

Commissioner's message

I am pleased to present the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services' (QFES) 2020–21 annual report.

With some exceptions, the 2020–21 bushfire season was relatively quiet due to wet weather. Alongside our key partners and communities, QFES faced the season well prepared, thanks to the record number of bushfire mitigation activities we completed during Operation Cool Burn 2020.

Several large fires threatened communities, particularly on the World Heritage listed K'gari (Fraser Island), where around 85,000 hectares were burnt. QFES worked with communities on the island to build their resilience and collaborated with partners such as the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation.

QFES contracted a Large Air Tanker (LAT) to boost our aerial firefighting capability during the bushfire season. From its base in Bundaberg, the LAT can reach Proserpine in the north, the Queensland-New South Wales border in the south or Tambo in the west within one hour. Its 10,000 litre capacity is a great boost when supporting ground crews.

To help manage bushfires into the future, QFES learnt important lessons about Indigenous cultural fire management from traditional owners. We supported cultural burns, trained with Indigenous fire practitioners and reached out to rural and remote communities. QFES also established eight new First Nations Bushfire Safety Officer positions to embed traditional learnings into our operations.

While September 2020 marked the start of La Niña conditions, signalling more flooding and cyclones over the summer, heightened bushfire conditions persisted, with fires burning in some parts of the state as storms hit others.

A large hailstorm at Springfield Lakes in October 2020 caused an estimated \$260 million worth of damage. SES crews led the response and recovery for this disaster that the Insurance Council of Australia termed a 'catastrophic event'.

Throughout the severe weather season, members from services within QFES were busy sandbagging, removing fallen trees, tarping damaged roofs and rescuing stranded drivers.

These operations were conducted while at the same time responding to COVID-19.

The State Disaster Coordination Centre was stood up to support COVID-19 operations in February 2020 and continued throughout 2020–21, breaking previous records for continuous operations.

Working with our whole-of-government partners, QFES managed quarantine accommodation, catering and transport for more than 91,000 people.

QFES staff and volunteers also worked at land and air borders, vaccination hubs and testing clinics, contributing around 12,500 shifts for border operations alone.

I'm proud of how everyone at QFES adapted our communication methods and ways of working to continue delivering vital emergency services during this challenging period.

To bolster our firefighting capacity, 48 of the 357 additional Fire and Rescue Service firefighters, announced in 2020, have been recruited. The new positions will help enable more contemporary crewing practices, as well as better balancing leave and staff planning.

Another exciting addition to our capability was the 20 new drones we distributed around the state, almost doubling the size of our drone program.

In September 2020 the intent to disestablish the Public Safety Business Agency (PSBA) was announced and in the first half of 2021 we welcomed more than 100 PSBA staff who transitioned into QFES. To support them, QFES provided induction forums, impact assessments, transition plans and working groups. We reviewed and realigned the Strategy and Corporate Services Division in line with this transition.

QFES also started work to establish an integrated marine rescue service for Queensland. Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association and Volunteer Marine Rescue Association Queensland volunteers are engaged in the process to shape the reform and help create a future service model. This work will provide an enhanced service to the boating public and better support volunteers.

A new bushfire warning system introduced in the first half of 2021 has improved the way we deliver bushfire information to the community. The system automates much of the warnings process, allowing us to create and send warnings more efficiently and get information to Queenslanders as quickly as possible.

COVID-19 continued to disrupt our community engagement but we surmounted the challenges to reach out and connect with Queenslanders when they needed it most.

QFES joined forces with the AEIOU Foundation for Children with Autism to make our fire education program more inclusive. A new version of the program uses modified language and fire drill activities to help children with autism be prepared for a fire.

We collaborated with The University of Sydney and Queenslanders with Disability Network to promote the new Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) Workbook. People with disability can use the workbook to account for their strengths and support needs in their emergency preparedness planning.

We also developed a visual guide on home fire safety for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to help them avoid fire risks.

QFES expanded the Roads, Attitudes and Action Planning (RAAP) program into more diverse areas and education settings, including Indigenous communities, youth detention centres and youth justice programs. This will help more young drivers across the state make smarter decisions before they get behind the wheel.

In the spirit of supporting our neighbours, QFES shipped five fire trucks to the Papua New Guinea Fire Service in February 2021. We delivered the ex-service Type 2 fire appliances to Port Moresby in collaboration with the Australian Defence Force.

I would like to thank every QFES member who helped keep Queenslanders safe through an unrelenting year with operations on a scale we've never seen before.

I look forward to continuing our work with communities and partners to keep building resilience for the disasters of the future.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Greg Leach
Commissioner
Queensland Fire and Emergency Services

27 September 2021