

'Hollywood' fire chief has too much power: councils

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Rural Fire Service boss Mr Phil Koperberg "belongs in Hollywood" and has too much power over an outfit that puts excessive focus on uniforms and rank and indulges in "show-pony tactics", the NSW Shires Conference was told yesterday.

The conference resolved to ask the Premier for an inquiry into the RFS's "operational relationship" with councils.

The Local Government Association's president, Mr Peter Woods, said too much power was in Mr Koperberg's hands and that the service was under threat following the departure of dissatisfied volunteers.

"If they keep [running] the whole thing out of Sydney . . . they're going to destroy it because its strength is being a voluntary organisation," he said.

And the south-west regional fire group chairman and Mayor of Boorowa, near Cootamundra, Councillor Robert Gledhill, said: "When you've got all the rural areas in NSW complaining about it, you've got a problem. Maybe Mr Koperberg needs to resign."

The disquiet has emerged with the perceived centralisation of power caused by the Rural



Mr Koperberg . . . "staged".

Fires Act 1997, which followed the deputy coroner's report on the 1994 Sydney bushfires.

The coroner found there were "142 bush fire services" operating in NSW, instead of one.

Complaints gathered by the association in the past year include: lack of consultation, proliferation of regulations, an excessive focus on uniforms, rank and regalia, and that the RFS had become unnecessarily bureaucratic and top-heavy.

One man, who introduced himself as a rural firefighter, told the conference Mr Koperberg belonged in Hollywood with his "stage managing".

He said he saw fire engines in one operation waiting in a line at Yass "so all the TV cameras can see them — if that's not stage managing I don't know what it is".

Cr Gledhill said the biggest problems for fire control officers around the State were they now had two bosses — the council and the Rural Fire Service.

"[Mr Koperberg's] a powerful man and nobody's game enough to say anything to him," Cr Gledhill said.

He said his volunteers had been told to travel to Orange by the RFS to fly in for the Sydney hailstorm effort so they could arrive with the main fleet of firefighters in a "show-pony" tactic when it would have been cheaper to go by bus.

A spokeswoman for the Emergency Services Minister, Mr Debus, said the act was about "establishing a clear chain of command" but the Government had kept shires involved against the coroner's recommendations.

A spokeswoman for Mr Koperberg said he "would not dignify" the claims made against him. She said the Rural Fire Service Association, representing volunteers, "fully supported" the direction of the RFS.