

Report 00.495

File: F/6/1/2

29 June 2000

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Report to the Landcare Committee
from Geoff Cameron, Manager, Natural Forestry

Wellington Regional Council Rural Fire District Disestablishment

1. Purpose

To advise the Committee about the National Rural Fire Authority (NRFA) decision on the future of the Regional Council's Rural Fire District (WRC RFD).

2. Disestablishment Process

Reports 99.163 and 99.561 discussed the proposal to disestablish the WRC RFD, and outlined the legal process required under the Forests and Rural Fires Act 1977. The resolutions from Report 99.561 were:

- (2) *That the Committee, as the Rural Fire Authority:*
 - (a) *Notes that the 1999/2000 Rural Fire Plan has been approved, and readiness measures are in accordance with the Rural Fire Management Code of Practice.*
 - (b) *Recommends that the Council approve advertising a Scheme notifying the intention to disestablish the WRC Rural Fire District, in accordance with National Rural Fire Authority guidelines.*
 - (c) *Recommends that the Council consider the future of the Rural Fire Fighting Reserve of \$225,000, as part of the LTFS process.*
 - (d) *Recommends that the Council Chairman writes to each affected territorial authority confirming the proposal to disestablish the WRC RFD and offering the opportunity to discuss the proposal before the Scheme is advertised.*

- (e) *Notes that cost savings from the exercise will be built into the Natural Forestry LTFS model for Environmental Asset Management.*

The Council dealt with recommendations (c) and (e) as part of the Long-term Financial Strategy process.

My subsequent manager's reports described later activities, culminating in the formal NRFA hearing on 2 May.

We have now received formal advice, attached as Appendix 1, that the NRFA will proceed with the disestablishment, (i.e. promulgate the appropriate Gazette Notice) when the Regional Council provides written confirmation of certain conditions. This will take effect from 1 October 2000.

3. **Conditions of Disestablishment**

The Forest and Rural Fires Act 1977 is silent on the imposition of any conditions as a pre-requisite of disestablishment. However, the conditions have really been drawn from Committee papers, and so a legal challenge to them is not recommended. The conditions, in italics, and our intended response to them are:

Provide a written assurance to the members of the Wellington Rural Fire Co-ordinating Committee (RFCC) that the WRC, as a landowner, will continue to protect its assets from fire. This includes:

- *Retaining active participation within the Wellington RFCC in a co-opted membership capacity.*

WRC Manager's comments: We plan to do this because of the benefits associated with membership. Dean Hearfield will probably be the representative.

- *Providing an annual financial contribution to the RFCC for publicity and education programmes for at least a further five years.*

WRC Manager's comments: In as much as we can commit the Council to future expenditure, a sum of \$3,000 has been budgeted for this and included in the 10 year LTFS numbers.

- *Maintaining fire protection plans, in consultation with the Rural Fire Authority, for each significant area of Wellington Regional Council ownership.*

WRC Manager's comments: We plan to continue this. Regional Park fire protection plans already exist. Specific forest plans will be prepared to the same format. Parks and Forests Rangers, and Plantation Forestry staff, will now need to discuss their plans with the relevant Principal Rural Fire Officer.

- *Retaining a level of fire incident management skills commensurate with best industry practice for the protection of WRC assets given their extent, fire risk, hazard and values at risk. These resources will be available to other Rural Fire Authorities subject to mutual reciprocal agreements.*

WRC Manager's comments: We plan to continue with this. A number of Rangers have completed Co-ordinated Incident Management (CIMs) courses. The rest of the team will be programmed this year. CIMs provides a framework for managing any incident, not just fire. The programme is appropriate and fits with the Council's general emergency management approach.

- *Retaining a level of in-house fire fighting resources, as above.*

WRC Manager's comments: We are already doing this. Parks and Forests (Operations) has a training and assessment programme for Assistant Rangers and other staff who volunteer. This is an on-going programme run in association with DoC and the volunteer rural fire forces (VRFFs). Our existing approved fire plan relies on various VRFFs for first response to any WRC fire and that will continue. The WRC plans to retain existing contractual arrangements with adjoining Rural Fire Authorities to ensure this continues to happen.

There is nothing in the conditions to create unforeseen problems for the new Parks and Forests management structure.

4. **The Next Steps**

In order to comply with the NRFA conditions, as recommended in Resolution 2(c), written assurances need to be given to the Wellington Rural Fire Co-ordinating Committee (RFCC), which next meets on Friday, 21 July. I have notified the Chairman and put this issue on the Agenda. After this Landcare Committee meeting I will prepare a letter in accordance with the Committee resolution. That will be presented to the RFCC, subject to final approval by Council. Once Council approval has been obtained, a formal letter will then be sent to the NRFA with a copy of the RFCC letter and the result of that meeting, requesting that they proceed with the disestablishment of the WRC RFD.

When that final step has been taken, Parks and Forests (Operations) propose to mark the occasion in a suitable manner for those who have been involved with the Rural Fire District in the past.

5. **Communication**

This is an issue for a number of rural ratepayers on the western side of the Region. I propose to work with the Communications team and prepare a media release once the final hurdles are cleared. This will have input from the other affected territorial authorities, and form the basis of customised press releases.

The WRC has dealt with the formal communication via advertisements and letters from the Council Chairman. The remaining legal communication (the Gazette notice) will be organised by the NRFA.

6. Recommendations

- (1) *That the Report be received and its contents noted.*
- (2) *That the Committee, as the WRC Rural Fire Authority:*
 - (a) *note the final steps to be taken towards disestablishing the WRC RFD.*
 - (b) *note that the conditions required by the NRFA are already in place or provided for and budgeted in the 2000/01 Annual Plan and 10 year LTFS.*
 - (c) *recommend that the Council confirm that it will comply with the conditions outlined by the NRFA.*

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Attachment 1 : Letter from National Rural Fire Authority