

Commissioner's message

This year has been a sombre one for Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES). When one of our own is lost, the hurt is felt deeply and the tragedy that unfolded at Slacks Creek in May 2023 has had a profound impact on many people. The passing of Firefighter First Class Izabella (Izzy) Nash, and the serious injuries suffered by her crewmate Senior Firefighter Lia Drew, bring to the forefront the dangers frontline firefighters face every time they start a shift. QFES members have drawn strength from the firefighter and broader emergency services communities in Queensland, across Australia and internationally. Thank you to all who have and continue to offer comfort and support in the face of this loss. It is through the strength and tenacity of our people that we continue to work with communities and partners, building resilience for our shared future.

The past 12 months have seen the first reform process changes progressed as we work towards creating the new Queensland Fire Department.

The successful transition of the Marine Rescue Implementation Program to the Queensland Police Service (QPS) on 1 May 2023 has provided a blueprint for the State Emergency Service (SES) and disaster management functions move to QPS by 30 June 2024. In preparation, the SES Uplift program invested \$10 million during 2022–23 to boost capital projects and initiatives, provide extra staff, assist volunteers to undertake formal training and increase the SES Support Grant Program. The hard work put in during the past year sets us up for a smooth SES transition. Extensive preparatory work and close collaboration will also ensure seamless service delivery across the disaster management season.

Operationally it has been a busy 12 months. Operation Ochre ran from July 2022 through to April 2023, extended from the usual end of the bushfire season in December due to an unseasonal fire risk in the Western Downs. While the state experienced a quieter bushfire season as a whole, significant fires took hold in the South Western Region from mid-January. Rural Fire Service and Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) crews were quickly deployed to the region with more than one hundred personnel on the ground and several aircraft on standby as fires multiplied. By the season's end, the

Western Downs had recorded 428 vegetation fire incidents with more than 90,000 hectares burnt and 30 structures destroyed or significantly damaged.

In September 2022 we switched to the new Australian Fire Danger Rating System (AFDRS). Adopted Australia-wide, the system helps communities better prepare for bushfires by improving the science behind the ratings and making them easier to understand. As part of adopting AFDRS, QFES began the installation of 130 new automatic electronic roadside signs to provide timely and accurate information in high-risk bushfire areas.

The severe weather season was an eventful one due to the ongoing La Niña weather system. Throughout Operation Nimbusus, which ran from the start of October 2022 until the end of April 2023, severe thunderstorms and flooding impacted every region. The start of the season saw QFES members from all three services deployed to southern states to assist their colleagues in response and recovery as widespread flooding caused significant disruption and damage. Teams sent to New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia supported swiftwater rescue operations and community recovery, ably supported by the State Operations Centre and State Deployment Centre which coordinated resources and logistics. The floods took a heavy toll on communities, particularly during the festive season, and emergency service agencies worked as one to support the devastated communities.

The first few months of 2023 saw heavy rainfall and flooding impact our Central, Northern and Far Northern Regions. The Whitsundays and Mackay were impacted in January 2023 while extensive flooding during March 2023 in Burketown and Doomadgee saw food supplies being flown into the towns and at-risk residents flown to Mt Isa for safety. Cape communities were also affected with essential food supplies air-dropped into Coen.

I have a close connection to the Coen community as their Government Champion and travel there often to listen to the community and collaborate with them to improve life outcomes. As at June 2023, the finishing touches were being put to a Men's Shed, a project first conceived in 2019. The shed is a culturally safe space to deal with men's business, to bond, and receive short-term support and will lead to good

outcomes for individuals, partners and families. On behalf of QFES, I am proud to have been part of this joint initiative by the Coen Regional Aboriginal Corporation and Queensland Government.

In 2022–23, QFES deployed highly experienced personnel to assist with international disasters and emergencies. In February 2023, Aotearoa New Zealand experienced the deadliest cyclone system in recent history—Severe Tropical Cyclone Gabrielle. Members of the QFES AUS-1 Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) arrived in the Hawke’s Bay area to join the harrowing recovery effort. The specialist firefighters undertook rapid damage assessments on the ground along with Fire and Emergency New Zealand personnel and police canine squads. Also in February, two QFES firefighters joined the AUS-2 DART deployment to Türkiye after a series of earthquakes struck the region; while in May and June 2023 approximately 70 personnel over three teams were deployed to Canada to assist during their destructive bushfire season. The affected communities and Canadian firefighters were grateful for our help, and it was an honour to return the favour after Canada lent a hand during our intense 2019–20 bushfire season. To be called on during major international incidents demonstrates our personnel’s high level of skill and expertise.

QFES regularly participates in multi-agency response exercises to practise and refine processes before disasters and emergencies strike and to strengthen our stakeholder network. In August 2022, QFES led Exercise Bombora—a joint desktop exercise with New South Wales and the National Emergency Management Agency simulating a catastrophic east coast tsunami. This collaborative exercise between local, state, interstate and commonwealth government agencies, along with partner organisations, was made possible by National Emergency Management Agency funding. The annual AUS-1 DART exercise was held in July 2022 and included participants from FRS, Queensland Ambulance Service and volunteer engineers, doctors, canine handlers and their canines. It included a 36-hour earthquake exercise where participants lived and operated in realistic field conditions, such as sleeping in tents and dining on ration packs.

While Queensland is no stranger to disasters, the climate crisis is having a significant impact on emergency services due to more frequent and severe weather events. An involved and interested workforce engaged with committees and groups, such as the QFES Climate Change Advisory Group and the QFES Alternative Energy Systems Advisory Group, are key to creating innovative policies and procedures that adapt to climate change. These groups provide strategic advice to generate informed and coordinated

whole-of-QFES decisions on climate change transition and alternative energy systems and operational response to infrastructure and vehicle incidents. QFES continues to work on reducing fleet emissions and research alternative vehicle technologies and reduced carbon fuel options. In May 2023, QFES placed the first Australian order for an electric Volvo FMX prime mover and an order for a Volvo FMX 6x4 prime mover with the latest 13-litre Euro 6 technology enabling us to trial fossil-fuel-free Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil as a drop-in diesel replacement. This is part of our ongoing work to provide effective emergency services with sustainable solutions in a climate challenged world.

QFES prides itself on its values of respect, integrity, courage, loyalty and trust and our department continues to work on ways to embed these values and connect them with everyday situations. In December 2022 we released our QFES Charter, which aligns each value with specific behaviours. The Charter is the result of hundreds of hours of conversations among staff and volunteers at all levels discussing how each value should be demonstrated in the workplace. The Charter encourages and inspires our people to live our shared values through modelling acceptable behaviours, including calling out inappropriate actions, treating each other kindly and embracing diversity.

The mental health and wellbeing of QFES members is a top priority and in 2022 the Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN) celebrated 30 years of providing mental health support. The service began in 1992 as the Occupational Support Service in response to clinical evidence highlighting the mental health risks related to emergency services. Thirty years later it has evolved to deliver a level of support in line with best practice anywhere in the world. FESSN’s multi-layered approach, including counsellors, psychologists and Peer Support Officers, ensures mental health and support stays top of mind for our people.

This year, as always, QFES members have worked through physically and mentally demanding operations, both on the frontline and in support. I thank all QFES members for your ongoing dedication, persistence and camaraderie.



Greg Leach AFSM
Commissioner
Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

22 September 2023