

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

BUSHFIRE EXAMINATIONS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
MONDAY, 17 OCTOBER 2011**

SESSION ONE

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)
Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.G. Stephens

Hearing commenced at 2.35 pm

PLOWMAN, MR NOEL RAYMOND

Volunteer Firefighter, Roleystone Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, examined:

BUSH, MR GLENN

Volunteer Firefighter, Roleystone Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: I am Tony O’Gorman. I am the chair of the committee and member for Joondalup. Ian Britza is the member for Morley and is a committee member. Tom Stephens may join us; he has just flown in from over east, so if he is going to be able to make it he will get here, but probably not. He is the member for Pilbara and he is a committee member. Our other two committee members, Albert Jacob and Margaret Quirk, unfortunately cannot make it today. David Worth, I think you know—you spoke on the phone—and Jovita Hogan as well.

I am going to read you this bit. Do not freak, it sounds all officious but it is just to make sure people understand where we are coming from. The 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? I ask that you say your answer rather than nod or shake because Hansard cannot record it.

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee today?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: You have seen our terms of reference, I take it. We are just doing a quick inquiry, if you like, or a quick examination of issues pertaining to the bushfires last February and our preparedness, or the fire brigades’ preparedness, FESA’s preparedness, for the upcoming bushfire season. Nothing to feel too nervous about; we are fairly gentle with our questions. Before I start, do you want to make any comments to the committee before we start or would you prefer us just to fire questions at you?

Mr Plowman: Just fire the questions away and we will get started.

The CHAIRMAN: Look, either one of you can answer; we are not fussy and we do not stand too much on ceremony. Western Australia—what we are trying to find out is if we are better prepared for the forthcoming bushfire season than we have been for the ones previously. In respect of that, have your particular brigades been given any additional equipment or training by FESA since the February fires this year?

Mr Plowman: No, we have not received any new equipment or any additional training, but some of our members have done other courses. One of our members has done a level 2 incident command course as part of the IMT, but that is part of our normal upgrade of training, especially for our

brigade members to make sure we have got current people through. But other than that, there is basically the standard for us. At the moment, we are all going through our training and upgrading and making sure that everyone is fully aware of what we are there for and making sure they are current with what the equipment does and how it works and where it is located on all the appliances.

The CHAIRMAN: The equipment you have, do you consider that that is sufficient for the job that you face every year?

Mr Bush: No, but then we are never going to find it sufficient. We could really use, especially this time of year when we are trying to get into the hazard production burns. For example, everybody's gung-ho, the whole crews and that, but when you get 18 or 20 people turn up, we have got people, we have to say, "Look, sorry, we can't get you on the vehicles because we're light on vehicles". Another light tanker would have been great, so we can actually get these done and knocked off. But training-wise, yes, our training has been a bit more full-on mainly because when you have fires like that, you find your membership tends to go up a little bit. We have had a lot of new members in, so we have had a lot of training to do like that, but that is mainly bringing them up. But equipment-wise, I think, yes, we are light on. We have got one large vehicle on the red side and we have got a larger 2-4 and a light tanker on the white side, which is the bushfire side. But the main structural side, we have only got the 2-4, so really it would be nice to have, like everyone else, the little red one behind it just to follow up, but that is not up to us.

The CHAIRMAN: Glenn, can I just clarify, when you say the red one and the white one —

Mr Bush: Yes, we are a dual-registered brigade; we are one brigade but we started off 50-odd years ago as a bushfire brigade and we have maintained that, but 12 years ago now, 13 years, we actually became dual registered and they put structural—the red vehicles came in.

Mr Plowman: We are a fire and rescue brigade and we are also a bushfire brigade.

The CHAIRMAN: But it is all volunteers?

The Witnesses: It is all volunteers.

Mr Plowman: So we have got currently a 2-4 urban appliance, which is a 2 000-litre four-wheel-drive truck which is designed for the urban-bush interface. It is mostly really set up for bushfire, but it has got the structural firefighting capacity for buildings and property. We have got a 2-4 rural, which is purely a bush firefighting vehicle; it has got longer hose reels, it is still a 2 000-litre four-wheel-drive. We have got one light tanker.

Mr Bush: It is just a LandCruiser, basically, with 500 or 600 litres of water on the back.

The CHAIRMAN: Slide-on type? But it is probably not slide-on, it is probably fixed on; I would say it is dedicated.

Mr Bush: The light tanker?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Bush: That is just basically—what is it now? We do get a seasonal one on the red side; we have a light tanker that comes in, but generally we will not get that until they finish the training, which is normally at the beginning of December to the second week in December. But by then, the hazard reduction burning is no good to us because we are in a fire ban.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: With that in mind, have you done any prescribed burning at all?

Mr Plowman: Yes.

Mr Bush: Yes, we are full-on now—any chance we get.

Mr Plowman: So as soon as we get the right conditions, we are out there burning, so —

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Is that where a lot of the new volunteers get their experience?

