

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2005**

SESSION TWO

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)
Mr S.R. Hill
Ms K. Hodson-Thomas
Mrs J. Hughes

Co-opted Member

Mr P.D. Omodei

Hearing commenced at 10.43 am

UNDERWOOD, MR ROGER

Chairman, Bushfire Front, examined:

McKINNELL, DR FRANCIS HOWARD

Consultant, Bushfire Front, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: I have official notes to read to you before we get under way. This committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

[10.45 am]

The CHAIRMAN: The committee has received your submission. Do you wish to make any amendment to your submission?

Mr Underwood: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it your wish that your submission be incorporated as part of the transcript of evidence?

Mr Underwood: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we ask any questions, do you wish to make any opening statement or addition to your submission?

Mr Underwood: No, other than we want to thank you for inviting us to attend, and we welcome this review.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give us a bit of a background of the Bushfire Front - how it started, where it came from, and who you are?

Mr Underwood: We began to meet informally about two to three years ago - "we" being a group of professional foresters and land managers with experience in bushfire management. We were concerned about the trends in bushfire management in Western Australia. These trends were confirmed by the very serious fires in the ACT, New South Wales and Victoria, and by some shocking bushfires in Western Australia in 2003. We formed an incorporated organisation, and we have adopted the objective of trying to lift the standards of bushfire management in Western Australia through the promotion of best practice. We tried to take what we considered to be a top-down approach to this matter by looking at the aspects of policy and management, and convincing the Premier and the relevant ministers involved of the need for improvement in bushfire

management. Since then we have been meeting approximately on a monthly basis for about two years. We have held a public seminar in Bunbury - in Eaton - and we have made numerous submissions to inquiries, to ministers and to other interested people and agencies. We have had many meetings with senior people in CALM and FESA, and with brigades in the bush.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Thank you for coming before the committee. Your experience is valuable, and your submission is excellent. On about page 5 of your submission you talk about setting up a ministerial council, and you say that council should be represented by the ministers for the environment, emergency services, planning and local government. That can probably happen very easily now under a standing committee of the cabinet. Do you think that would work, given the varying responsibilities of those ministers and the fact that some of them are virtually on one side of the fence and others have different responsibilities? Should there be planning and implementation of a bushfire management system at ministerial level, or should it occur at the senior officer level, given that ministers do not necessarily have a lot of knowledge about bushfire control but obviously at the CEO level of each of those departments there would be a greater level of knowledge? I would like to hear your views on that.

Mr Underwood: The problem as we see it with bushfire governance is that no-one is in charge in Western Australia. When no-one is in charge, there is a capacity for agencies to go their own way, and that is what has happened. CALM has a bushfire policy, FESA has a policy, the Department for Planning and Infrastructure has a policy and the WA Police has a policy, but there is no mechanism to ensure that these policies dovetail together in the interests of good bushfire management. We see no alternative to overcoming this problem other than the relevant ministers getting together. Clearly they would need to be supported by their agency staff or by specialist people - hopefully even by independent specialist people - who could assist them to prepare some sort of overarching state bushfire policy that would provide leadership to not only the agencies but also the approximately 124 local government authorities out there, which either have their own bushfire policies or do not have them and are able to go their own way without any overarching direction. The suggestion of a ministerial council arose because we did not see that this system could work properly with one minister in charge, for the very reason that you have outlined, Mr Omodei, which is that individual ministers have their own particular interests and agendas. The Minister for the Environment, the Minister for Emergency Services or the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure will not necessarily promote the big picture that we want to see promoted. You people would know much more about the mechanisms of government than I do. What we are trying to come at is some way of integrating these different interests.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA has proposed that it become an emergency services department. Would that not be a way of achieving the same goal, if it has overarching authority across the state? You also mentioned the 124 relevant local governments. Fifty-five of those have signed up with FESA to hand over authority at a certain stage of a bushfire; however, the others have not. Do you propose that we make it mandatory that they hand over control to FESA?

