Volunteer Rural Fire Brigades: the Meat in the Sandwich

A study of the rural fire service in the Monaro region of South-East New South Wales

Sandra Lauer

PhD Scholar, School of Sociology, the Australian National University, Canberra ACT.

Sharing responsibility

Outcomes from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission and the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience have indicated that **"shared responsibility"** is an essential part of any future fire or emergency management strategy that aims to empower communities and improve the resilience of those communities.

What does this mean for the functions of **rural fire brigades**, within the context of shared responsibility?

A volunteer rural fire brigade does not operate in isolation

It is made up of the members from the community who volunteer their time to perform specific functions, some of which are driven by the needs of the **rural fire service** and others that respond to the needs of the **community**.

Although there is an acknowledgement within the research community about the complexities of how responsibility might be shared[1], the role of rural fire brigades, as representative of both the fire agencies and communities, has not been suitably addressed.

This research examines the changing functions of rural fire brigades by exploring the **perceptions and expectations** of community members, rural fire service volunteers and other stakeholders from the **Monaro region** in South-East New South Wales.

How do the functions of rural fire brigades contribute to community development, collaboration and resilience?

What are the implications for future fire management strategies within New South Wales and Australia, within the context of national policy changes toward "shared responsibility" when managing emergencies or disaster?

"The **traditional brigade model** is not the brigade model that we're going to enjoy in a decade's time, in 20 years' time. If we do, we will stagnate and die." NSW RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, AFSM[2]

1. McLennan, B. and Handmer, J., 2012. "Visions Of Sharing Responsibility For Disaster Resilience: Sharing Control", presented at AFAC / Bushfire CRC Conference, Perth, Australia, 28-31 August 2012
2. Presentation at the NSW Rural Fire Service Association Conference in Mudgee, 21-23 June 2013

CRC

ANU
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY