

EYRE ELECTORATE — HEAVY FIREFIGHTING UNITS — DISPOSAL

Grievance

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [9.25 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Emergency Services. I thank him for taking it and for the assistance his staff have given me in working through this issue. It is one of decommissioning and disposal of heavy firefighting units in my region, particularly in the southern mallee in and around Grass Patch. The issue was first brought to me by a deputy chief officer of the fire brigade at Grass Patch, who is a man who has farmed in the area all his life and been involved in firefighting for over 40 years. The old units are being replaced by the new emergency services levy fire units. I think the letter that Mr Hallam wrote to the minister around 25 June says it best and most succinctly; it states —

Dear Sir,

I am a long term member of the Esperance Shire Councils Bushfire organization. I write to you to express my concern at what is happening with the lack of flexibility, in the disposal of existing heavy units, when a brigade receives a new ESL funded fire unit.

Brigades spend considerable funds on these older units to keep them up to a high standard of safety, roadworthiness, etc. I consider that it is a shame that local farmers are not given the opportunity to purchase these older units as added fire protection in the Esperance Shire.

The size of this Shire and the large areas of fence to fence cropping, I believe it is warranted that these heavy duty units stay in the Shire.

Over the years the response to training courses in the Esperance Shire has been excellent. With this high acceptance of training I believe the additional units held privately in the Shire would be beneficial in the event of any emergency situation.

The cost of transporting these heavy units to Perth, and then stripping most of the equipment on them, seems to be an unnecessary waste of good serviceable fire fighting units.

The proponent puts forward that this process of decommissioning and disposal devalues the asset and is wasteful and a loss to the district. I thank the minister and the CEO for providing the information that gave an explanation of the disposal of the replaced emergency services vehicles direct purchase guidelines and lists a process of assessed serviceability. Serviceability is retained if the unit is serviceable. If it is past being serviceable—that is, unserviceable—it is decommissioned, its lights and sirens are removed, it is deregistered and it is then put to public auction. The explanation from the department was that occasionally there are requests from local governments, private brigades and individual parties to purchase decommissioned units. This has happened in the past. However, the explanation goes on to say that this course of action is discouraged because of a number of factors. Firstly, they have a poor or absent maintenance record; however, the feeling on the ground is that these units are very well maintained and that there is surety of safety. Secondly, it is felt that if they are unserviceable for the department, they are unserviceable for anybody else. Thirdly, a person can get one if they want by going to Perth and bidding in the auction. Fourthly, if the local government, under the resources-to-risk model profile, believes that they are not required within the district and if the shire does not want them, they must not be used and are not needed, so they can go through this process and not be retained in the region. Most returned vehicles are past their use-by date, are unserviceable and should go. As I have said, if they are no good for the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, they are no good for perhaps a farmer or a private user to supplement the firefighting infrastructure in the region.

One of the other arguments put forward against this commonsense and practical process is a fear that these vehicles will be de facto DFES units with de facto crews. That is not the way it works. It has not worked like that in the past. The units are privately acquired, they are registered under a private farmer or a private organisation, and they are supplemented by volunteers who, as we have seen, are trained and have local knowledge. The process, as it has been put to me, is that these units are trucked to Perth and could be bought by a middleman, stripped, resold at auction and then lost to our system, when they could be useful for firefighting in the middle of summer when we have a very big fire in the southern mallee region. The resource-to-risk process is basically academic.

I will make several points. Minister, we want a commonsense and practical approach, not a centralist, professional firefighter approach. We want a model with rural realities, cognisant that we have trained, well-equipped volunteers who have got skin in the game. If the argument is that we want to have the cake and eat it too, we are not talking about the serviceable vehicles going back into the minister's asset, but, basically, the ones that need to be disposed of and decommissioned but are useful, practical units in the region owned by private well-meaning and well-deserving volunteers fighting the risk of particularly ravaging fires during summer.

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services) [9.32 am]: I thank the member for Eyre for raising this issue. He has raised it with me a couple of times now. In fact, when I was in Esperance earlier this year for our community cabinet night, it was certainly raised with me by a couple of volunteer firefighters and people involved in this area in the member's part of the world. In my travels across the state and during my time in the job, this is the second community group that has raised the issue with me, which warrants asking the question: what happens to old fire trucks, whether they be the big ones or the light tankers? Predominantly, an awful lot of them are the light tankers. The LandCruisers—the ones with the 600-litre tanks on the back—are being phased out. The six-cylinder ones are being replaced by the new turbo V8 ones, which a person can pick out on the road. I am a bit of a freak when it comes to picking out different vehicles on the roads when I drive around. I can actually tell which ones are the old DFES or FESA light tankers that are now being used as tradie utes, with their trays on the back and all the equipment removed from them. However, it is a good question and it is worth looking at what happens with them.