Mr Underwood: What should be mandatory is that every agency or organisation that manages land or has bushfire responsibilities meets certain standards of planning, preparedness, damage mitigation and suppression. In other words, every agency should have a bushfire management system that is operating at the level of designated best practice. Whether that is best done by FESA being in charge of all the individual local government authorities, or whether they should take it on themselves, I am not sure. However, there needs to be a system in place on the one hand, and there also needs to be some way of monitoring that system to make sure it is working. To have FESA judging FESA - it sounds a bit like Caesar judging Caesar, does it not? - or, for that matter, CALM judging CALM is not in my opinion satisfactory, because when organisations are required to report on themselves, they do not like to report failure. Therefore, in my view there probably needs to be some independent method by which the people of Western Australia can be assured that our bushfire management is being done properly.

The CHAIRMAN: Something similar to the Office of Energy that looks at -

Mr Underwood: Or the Auditor General. I see that model as being very effective. I have seen that model working in Victoria, not in bushfire management, but in the regulation of the privatised power industry, where there is an independent body that sets the standards, does the auditing and provides an independent report to Parliament at the end of the year on how things are going. I think that model is a good model.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I am keen to acknowledge your point that there needs to be a way in which we can ensure that plans are put in place. That has been a long-time problem from my experience as officer in charge of the Denmark Police Station, which is in an area where the fuel loads are very high, and one of the greatest fears down that way is a fire of catastrophic proportions. The problem is how we can get the 24 volunteer units in that district to sit down and compile a fire management plan, considering that we have members who have been chief fire officers for 26 years and may not be particularly conversant with putting a plan on paper. How can we compel volunteers to do such a thing?

Mr Underwood: I do not think it is the role of the brigades to do that planning. The brigades can contribute to it, but the local government authority needs to take the initiative of setting up a planning process that brings in the necessary expertise. That planning process is well understood. It is a matter of identifying the risks of fires starting, the values that are threatened, the resources that are available to deal with those threats, and the emergency plans for what to do in the event of a fire starting. There is a template for producing good fire management plans that any local government could pick up and work its way through. I agree with you completely on two things. I am familiar with Denmark. It has a very serious fire management problem. Also, bush fire brigade officers are difficult people to deal with, particularly when they are farmers, who tend to operate independently and have their own ideas about everything.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is interesting that you note that the local government authority should be the responsible body. In the past the responsible person has been the local officer in charge of the police station, and the level of preparedness and what plans have been put in place varies. My background is in emergency management and fire and disaster management. I am pleased to report that there is a very comprehensive fire management plan in place in that particular area. However, I acknowledge that it is not widespread.

Mr Underwood: The point I would like to emphasise is that there are two sorts of plans. There are emergency plans that come into action where there is an emergency, and there are management plans that look at all the aspects of preparedness and damage mitigation, as well as the emergency response. The aspect that I believe is missing from so many local government authorities around the state is their preparedness or damage mitigation work; that has not been done.

The CHAIRMAN: Just to follow on from that point, on page 6 of your submission you recommend that more emphasis be placed on bushfire prevention as opposed to response. Can you give us an idea of how you see that fitting into emergency services legislation?

Mr Underwood: The first thing is the requirement for fire plans. That is absolutely critical. Everyone who owns fuel should be required to have a bushfire management plan. The second thing is the question of the emergency services levy and how it is distributed. There is a tendency that I have noticed - this is not supported by facts; this is a personal opinion - for bushfire levy moneys to go towards fire suppression and vehicles and equipment rather than things like fuel reduction, communications and education. The third thing is education. I am not sure how you can introduce this through legislation, but to our mind, and from what we have discovered since we have been involved in this business, people in the Western Australian community are generally very ignorant about bushfires. They do not understand fire ecology. They do not understand the role of fire in the Australian environment. They tend to think it will never happen to them. They also think that if a fire does occur, a helicopter will buzz overhead and save them.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I heard your comment about farmers! I wanted to raise the issue of prevention and management plans. Currently the state government has a policy that it will burn 200 000 hectares of forest each year as a hazard reduction measure. It has been said by a number of people, particularly another person in this room today, that it is very easy for CALM to burn large areas, whether it be coastal plain or large sections of forest, and that it tends not to focus on the really important thing, which is hazard reduction around towns.

