

10.1. Rural Fire Service Update

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Summary

This report allows Council to receive updates on matters in relation to the Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the service it provides for the Council area in relation to fire fighting activities/management, on behalf of Council under the Rural Fire Services Act 1997. The report also will table as a late attachment if received, the minutes from the most recent District Liaison Committee (DLC) meeting, held at the Corowa RFS Centre, on the 23rd of February 2026.

The report covers four main areas as summarised below and seeks Council consideration of the staff recommendations based on matters outlined in this report.

1) Motion to 'De-team' from the Southern Border Team (SBT)

The report firstly provides information including an update on the lack of progress in relation to relevant, previous Council resolutions in relation to requesting the Federation Zone (Federation and Berrigan Local Government Areas) separate (De-team) from the **voluntary** Southern Border Team (SBT). The SBT is a grouping of Council Districts created in 2007, to be managed under the one Fire Control Centre and Management/Staffing Structure. It comprises the Council areas of Albury, Greater Hume, Federation and Berrigan all being managed from the Albury Fire Control Centre.

2) Update on the Red Fleet Ownership Dispute

The report also allows Council to receive information by way of the NSW Government response to the Government Inquiry, see attached, with respect to the ongoing dispute between Councils and the NSW Government, in relation to the ownership of most of the Fire Fighting Plant and Equipment (excluding aerial assets), known as the 'Red Fleet' (Rural Fire Services Trucks and Equipment).

As an example of the issues that arise from Councils and the RFS both having roles in Fleet Management, the report advises of an anomaly raised at the last DLC meeting. Federation Council have been paying for the registration, and registering, a 2014 Land rover Defender, registration CWS15Y, that to local knowledge has never been stationed in any Federation Brigade. It is thought to have always been stationed at Lavington and is part of the Hume Zone (Albury and Greater Hume Council areas).

3) 25/26 NSW Government Allocation

The report also tables Councils 25/26 allocation from the NSW Government for Fire Protection.

4) Seeking Design funding for expanding Corowa RFS Centre

Finally the report allows Council to consider funding from the Rural Fire Services budget, should

there be sufficient underspend for 2025/26, an amount of \$15,000 for the design of an expanded Corowa RFS Centre.

Recommendation

1. THAT Council note the update on the Rural Fire Service matters;
2. THAT Council awaits the minutes from the Federation Zone District Liaison Committee held on 23 February 2026 and in advance of their receipt, seeks a decision on the Land rover Defender registration CWS15Y and what Council area it was originally vested in and where it should be; considering it is registered by Federation Council;
3. THAT Council notes and endorses that information from this report be compiled and sent to local Member Mr Justin Clancy MP, Member for Albury, to seek assistance via the Minister for Emergency Services, in the 'De-teaming' of the Federation Zone (Berrigan and Federation Local Government Areas) from the voluntary Southern Border Team, to allow the stand-alone zone of Federation and Berrigan Councils to be ran from the Corowa RFS Centre, with no additional costs to be incurred by Federation, Berrigan, Albury and Greater Hume Councils, and with the higher level support, as should occur, to come from the South Western Area Command and any additional budget to be from the RFS/State Government;
4. THAT Council request a formal response by way of agreement from the Rural Fire Service on this matter as a priority so that planning can occur to ensure an improved Rural Fire Service occurs for the benefit of the protection of the Berrigan and Federation Local Government areas from 1 July 2027.
5. THAT Council in-principle support using an amount of \$15,000, should there be sufficient underspend in the 2025/26 budget for the RFS operations, as currently projected, to plan for an expanded Corowa RFS Centre, to allow an additional truck parking area and the possibility of an State Emergency Service (SES) addition to the Centre and receive a further report on this post the finalisation of the 25/26 financial year.

Background

1) Motion to 'De-team' from the Southern Border Team (SBT)

Council has previously resolved, at the July 2023 meeting, from attendance and tabling minutes of two RFS volunteer driven meetings, (Rennie 21 June 2023 and Berrigan 30 July 2025) to De-team from the voluntary SBT arrangement, due to the significant operational issues and an ongoing lack of appropriate service delivery over many years.

See the below Council resolution passed after the Rennie meeting - with the main unactioned points in bold italic -

173/2023FC RESOLVED on the motion of Councillors Rowena Black and Gail Law

1. THAT Council note the report on the issues raised in the report by the Rural Fire Services (RFS) volunteers across the Federation Berrigan Zone/Council areas;
- 2. THAT Council meet with the Councils of Albury, Greater Hume and Berrigan, to formally discuss these issues; where relevant to each of those Councils;**
- 3. THAT Council meet with RFS local (Southern Border), Area Command and State Wide management/commissioner level, to further discuss and seek resolutions to the issues raised in**

particular those covered by motions 4) a) e) and f) below, unanimously passed at the meeting at Rennie;

4. THAT Council supports in principle the following motions as passed at the RFS Brigade Group Captains meeting held at Rennie on 21 June 2023 being -

a. Motion- That the Bush Fire Management committee, not be merged with Greater Hume and is kept within the Local Government areas of Federation and Berrigan.

(strategic matter - involves Council)

b. Motion - To retrofit where applicable to Cat 1s upgrades with monitors. (operational matter to be dealt with between RFS and members).

c. Motion - That future bids and replacement tankers for Rural Brigades be Cat1 Single Cabs or Cat 6s. (operational matter to be dealt with between RFS and members).

d. Motion - Training day time and place to be decided by the group. (operational matter to be dealt with between RFS and members).

e. Motion – Expression from Howlong Brigade to move to Group 3 (Hume Shire) NOT endorsed by Group 2 brigades and Fed zone.(strategic matter - involves Council).

f. Motion - To reopen the Corowa RFS office on a full-time basis and to immediately have the Federation Zone, incorporating the local government areas of Federation and Berrigan councils operating as a "Stand alone zone" with its full staffing entitlements again, hence ceasing the voluntary teaming arrangement with Greater Hume Zone in line with the agreed ability to review this arrangement.

(strategic matter - involves Council and would need support of Neighbouring Council Berrigan, and RFS, and consultation with Albury and Greater Hume Councils).

5. THAT Council works with the Rural Fire Service and the Councils of Albury, Greater Hume and Berrigan, to develop a new Rural Fire District Service Level Agreement as a matter of urgency, and receives further reports on this matter and the other matters as raised above, especially in relation to motions labelled a) e) and f), as they progress, with the other motions being more operational matters for the RFS to determine with their brigades and Council staff if appropriate.

Councils General Manager attended a meeting with the Minister for Emergency Services, Jihad Dib, in August 2024, arranged by and attended by the local member, Member for Albury, Justin Clancy MP, and an RFS Deputy Commissioner, and tabled information in relation to the resolution and issues. The original intent of the meeting was on a different matter (Service NSW Corowa Agency costs), hence no discussion occurred on the RFS matters, but considering the material was tabled, Council considered a response may have been forthcoming by now.

The SBT is the name used to describe the grouping/teaming in 2007 of the then Corowa Shire and Berrigan Shire Council Fire Districts, with the Albury and Greater Hume Shire Councils, and all being then essentially managed from Albury. See the attached letter from the Corowa Shire in 2007, who supported the teaming, but on a '**voluntary**' basis and subject to '**review**' by each zone/organisation as (not if) required.

There are no records of any 'review' ever been undertaken. This is, in addition to creating a new Service Level Agreement (SLA - discussed further in this report), therefore the main and most critical unactioned resolution of Council, essentially being to De-team from SBT and create a standalone Fire Control Centre and Management Structure, at the Corowa Fire Centre, for the Federation Zone (Berrigan and Federation Councils).

Federation Council Ordinary Council Meeting

17 March 2026

Due to a lack of progress between the Rennie and Berrigan meetings, the Volunteers endorsed the creation of a Working Party, at the Berrigan meeting. This has met several times since then, and is now in recess whilst the matter is worked through the DLC. The Working Party contains RFS volunteers, Council reps from Berrigan and Federation and RFS staff.

There has been limited correspondence from the RFS at any level on this matter, since Councils resolution to De-team but Councils General Manager has had one letter labelled private and confidential, from in late August 2025 from the Area Command, acknowledging issues and committing to rectifying. But there has been no formal reply in relation to the request to De-team, only that it is to be dealt with at the DLC meeting level first. Recent conversations however between Councils General Manager and Senior RFS personnel and also at the recent DLC meeting, suggest the RFS will strongly resist any request and that a formal reply is anticipated shortly.