Mr Plowman: That is where they get it.

Mr Bush: That is the best place for it, yes.

Mr Plowman: That is where they get to actually see how the fire behaves in different terrain and types of fuel, because depending on where it is located within Roleystone, the fire can behave in completely different ways. So it is the only place you can actually start to teach the new members how a fire will react in certain locations.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: If some of the volunteers—I will put myself in that place—have no understanding of a fire and what it can do and how dangerous it really is, the public, who are in the line of this thing, how is their understanding, as you have perceived it, especially after what happened in Roleystone?

Mr Plowman: They have not got a clue. The average person in Roleystone and our community has got no idea how dangerous the fires are and in the country they are living, how bad and how disastrous it can be. They have got no idea. Most of them have never even seen the fire—a little bit on the edge of a road, that is it. No-one has seen a fire, fully developed, crowning out through the tops of the trees. Until they see that, they will not believe it, and most people will not.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the volunteer brigade or does FESA actually do any information distribution out to those people to tell them how serious it can be, what they should do and should not do, how they should be prepared—things like that? Do you get involved in that as volunteers?

Mr Plowman: FESA have sent a whole sack of the—I have forgotten the name—“Prepare or Go” survival booklets. They have gone out, but we have, both our brigade and Bedfordale, our BRAG groups where we are actually trying to get street coordinators and get the groups in the more hazardous areas to get all those people organised in their own BRAG group, so they are actually looking after each other and helping each other. In those we try and teach them the basics in fire behaviour, what to look for. But our biggest problem, though, is the turnover of people; people just come and go, move into Roleystone, stay a couple of years and shift because of work or family or other reasons. The turnover in our area is quite prolific really.

[2.45 pm]

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Everybody knows that Australia’s biggest dangers are fire, arguably. We have got rains and all that stuff but fire is one of our biggest major disaster areas. Although we have a bushfire every Christmas, I really get the impression that for the first time I’m actually hearing, publicly and privately, there is a bit of nervousness about this particular bushfire season. I have two questions. Number one: do you agree with that? Number two: if it is that way, why is it?

Mr Bush: Well, I say the number one reason—

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Well, first of all, maybe the first question: do you think that what I am hearing—that everyone is a little nervous about this season?

Mr Bush: We hear that every year. Every single year.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: So it is no different—

Mr Bush: No, it is no different at all.

Mr Plowman: Everyone is wary of fire, and especially with the terrain we live in in the countryside, everyone is aware of it and the potential threat and everything else that is there. There is still the apathy of some people, “I am going to get onto that this year.” Suddenly the year has gone and they have done nothing to their property. There are others that say, “I live in the bush. I insure my house. So if a fire comes through and the house is gone, I will claim it on insurance.” That is their attitude. We try to teach people that it is not that; you need to make sure you prepare because it is not only your property but your neighbour’s property, it is everyone. It is a community problem.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: What about the environment issue? Let me restate that a little more pertinently. Do you think that there is an attitude out there that we should not be touching it at all? Is that strong? I hear it but I do not know whether it is really strong or whether it is a fair dinkum argument.

Mr Plowman: Before the Roleystone-Kelmscott fires, yes, that was very strong, but because of the amount of damage that was done, now we can go out and do our burning off without being abused, and being called environmental vandals and everything else. Beforehand, that is what we were being accused of—environmental vandalism. It did not matter what we were doing to try to reduce the fuel hazard, there was always someone who would be pointing the finger and saying we were doing the wrong thing, that we should not be burning the bush.

The CHAIRMAN: Your particular brigade—you have got three appliances but how many members have you got and how well trained are they? Have some of them been there a long time? You said you had a big influx this year of new volunteers. What is your turnover and how well trained are the volunteers?

Mr Plowman: We have 50 on our books at the moment. Of those, we have seven brand new members, who are currently on the way to finishing their training. The rest are all trained. We have got about 10, who have got more than 10 years' experience—or around 10 years' experience.

Mr Bush: It would be more than that now. We would probably have 15 of them now because we have got all of —

Mr Plowman: Some of those, even though they have been in 10 years, have still not seen a major fire until last year, and some of them actually were not even at that fire. Experience-wise with major bushfires, no they have not. We would have only about half a dozen of those who have actually seen those sorts of fires and been at them fighting them.

The CHAIRMAN: In the situation of a fire, if your brigade or parts of your brigade are despatched to look after a particular piece of property, regardless of the fact that there is not a fire at that particular piece of property, would they understand the importance—I am thinking about the bridge that was burnt—of staying to protect that piece of infrastructure rather than move off because the fire is over there and we should be fighting the fire?

