# Background – New Zealand’s fire services

## New Zealand’s fire services are organised and funded in urban and rural sectors

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| Service | Operated by | Funded from |
| Urban fire services | * Operated by the New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) Commission, with paid and volunteer brigades. | * The fire service levy (a levy calculated on property and motor vehicle insurance). |
| Rural fire services | * 52 Rural Fire Authorities, including Enlarged Rural Fire Districts (which are amalgamated Rural Fire Authorities). * Rural Fire Authorities have paid staff and volunteers. * National Rural Fire Authority (part of the NZFS Commission) coordinates rural fire. | * Local Government through rates. * Rural Fire Fighting Fund (contributions from the NZFS Commission from the fire service levy and the Department of Conservation). * Department of Conservation. * Forest owners and land holders through levies. * Cost recovery from person responsible for rural fires. |

There are also some privately-funded services, called industrial brigades, such as airport fire brigades. The Department of Conservation and the New Zealand Defence Force also have a role in fire services. There are contracted firefighters in the rural service.

## Volunteers make up more than 80% of the fire services’ workforce

There are volunteer firefighters in both rural and urban areas, with rural towns serviced mainly by volunteers. There are about 8300 volunteers working in NZFS volunteer brigades and another 3500 volunteers working in rural volunteer fire forces.

There are about 1700 career firefighters, backed by about 600 support staff and managers, in the NZFS. There are about 150 paid staff working in the rural fire sector.

There are about 80 fire stations staffed by career or paid firefighters, and about 360 stations staffed by volunteers.

## Firefighters work on a wide range of emergencies, including floods, car accidents, etc

Firefighters now respond to a wide range of emergencies, including medical callouts, flooding, spills of hazardous substances, and road accidents. This “non-fire” activity now takes up more time – about 60 per cent – compared to responding to either building fires or vegetation or forest fires.

In the 2012 to 2013 financial year responding to medical emergencies accounted for 27 per cent of fire services efforts; road accidents, 18 per cent; and hazardous substances, 13 per cent. In comparison, dealing with fires took up 42 percent of fire services’ efforts (evenly split between building fires and vegetation/forest fires).

## Fire services work well with other emergency services

Fire services and other emergency services have a long history of working together. For example, the NZFS’s recent agreement with St John Ambulance about a combined response to cardiac arrest is already having good outcomes for patients. The fire services also have close operational links to civil defence.

Emergency services coordinate at the operational level to make sure any gaps or overlaps in service delivery are minimised. Strategic coordination is provided by the Emergency Sector Chief Executives Group that was set up following the independent [Fire Review Panel in 2012](http://www.dia.govt.nz/Resource-material-Our-Policy-Advice-Areas-Earlier-Fire-Services-reviews#1).

## Fire services must work effectively because of the risk to lives, property and the economy

There is a social and economic cost when lives are lost to fire. The value of a statistical life (VOSL) at June 2014 was estimated by the Ministry of Transport at $3.95 million per fatality.

The total economic cost of rural fire over a five-year period has been estimated at $586 million[[1]](#footnote-1). For example, three Department of Conservation reserves were destroyed on the Poutu Peninsular, Kaipara, between 2004-5 and 2012-13 and some $25 million of exotic timber lost.

## Two key pieces of legislation govern fire services in the urban and rural setting

The two Acts governing fire services – the Fire Service Act 1949 and the Forest and Rural Fires Act 1947 – were updated in 1975 and 1977 respectively, but New Zealand’s fire services legislation has not fundamentally changed since the 1940s.

## The Minister and Department of Internal Affairs have oversight of fire services

The Department of Internal Affairs supports the Minister by providing advice on fire services in general, including the annual setting of the Fire Service Levy, and on the Minister’s particular responsibilities for the NZFS Commission and the National Rural Fire Authority.

1. Business and Economic Research Ltd, BERL Economics [↑](#footnote-ref-1)