[11.00 am]

Would you like to comment on that, given that there are obviously reasons that that does not happen? On the issue of management plans, obviously, if a private landholder does a subdivision or whatever, he must have a fire management plan as part of the subdivision approval, and I think that is a good thing. CALM's management plans are actually prepared by other people - I think you made that comment in your submission - and are not necessarily in line with some of the thinking of CALM. CALM derives its responsibility for fire control from its biodiversity responsibilities under its management plans. It actually has no real power under its act to burn forests, and yet it obviously burns large areas. Would you like to comment on those issues? The first is the prevention issue and how you can very easily get to 100 000 hectares, I think. The second is the issue of the management plans themselves. Obviously, CALM is seeking to have its legislation amended to allow it to burn forests. The other issue you raised is that of green burning. Can you explain what green burning is?

Mr Underwood: I will deal with that one last. We have discovered in our dealings with people in the community that people think fire is fire is fire. They do not distinguish between an enormous roaring blaze, with the flames coming out of the tops of the trees, and a mild, trickling fire, with flames less than a metre high. Someone said to me one time, "It's a pity a wildfire and a prescribed burn aren't a different colour so that we could distinguish between them when we're talking to people." It suddenly occurred to me that we could perhaps help by adopting a slogan, which we have adopted now: green burning, not black forests. By "green burning", we mean low-intensity fire that does very little damage, if no damage - in fact, it does good - to the bush. Trickling flames, leaving a patchy result, carried out periodically, reduce the amount of fuel and keep our forests green, rather than having them turn black by high-intensity summer bushfires. We also found that people do not understand the term "prescribed burning". What does the term "prescribed burning" mean? It is an in term, a jargon term. Even within agencies it is sometimes used differently. Therefore, we are using our own term now, which is green burning.

I do not actually use the term "fire prevention" very much myself. I say that it is almost impossible to prevent fires starting. The word "prevention", therefore, is meaningless, so I tend to use the terms "preparedness" and "damage mitigation" as being much more appropriate. We can prepare ourselves for bushfires that will inevitably start, and we can take steps to ensure that when the fires start, they do no or little damage. They are the critical things that should be addressed.

As for CALM's prescribed burning target, we take the position that CALM is allowed to set its own targets. CALM's target setting is not imposed upon it. It does not appear to us to have any realistic basis. It is a figure that CALM has drawn out of the hat almost to justify what it does, and we believe that that figure is not large enough and that it is not properly justified. I do not think I would go as far as to say that CALM ignores the threat to local communities and town sites. I know that I can list a number of towns around the place that are adjacent to heavy fuels; however, if you look at the CALM burning program closely, you will find that it gives priority to areas adjacent to where people live, and I think it is correct that it does that. What I think is incorrect is that, in adopting a target of 200 000 hectares, it leaves a lot of forest beyond the settled areas with heavy fuels and, therefore, vulnerable to serious damage by high-intensity bushfires. I do not believe that that is correct. I do not agree with the view that it is quite okay for remote areas of forest to be cooked to a cinder in a terribly hot fire. I think that is wrong.

The other thing about CALM's target is that if you adopt a target of 200 000 hectares, but you achieve a target of only 100 000 or 150 000 hectares, and you do that over successive years, it means that there is a build-up of fuel accumulating in the forest every year. The situation at the moment is that over the past decade the amount of burning has not always reached the 200 000-hectare target, which means that the amount of fuel accumulating is becoming too dangerous. Therefore, we say that not only should the annual target be 250 000 hectares a year, but also there should be a period in which it might even need to be 300 000 hectares a year to provide a catch-up for the past 10 years when not enough was done. I do not think CALM will do that; in fact, I am sure it will not do that, because I do not think it has the resources to do it. There are just too many constraints on CALM to enable it to get that sort of level of burning done. However, I believe it could adopt a target greater than 200 000 hectares if it wanted to.

The CHAIRMAN: Before Murray asks his question, can I ask you to give us an explanation of what your term "fuel" means? As far as I am concerned, if there is a forest, there is undergrowth and overgrowth. All that is fuel. However, you seem to have a different determination of what fuel is.

Mr Underwood: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: I think it is the undergrowth you are talking about.

