

Committee Secretariat  
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Parliament Buildings  
Wellington  
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## **Rural Women New Zealand Submission on the Fire and Emergency New Zealand Bill**

### **Introduction to Rural Women New Zealand**

1. Rural Women New Zealand (RWNZ) is a not-for-profit member based organisation that reaches into all rural communities and advocates on issues that impact on those communities. We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission on the Fire and Emergency New Zealand Bill. This Bill has immense significance for our members, many of whom, live in rural communities that rely heavily on their local fire-service brigade for an increasingly wide range of emergency purposes. We would greatly appreciate the option to appear before the Committee in support of our submission. Please contact Chief Executive Officer Penelope England at [penelope.england@ruralwomen.org.nz](mailto:penelope.england@ruralwomen.org.nz).

### **Overview: RWNZ strongly support this Bill**

2. RWNZ strongly support the changes in this bill. Modernisation of the law in this area, is an important step towards ensuring fire services in New Zealand are funded appropriately and that the service remains fit-for-purpose in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. As recognised in this bill, the role of the fire brigade today has expanded well beyond putting out house fires. In rural parts of New Zealand (often located well away from mainstream services) the local fire brigade is frequently the first to arrive on the scene of traffic accidents and other medical emergencies. Rural fire-services also provide a vital lifeline to the community in supporting ambulance services, assisting in maritime and search & rescue activities and in leading civil emergency responses to adverse weather and natural disaster events.
3. We also welcome the Government's commitment to provide additional funding of \$191 million towards rural fire services. We also support unification of rural fire-services with urban fire-services. Many rural fire brigade are struggling to keep up with the increased demand for their services and many also face significant funding gaps in recruiting and training volunteers as well as paid workers to the service. We are hopeful that the additional funding that is promised in this Bill will go a significant way towards addressing these funding gaps and towards better supporting the many paid and non-paid men and women who dedicate their lives to this service.
4. We also note reassurances from the Government that the changes in this Bill will not be used as a cost-cutting exercise or as an excuse to make changes to fire service jobs or the conditions of their employment. We urge the government to follow through on this commitment when implementing the changes in this Bill.

5. While we strongly support this Bill we think it is worth the Committee giving further consideration to the following areas:
  - We note that under clause 12 of the Bill the role of the fire-services in responding to adverse weather events and natural disasters is identified as an “additional function”. From our perspective, we think this responsibility would be better classified as a core function of the service (clause 11) for which appropriate funding is made available. In rural areas, the reality is that the local fire brigade is expected to take a leadership role in supporting communities through such events.
  - We also support calls by the Insurance Council of New Zealand for a further review of the current funding by insurance model for fire-services. We are not convinced that this is the best or the fairest way to fund the service. We think the option of New Zealand adopting a general taxation approach to funding (in line with Australia and the UK) warrants further consideration by the Committee.

**Greater recognition should be given to the role of the fire service in responding to severe weather events and natural disasters**

6. We think that the role of the New Zealand fire service in responding to severe weather events and natural disasters should be recognised in the Bill as a core function under clause 11 (rather than as an additional responsibility). This change is necessary to reflect the true nature of the service that rural fire services are already providing in responding to these types of events. For example the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes highlighted the essential role that fire services provide in supporting disaster management and recovery efforts. In rural parts of Canterbury, local fire services provided around the clock support to communities including filling up farmers tanks, clearing debris in isolated areas to restore access to roadways and essential utilities and assisting in medical emergencies.
7. The effects of climate change have also increased the demands on fire-services in assisting rural communities through adverse weather events like droughts, flooding and snow storms. During the 2015 North Canterbury droughts, for example, one North Canterbury volunteer fire brigade reported having to fight at least one vegetation fire every day throughout the month of January. According to official reports these types of severe weather events are only expected to increase in the future. It is therefore, essential that the legislative framework reflects the role of the fire service in providing a response, and that fire services are appropriately funded in taking on this responsibility.

**Option of funding the fire service through general taxation warrants further consideration**

8. We also support calls by the Insurance Council of New Zealand for a further review of the current funding model for fire-services. The issue with the current insurance levy approach is that it allows those who are not insured to avoid contributing to fire services, despite their potential to benefit from these services. It is estimated that around 10% of all New Zealand drivers do not have motor vehicle insurance - these drivers ultimately end up deriving an unfair benefit from this system of funding. A further issue is the fact that many rural businesses and household already face higher insurance bills due to the fact that they are located further away from emergency services.
9. As far as we are aware, New Zealand is one of the only countries in the world that funds emergency and fire services from insurance levies. We think the option of New Zealand adopting a general taxation approach to funding (in line with Australia and the UK) does

warrant further consideration by the Committee. This type of funding approach would better reflect the fact that fire-services are ultimately a public good, which should be contributed to by everyone.

### **Conclusion**

10. RWNZ would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment on this Bill, which we are in strong support of.
11. Please do not hesitate to contact me using the contact details below if you would like to discuss our submission further. As noted above, we would also appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee in support of our submission.

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