Obviously, appliances are used by brigades across the state and they are extremely capable appliances, even down to the light tanker Land Cruisers. However, they are worked very hard—many times off-road because they are four-wheel drive—predominantly in rural and regional areas, and they are maintained to a very high standard. At the end of the day, there comes a point when they reach their effective use-by date due to either serviceability or the fact that they are worn out and on the verge of no longer being safe. The safety of firefighters in the community is obviously my key priority when it comes to emergency services. We are replacing older vehicles with newer vehicles. In fact, we have replaced more old fire trucks in the last three years than has ever been done in a significant period of time. We have a fairly new modern fleet, and in future I expect that to be rationalised in the number of different units anyway, but that is a different issue. When it comes to the disposal of retired firefighting appliances, the department has a fairly clear policy on that. That is being reviewed and looked at because the member has raised this issue with me. As I said, all appliances are constantly assessed for serviceability and maintenance. If an appliance is capable of continued service, it remains with the department. If the appliance is beyond its economic or serviceable life, it is decommissioned. The appliance is then deregistered to ensure that the new owner is responsible for making sure that the appliance is compliant with Western Australian transport roadworthy rules, and it is disposed of through public auction, which I will talk about shortly.

The other key thing is that many of the appliances have new equipment on board, such as pumps, reels, hoses, lights, sirens or radios. Radios are a key part of this equipment because they are a secure communications network, unlike what we saw in Parkerville. Our wish is to ensure that people cannot access the same frequencies. An awful lot of equipment has to come off a fire truck before it can be put out to auction and privately registered. The other thing is that a truck could be at the end of its use-by date, but it may have a brand-new pump on it, which may well be of better use to the taxpayer as a spare part or if it is put on a different vehicle. There are a number of reasons for not selling the whole unit straight to the public, but it is predominantly because we do not sell vehicles with lights, sirens and radios, and there are also a number of other different parts on them.

At the moment, the state fleet has more than 900 appliances, many of which are light tankers. These are used by career and volunteer firefighters. Obviously, the volunteers have the white trucks and the career firefighters have the red trucks; they are pretty easily distinguished. The fleet also has 119 vehicles, which are generally retired from brigade service, in a stand-by fleet that moves around the state. If, for example, an Esperance brigade has a new vehicle replacing an older vehicle, and that older vehicle is still serviceable, many of them will go to a standby fleet and be used in the northern half of the state during winter, when there is a fire risk. Right now we will start to see them rolling down throughout the south west, and many brigades will be given extra appliances during the fire season depending on where the risk is deemed to be greatest. As we speak, I know that a number of appliances are being redirected from the north from that standby fleet. The vehicles also live at the DFES workshop at O'Connor so that if a brigade anywhere in the state has, for whatever reason, an accident or a truck has a significant failure, we can lend it a vehicle while it is waiting for the replacement, so all the vehicles are used if they are serviceable. Vehicles that have reached the end of their existence as roadworthy vehicles are disposed of under the State Supply Commission's supply policy, which covers the disposal of goods and hazardous goods, and the department is also required to abide by that. The member has obviously raised some valid points. Although the department supports the sale of some retired fire appliances, it has to be done in an open and accountable way as well, which is why they are auctioned off —

Dr G.G. Jacobs: We are not asking for any special deal here. We still recognise the process —

The SPEAKER: Member for Eyre!

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Correct, at market value, and market value is determined in a publicly accountable way by disposing of the vehicles at a public auction.

Dr G.G. Jacobs: They can do that by the tender process locally —

The SPEAKER: Member for Eyre! I want this answer through the Chair.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: As I said, the issue is that if the member were to do that and he wanted to save on the shipping of the vehicle—a light tanker—from Esperance to Perth, at the end of the day it still has to come here to Perth to have removed from it all the equipment that is of use to the department. It may be modern, new equipment that can be reused, such as, essentially, lights, sirens and radio communications. The vehicle can then be put into a saleable space, but that cannot be done cost effectively in regional Western Australia.