Mr Underwood: Fuel comprises two things. It comprises the dead material that has been shed from living plants - bark, leaves, twigs, branches and fallen trees. Dead material on the ground is the first thing. In the Australian forest situation, particularly the dry forests of jarrah and the wetter forests of karri, there is no natural mechanism for these fuels to disappear in the early years. If you measure the weight of dry material on the ground, you see that it starts to accumulate in the first year after a fire, and it accumulates slowly until it reaches a certain point. It might take 10, 15, 20 or 30 years for that fuel to reach an equilibrium point at which the rotting of the fuel underneath is equal to the new fuel being deposited on the top. That dead material is the most important component of the bushfire fuel. However, you need to add to that also the live shrubs that grow on the forest floor. In the Australian environment, these tend to be highly flammable in hot weather. What happens is that they contain flammable oils, and the flammable oils become volatile when the sun is streaming down on them, so that each of these little plants is living within an atmosphere of volatile oil that can become quite explosive.

There is a further level of fuel altogether, which is the canopy of the trees. Again, when you have eucalypt trees, they are surrounded by an atmosphere that contains eucalyptus oil, which burns fiercely under certain conditions. A very mild prescribed burn - a green burn - will trickle through the forest and do no more than burn off the layer of dead material on the forest floor. These are the sorts of fires that you can virtually walk through. A human being can step over the flames quite easily. They trickle about. They slowly reduce that dead fuel, but they do not burn the intermediate layers or the trees. As the fires become more intense, more is consumed, until you get to a point where, in a really high-intensity fire, the whole lot goes in one hit. This is what we call a crown fire, when the flames leap from crown to crown of the trees. The fire can be travelling at a rate of many kilometres an hour, and it generates spot fires miles ahead. No firefighting force anywhere in the world, no matter how well equipped it is, can suppress a crown fire. It is impossible.

Mrs J. HUGHES: While we are talking about those types of fires, quite often around towns and so forth there are a lot of small private landholdings - not necessarily crown or CALM landholdings. There will be 20 acres here and 50 acres there, and so forth. At this stage there is no requirement for any of those owners to have any fire management plans. Do you see that as part of your push for fire management plans, whether that is with local government or FESA?

Mr Underwood: Yes. Our view is that if you are a landowner and you own fuel, you should have a fire management plan. In fact, I say even to farmers in the wheatbelt who have no bushland that they should have a fire management plan. It gets down to those basic things I mentioned before:

what are the assets or values on your property that are threatened by fire, and what steps should you take to minimise the risk of those assets or values being damaged? There is a third point, which is the aspect of common law; that is, if a fire starts on my property and I do not take adequate steps to put it out and it goes onto someone else's property, there is another problem, which is a legal problem. I am a very firm believer that if you are a property owner, you should have a fire management plan, and there should be someone else who makes sure you have a fire management plan and that it is acceptable.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I have a question on the same issue, Mr Underwood. In relation to land tenure and the requirement for a management plan, the submissions that have been made to date support that. CALM has always controlled fire on the land for which it is responsible. It has an overlay of times for the last fire and the litter levels and all those kinds of things. In more recent times, it has inherited all the unallocated crown land. Should the Crown be bound to have a management plan for all the unallocated crown land as well?

Mr Underwood: That is a very tricky issue, because in the past the Bush Fires Act did not bind the Crown. When you asked why, the answer was simple: it was the unallocated crown land. It was such a vast amount of land that if someone had said, "Okay; you, the Crown, are responsible", the cost to government to implement fire management on those areas would have been astronomical. I believe that is the main reason that the Crown was never bound by the act. We now have a situation in which CALM has been given responsibility for unallocated crown land. It is a huge responsibility. The amount of resources required for it to do that work responsibly is incalculable by me. I do not know how that will work.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: You made the comment that everybody who owns fuel should have a management plan. Should the government have a management plan for that unallocated crown land?

Mr Underwood: Not only does CALM have the unallocated crown land, but the other thing that CALM has is the very large area of pastoral leases all through the rangelands nowadays. CALM would be one of the largest owners of rangeland in Western Australia. That is another huge issue for fire management. To date in this state, the rangelands - in other words, every area of Western Australia outside the desert and outside the agricultural areas, which is a very high proportion of WA - have been ignored in bushfire management.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I will ask you a question that I have asked people who have appeared before this committee previously. The question I put to you is - the answer is probably evident from the way in which you have described your knowledge and experience of forest fire - if there is an overarching decision to amalgamate or to bring a new body into play, is there a potential, do you think, that the knowledge of fire management which foresters of old had and which has accumulated over 100 years may be lost?

Mr Underwood: I do not advocate one fire service. The takeover of a CALM fire by FESA is not something that we think is a good idea at all, because we believe that the management of CALM lands is, fundamentally, a question of land management that is based on research, science and experience, which is very important for our state forest, national parks and nature reserves. I believe that expertise should be promoted and continued within the Department of Conservation and Land Management. The one body that I would like to see come in is not a new fire service but an independent small agency sitting above both CALM and FESA and reporting independently. Perhaps that body would be the ideal one to produce the new state bushfire policy and to deal with questions of standards, desirable outcomes and best practice bushfire management systems.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Just on that point, although we are talking now about only bushfire, this committee is also looking at other aspects or other arms of emergency management; namely, marine rescue, state emergency services and the like. Do you think that that could also fit into that model?

Mr Underwood: I am not an expert in those areas, but it would seem sensible to me that if such a little body were put together - I do not see it being a huge new agency; I see it being something that might be only five or 10 professionally trained and experienced people - and it reported on bushfires, it would be sensible, in my opinion, that it also took into account other emergency operations such as you are talking about, because the philosophy is the same. It relates to preparedness, damage litigation and emergency response. All those matters are the same for bushfires as they are for storms or marine accidents.

[11.15 am]

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned that you did not think that CALM should come under FESA regarding bushfire issues. What is your opinion on the other 144 local government authorities? Currently, 144 agencies are responsible for bushfires. I accept that CALM and FESA have particular jobs to do, but what about the other 144 local government agencies?

Mr Underwood: Local government has had a chance to sort itself out and get the job done properly but in most cases they have failed to do so. Therefore, the question is whether they are given another chance or someone else is put in charge. They are the two options. I will not go into the politics of it, but the practicalities are that if FESA were properly funded and set up, it would be the only organisation that could bring the appropriate level of professionalism to local governments. FESA should play a much bigger role in bushfire management at the local government level.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: That begs the question: how important is the volunteer aspect of emergency management or, in this case, of fire control? If FESA takes over local government brigades, will we lose some of those volunteers?

Mr Underwood: That has been said. I am a great believer in volunteer bush fire brigades and volunteer marine rescue organisations and other things because it is a wonderful and rewarding activity for communities to be involved in. I would not like to see anything happen that would lead to the end of volunteerism. New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia have country fire authorities and they continue to have volunteers, although an overall organisation sets the standards for equipment, communications and so on. The model does work. My main comment about volunteer bush firefighters is that generally they are not the ideal people to work on fighting forest fires because fighting forest fires is a very specialised form of firefighting. I would not like to see a situation whereby the government increasingly relied on volunteers to fight fires in the karri and jarrah forests because it is too dangerous. We need specialised, well-trained and permanent firefighters employed by CALM in those areas. However, outside of those forest areas in the agricultural areas and in the towns, the volunteer fire brigades are well and truly capable of doing the job.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Should the volunteers be paid? When a forest fire occurs, CALM gets the fire under control and the farmers and local volunteers from the towns then do the mopping up. The majority of the volunteers are self-employed. Should they be compensated?

Mr Underwood: I do not have a position on that because I know that the volunteers themselves do not have a uniform voice on the matter. I have not entered into that debate. It is a shame if someone loses money through having to act as a volunteer.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: It happens too often.

Mrs J. HUGHES: In lieu of the fact of what you were talk about regarding local governments, is the role of local government to act as an administrative arm, for instance, in the enforcement of firebreaks, the drafting of fire plans and collecting the ESL?

Mr Underwood: Local government should organise fire management in the shires. They should coordinate the planning and make sure that the brigades are supported and established. Also, they should be the people who handle the difficult issue of enforcement. That is probably one of the biggest issues on which local government falls down. Even when the Bush Fires Act enabled local

government to insist that people took steps to reduce the fire hazards on their properties, very often it was not done. Local government would send somebody out to inspect the firebreaks, and if they had been created, that was it. That always seemed to me to be a superficial approach. The local shire should be the organising force for fire management in the area. However, local governments need the support of a professional body, which is the role of FESA.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Should FESA be the overall organisation?

Mr Underwood: FESA would provide the steel backbone and the professional training and standards coordination so that one shire has the same firefighting equipment and communications technology as its neighbouring shire.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Should FESA do some of those things and the shire do the enforcement?

Mr Underwood: Yes. The shires should have an administrative role and FESA should be involved in professional firefighting and management.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I was intrigued to read in your submission on page 3 about the bushfire cycle, which I find enlightening. You asked whether the government - aside from this committee - recognises this. Obviously this committee has been created because of the review of the FESA legislation and the concept of reviewing the whole of the emergency services legislation, which would change all the current acts of Parliament and replace them with one act. Would you like to expand on the bushfire cycle? The observations you made are very valid.

Mr Underwood: It is all set out in the submission and I probably do not need to go through it. The cycle turns relentlessly and has done so in Australia for between 50 and 70 years, going back to the 1939 bushfires in Victoria. The general view is that fires are not a big problem until a big bushfire occurs and that is when we will do something about it. That is the wrong way of going about it, which is why I welcome this committee. This committee is one of the first examples of government acting before a disaster occurs. Through our submission and through talking to the committee, I want to lift the government's sights to beyond just the review of the FESA legislation to the larger issue of bushfire management in Western Australia. That is why I set out the template of best practice and made my assessment against it. It is a bigger issue than just the FESA legislation. If the committee can help to make that well known, it fits in very nicely with what we are trying to do. I will give another example. It is bad governance that this state has not yet introduced a properly organised incident management system that will come into play when a large fire crosses different tenures.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have a proposal for what you consider to be the ideal model for a command structure across the state and different tenures?

Mr Underwood: I have not developed a model, but I do not think I need to do that because they have been well worked out. There is an Australian standard for an incident management system that everybody knows about. What is needed in this state is for the various people involved in incident management to come together and sign off on a procedure that will come into play the minute the fire siren goes off. The model is there.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: You are right. We are still operating out of the 1985 SEMC policy statement No 7. It is now 20 years later. Obviously it has not worked.

Mr Underwood: A recent example is the big fire that occurred in Mundaring Weir last year when two parallel management systems were operating at the same time. One was run by CALM and the other was run by FESA. They could not even get themselves engaged in that situation to produce one integrated management system that involved CALM, FESA, the police and local governments all operating together to deal with that fire. It is disgraceful in my opinion.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Is it true to say that in that case CALM was the hazard management authority?

Mr Underwood: CALM's view is that it will take control and retain control for fires that either start on or threaten CALM land. That has always been the situation and was enshrined in the old Bush Fires Act. When a fire is either on or threatens CALM land and also threatens the land of local suburbs, we must go beyond that system of tenure and bring in other people to become part of the system.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Having lived and worked in country towns, do you think that the town brigades and the bush fire brigades should be amalgamated? One is obviously building related and the other is bush related.

Mr Underwood: I can see some advantages in it but I know also that the culture is different in those two organisations and therefore it might be hard to make it work. The bush fire brigades tend to be farmers - I am not making any derogatory comments about farmers - and the townies tend to be made up of the local chemists and dentists and so on.

The CHAIRMAN: I think you have managed to cover some of our questions without members having to ask them.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Your submission is excellent. I hope that the committee takes on board your comments. You and Dr McKinnell have gained experience over many years in many different parts of the world.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Regarding the incident management system and the body that would sit above CALM and FESA, are you suggesting that the overarching body would take control of a situation in which there is a fire on -

Mr Underwood: Not at all. Its role would be to make sure that a good system was put in place. Once that was done, it would be up to the agencies to do the work.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: You believe that a system should be in place whereby all those agencies work together, but somebody must drive that. Who do you suggest should drive that?

Mr Underwood: The new body I am talking about.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Is that the case with an incident such as a major bushfire?

Mr Underwood: That should be sorted out before a fire ever starts so that there is an agreement on who will take charge and what roles will be filled by whom when the balloon that signals a fire goes up in an area. It is a matter of simple planning, on deciding the responsibilities of each agency, writing it down and signing off on it. When the fire starts, a button would be pushed and everyone would fill those roles. It is a system that to my knowledge has been around since 1968. That is when I first started working in what was called the "large fire organisation".

The CHAIRMAN: A transcript of your hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcript or fact. New material cannot be introduced and the sense of evidence cannot be altered. If you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct.

Hearing concluded at 11.28 am