The key point remains however of, is the SBT compulsory, and conversations between Council and Senior RFS staff including at the recent DLC meeting, have led Council to believe the RFS will resist at every level, and use 'budget' as the reason not to. Citing the costs of employing up to 7 new staff to create a new stand-alone Fire Control Centre at Corowa, and figures quoted of around \$7 million to construct a new Fire Control Centre at Corowa or Berrigan.

Additionally an extra major issue that has not been properly considered, was that with the 2016 merger, the former Urana Shire area, formerly under the Riverina (Wagga and surrounding Councils) management, became absorbed into the SBT. The former Urana area is larger in square kilometers than the former Corowa area, so the SBT and the Federation Zone has had to absorb significant additional work/brigades etc., with no extra funding/positions. It is understood that Riverina had one staff allocation for the Urana area, and has retained this position in the Riverina office. This is something that needs to be resolved by the RFS.

Overtime and it was raised as a fact at the recent DLC meeting, that prior to the recent refurbishment of the Corowa site, Council and volunteer driven, the site was essentially 'stripped bare' of both equipment, furnishings and staff. There are no records of why the Corowa allocated staff positions should ever have been all over time, changed to be Albury based.

Councils General Manager advised the recent DLC meeting that Council and the Working Party see this as an opportunity to look at a more 'fit for purpose' model, and its considered the broader volunteers would support this, given the financial constraints across the country and the world. The RFS should work with Councils and the broader State Government, and use the recently refurbished Corowa Fire Centre as a new leaner model, both physically and staffing wise.

Council also pays over \$500,000 a year currently, so do not see why any further funding could be requested, even if the new model requires it, given Councils contributions are based on a state formula of around 11% of the total budget required for RFS services.

Council awaits formal correspondence on this matter to consider this further, but at this point, have no reason to think being in the SBT is a legislative requirement, and also have no reason to be convinced that any Council funding should be increased to fund any extra costs associated with De-teaming.

The establishment of the 7 Area Commands across the State, see attached map, it is understood, was intended to provide overarching strategic and administrative support to each of the Fire Districts which should mean, less staffing and costs than is currently being considered. Council were heartened to learn at the DLC of a state wide review occurring of the RFS Districts, Area Command structures etc., and would be insistent that Local Government representatives are consulted as part of this.

Council has not had any success despite numerous attempts to meet formally with Berrigan, Greater Hume and Albury Councils on the decision to De-team, and part of the reason is due to each Council being at various stages with General Manager positions, with Albury and Berrigan currently under Acting GMs. Meetings will continue to be sought and Berrigan are understood to be formally presenting something to their Council at their March Council meeting.

The recent busy fire season and motor vehicle accidents, and Councils involvement, including as the Local Emergency Management Officer role, has shown that the dis-economy of scale/tyranny of distance, created by having such a big area as the SBT, and no strong presence at the Corowa site, means that despite the best intentions and efforts of the RFS staff, the service is not considered acceptable to Council and broadly, the volunteers.

2) Update on Red Fleet Ownership Dispute and hold ups with creating a new Service Level Agreement (SLA)

Councils and the RFS enter into SLAs to identify roles and responsibilities of each party under the Rural Fire Services Act and Regulation. Council has never had a new SLA in place since the 2016 creation of Federation Council. Part of the reason the RFS has held up the creation of a new SLA is to await the outcome of the PAC review into the ownership of the Red Fleet. Considering now the NSW Government has now not accepted the PAC review recommendation to transfer the Fleet ownership to the NSW Government, and a Business Case/Audit is required, the new SLA is not looking to be reality at anytime in the next few years.

Extract from the Rural Fire Service release -

The NSW Government has now responded to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Inquiry into RFS Assets and Equipment. Given the level of interest in this issue, we want to provide a clear update on what this response means for the RFS, our volunteers, and our council partners.

