

Commissioner's message

I am pleased to present the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services' (QFES) 2021–22 annual report.

After moving into a third year of living with COVID-19, the State Disaster Coordination Centre (SDCC) was stood down on 29 April 2022. It was a marathon effort by the SDCC, which spent more than two years in activation and played an integral role in keeping Queenslanders safe throughout the pandemic response.

The second half of the 2021–22 financial year was dominated by the extreme wet weather caused by La Nina. From 22 February to 7 March, intense rain led to flooding across South East Queensland, Maryborough, Gympie and New South Wales (NSW). More than 7,000 QFES members responded, aided by 15 Fire Rescue Victoria personnel. During the course of the floods resulting from the South East Queensland Rainfall and Flooding natural disaster event, the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) conducted water rescues and State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers responded to requests for assistance, including storm damage operations, chain sawing, sandbagging, temporary repairs and evacuations. Once the water receded, the recovery work began. Rural Fire Service (RFS) personnel, assisted by SES members, helped communities recover by washing out inundated houses and businesses and FRS staff worked with the Queensland Reconstruction Authority to conduct damage assessments.

Tragically, during the floods, we lost one of our own. Merryl Dray, a member of the Lowood SES and dedicated mum and grandmother. Merryl was travelling to a call for help with three other volunteers on 25 February when their vehicle became surrounded by fast-moving water at Coolana, north-west of Ipswich. Many of Merryl's colleagues paid their respects with a guard of honour at her funeral. Her loss is a sombre reminder of the dangers our frontline people face every time they respond to a call.

Severe wet weather continued to affect NSW during April and QFES deployed SES teams and FRS swiftwater rescue technicians to various locations including Mullumbimby, Lismore and Coraki to provide support. In Queensland, the prolonged wet season continued into May. With catchments already wet in many areas across the state, rivers flooded quickly and FRS swiftwater rescue crews and SES crews were again out in force across northern and south-east Queensland.

In contrast we experienced a relatively mild bushfire season. This enabled us to put a strong focus on Program Grass Tree, a new approach to managing bushfire on the land. Program Grass Tree, which takes its name from the native grass trees that symbolise a well-managed landscape, strikes a delicate balance between promoting biodiversity and keeping communities safe.

A key component of the program is Operation Sesbania, an annual cycle of mitigation and planning that aligns our mitigation programs with location, vegetation and bioregion management, as well as changes in weather patterns across the state. Program Grass Tree also integrates First Nations knowledge to better understand country and cultural burning techniques. To help accomplish this, in 2021–22 QFES appointed four of eight First Nations Bushfire Safety Officers. These roles focus on conducting mitigation activities, building links with First Nations communities and improving the understanding and use of cultural burning.

In the Queensland Government's June Budget announcement, QFES received more than \$900 million in funding, providing a record investment in the FRS of new firefighters, facilities and equipment and the historic additional commitment of funding to the RFS, SES and Marine Rescue Queensland. The extra funds allocated put QFES in an excellent position to increase capability across all services and ensure we can continue to serve Queensland communities as we face the challenges posed by a changing climate.

The work that began in 2020–21 to establish an integrated marine rescue service for Queensland has continued to gather speed. The new service name, Marine Rescue Queensland, was formally announced in May after being overwhelmingly supported by volunteers. QFES continues to engage with key stakeholders through the Marine Rescue Implementation Program to identify an implementation pathway for the service. Good progress is also being made in the areas of capability, engagement, operations and governance for the service, thanks to the dedicated Marine Rescue Implementation Working Group members.

QFES' strong focus on enhancing community resilience is being supported by the national changes to fire danger ratings and the warning system, outcomes of the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*. The Australian Fire Danger Rating System (AFDRS) is a nationally consistent system for communicating fire danger ratings to the community and forecasting fire behaviour for decision-makers. The Australian Warning System (AWS) includes built-in approvals and recordkeeping and ensures consistency of community bushfire warnings. QFES will be running public information campaigns in the second half of 2022 to support community understanding and knowledge of these important changes.

The mental health and wellbeing of all QFES personnel remains a top priority. In 2021–22 we continued to participate in important initiatives including *Are they Triple OK?*, *Movember* and *Darkness to Daylight*. The overwhelming support of our people for these initiatives is demonstrated through fundraising efforts. Across QFES, staff and volunteers raised more than \$40,000 for *Movember*, gaining second place among National First Responder agencies while raising awareness for men's mental and physical health. One hundred QFES members from across the state joined in *Darkness to Daylight* to build awareness about our role in ending domestic and family violence, and QFES raised more than \$17,000 during the event—the second highest on the fundraiser leader board. In addition, the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN) implemented rapid responses to support members through COVID-19 and flood disasters through easy-to-access critical incident check-in services.

In June 2022, QFES provided the Pakistan Government with remote geo-strategic support during the country's devastating forest fires. Facilitated via the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and in association with Emergency Management Australia, it was the first time Queensland provided this form of support to a foreign country under the AUS-1 Disaster Relief Arrangement Taskforce. The remote support operation was successful with the Pakistan Government and DFAT giving positive feedback about QFES' assistance and leadership during this operation.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my job is visiting regions and state directorates and spending time with staff and volunteers from all services. The visits are a great opportunity to learn first-hand about the local challenges and initiatives occurring across the state. I also schedule in meetings with stakeholders, such as local governments and other volunteer-based organisations, to discuss how we can continually improve the way we work together to serve Queensland's diverse communities. In May, I was also privileged to travel overseas and represent QFES, along with Assistant Commissioner John Cawcutt, at the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks event in Geneva. It was a fantastic opportunity to share our world-class expertise in responding to disaster and humanitarian events. A highlight was the inter-network day, where I was in discussions with representatives from America about a potential joint exercise and met face-to-face with the Chief of Emergency Response Section and International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) secretary.

Thank you to each and every QFES member who helped keep Queenslanders safe through another physically and mentally demanding year of operations. It is through your dedication, persistence and camaraderie that we are able to work with communities and partners and build resilience for the future.



Greg Leach AFSM
Commissioner
Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

13 September 2022