implemented.

We thank the Minister for considering our submission on behalf of Ashburton District Council.



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