The PAC Inquiry examined long-standing issues relating to the funding, ownership, maintenance, accounting and management of RFS assets and premises, particularly the firefighting vehicle fleet commonly referred to as the "red fleet". The Inquiry highlighted that current arrangements are complex, inefficient and place a significant administrative and financial burden on local councils.

In its response, the Government acknowledged these challenges but has not made a final decision to transfer ownership of the red fleet from councils to the RFS at this time. Instead, the Government has asked the RFS to undertake further work to inform any future decision. This includes the development of a comprehensive business case that will be supported by:

- 1. A comprehensive sample audit of the RFS firefighting fleet condition and value (approx. 900 vehicles)*

2. *Review of insurance coverage*
3. *Financial, operational and risk analysis*
4. *A review of the legislative framework to clarify roles, responsibilities and accountability*

This work recognises that any change to ownership arrangements would be significant and must be underpinned by robust evidence and appropriate legislative reform. You can read the report and the Government's response [here](#).

As part of the Government's response, a cross-government working group will also be established. This group will bring together local government and other key government stakeholders to develop a more consistent, transparent and coordinated approach to asset management, funding and accountability across the system.

It is important to emphasise that the RFS is not taking over hazard reduction or mitigation responsibilities from councils.

The Government has committed to progressing the required studies and analysis to ensure any future decisions are well-informed and sustainable. Strong, collaborative relationships with local councils remain critical to effective bushfire prevention, preparedness and response. Maintaining those partnerships is essential and continues to be a priority for the RFS.

Until this work is completed, there are no changes to current arrangements. Existing roles, responsibilities and funding arrangements remain in place, with no change to the current legislative framework.

We recognise this is a complex issue and one of strong interest to our members. We are committed to keeping you informed as the work progresses and to engaging constructively with councils and other stakeholders as further clarity emerges.

3) 25/26 NSW Government Allocation

Councils 25/26 allocation from the NSW Government for Fire Protection is attached for the information of Council.

4) Seeking Design funding for expanding Corowa RFS Centre

Council has been requested from the State Emergency Service (SES) to establish a new SES site at Corowa. Under the State Emergency Services Act 1989, Council has to provide premises for the SES, however this could be considered to be met, at Urana, where there is a combined SES and RFS. At the 2024 meeting with the Minister, this was raised and met favorably in principle, such that, if Council could come up with the design, the State could look at funding assistance. There is also the opportunity for a Federal Government grant under the Disaster Risk Reduction funding program.

Council historically has some savings in each years RFS budget, and this was what allowed the recent refurbishment works to occur at the Corowa site, and hence, should savings present again, it is recommended to use some if it amounts to at least \$15,000 for design of an expanded RFS site, for extra RFS truck storage, and the possibility of an SES site.

Community Engagement

Council considers reports such as this are important to ensure the community broadly if they are interested and the more direct stakeholders, are important community engagement and public awareness tools.

Attachments

1. NSW Government Response - Report on assets, premises and funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service - 28 November 2025
2. CMA Media Release - No red fleet quick fix Dec25 (26/2543)
3. Allocation Letter - 2025-2026 - Federation Council (2)

Links to Councils Integrated Planning Framework

Pillar: Natural Federation

CSP Objective: We are stewards of the natural environment for future generations.

Delivery Program 2025 - 2029 4 year Goal:

3.2.2 Ensure appropriate emergency management.

Operational Plan 2025-2026:

A3.6 Coordinate the Local Emergency Management Committee.

A3.7 Provide After Hours Emergency Response.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications as a result of adopting the recommendations in this report. Councils current financial outlay is budgeted.

Financial Sustainability

Proceeding with this recommendation will have a neutral impact on Council's Long Term Financial Plan 2025-2035 financial sustainability ratios.

Risk Implications

It is critical that Council and the RFS staff and volunteers have a far improved relationship and level of service and the issues outlined in this report, with good will, can continue to be progressed. The day to day response of the RFS volunteers, continues to be extremely impressive and critical, and never highlighted more then in the current season. Council also provides essential first responder support to incidents, when requested by the RFS.

Legal Implications

Council and the RFS work under the Rural Fire Services Act 1997.

Options

1. As recommended.
2. Council adopt in part.
3. Not adopt and request further information or await further information from the RFS.