Mr Bush: Because we are volunteers, people think, “Oh, they are just volunteers.” But our training—the whole training program and everything else—is exactly the same as the permanents. The only difference is we do not get paid. We only get one pair of socks a year. They get more. Otherwise, we have got exactly the same training regime and we go through—we do not get quite as much because they are out every single day and we have to wait until the pagers go off, but I think everybody in the—if they are told to do something, they know it is there for a reason. The officers throughout the brigade do command a lot of respect and they do all have a fair bit of experience so if they say, “Look, stay here”, they know there is a reason to be staying there and if they moved away and something happened —

Mr Plowman: The only time our guys would—if they have been given a designated area to look after they will stay with that area until such time as either the fire behaviour is going to threaten their lives, then they will leave. Other than that they will stay there until they are told or the fire has gone, or everything is locked up and everything has been declared safe. That is the only time they would leave, if their lives were directly threatened by the fire coming.

Mr Bush: And even so, then they would be onto the radio because we do have that communication, because we have to know that they have left as well. So we have got—we seem to know what we are doing out there, and if they are put there they will not sort of—“Geez, I am hungry, I might go and get a sandwich or something.” They will stay there until—and if they do have to leave we will always know about it because they will be on the radio saying, “Look, this is getting a bit too hot

here. We are going to have to move out.” Then we will not say, “No, no. You will stay.” We say, “No, if you are not sure, you get out.”

The CHAIRMAN: One of the recommendations from the Keelty inquiry was that WALGA—WA Local Government Association—and its member councils should pick up recommendation 35 in the Keelty report, and local governments jointly review radio communications capability prior to the 2011–12 bushfire season with a view to improving the current delivery of service to firefighters. Has that happened? Have you had any upgrade or improvements in radio communications between yourselves and other bushfire brigades?

Mr Plowman: No, that has not happened. Where we are, we have the Brookton Valley, and once we are in that valley the radio reception—the communication—is terrible. We can go back many years, and we have been chasing to get that upgraded but it has always been—previously it was the bushfires board—when we have tried to get things done no, nothing has happened.

They keep saying that where our current repeater is, in Canning Mills, is the ideal spot for it even though we have now had a TV translator tower built from the other side at Roleystone between us and Bedfordale, and it gives us now TV reception all down the Brookton Valley, which we never used to have. So it was offered to the bushfires board back then and nothing has ever been done.

The CHAIRMAN: So, can I just get this straight in my mind, and you will have to forgive my ignorance of radio communications, but from what I am hearing is you have a repeater tower here, you have a valley here, and the reception in the valley is pretty weak or non-existent.

Mr Plowman: It is really hit and miss.

The CHAIRMAN: And you have now got over the other side of the valley a telecommunications —

Mr Plowman: A TV tower which actually sends all the TV channels back into the valley.

The CHAIRMAN: And you could put a repeater station on that tower and get radio service into the valley.

Mr Plowman: Right up through the valley the whole distance.

The CHAIRMAN: And it has not been done.

Mr Plowman: It has never been done.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any idea—forgive me if you do not know—of the cost of putting that additional equipment onto that tower so that you have good communications in the Brookton Valley?

Mr Plowman: I would not have a clue on that one. That is —

[2.55 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: We will see if we can get a price and we will ask why it has not been done.

Mr Plowman: That was our biggest thing for the Roleystone fires—communications. Normally from the repeater sites comes the command channel, and then we go simplex, which is basically the line-of-sight, on the radios. In a hills and valley situation, the line-of-sight radio just does not work. You have to use repeaters or some other way of reducing and getting a smaller boundary. That fire developed so quickly that it just blew out all the boundaries.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: That was the next point that I was going to ask. Whatever you could do, if you could do anything different—I think I heard someone say that fire intensity, which I happen to have never seen or experienced, but they said that it was so intense that it came upon us so quickly that we really could not have done anything different than what we already knew. Is that sort of accurate?

Mr Plowman: That is very accurate. We were the first—there was our bushfire vehicle, which Glen was in charge of. I was in charge of the fire and rescue vehicle, and also Armadale career guys turn up. We all turn up virtually at the same time. We contained what we thought was the main part of

the fire and then we had the spot over. From the moment we shifted down to get to that fire, that fire was up and running. We could not even catch it—if it was a dead flat road and we could drive to get to it, we still could not have caught it. It was just moving so quick. Once it hit the hills and the terrain up past Buckingham Road it was gone. There was no way of stopping that. The first hop over on the southside of Brookton Highway, Maddington with their pump were trying to put the fire out, which was into the watsonia, and they just could not do it. There were not enough vehicles or appliances there and once it hit the rest of the watsonia, it just spread right along the river and took off up over Scott Road and just up the hill. In a matter of minutes—you could say within two hours a fair bit of the damage was already done. Within four hours it was completely done.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Knowing the little that you have just explained to us, what can be put in place to try to stop something that appears to be so unstoppable? What can be put in place to protect that?

Mr Bush: I do not know if there is too much that can be done apart from education. That gets us back to the public being told about total fire bans, and what you can and cannot do. This was just a freak fire.

Mr Plowman: Even some of the paddocks, which only had grass about that high, the fire was just shooting across it in huge great sheets of flame. It was just—

Mr Bush: It was not upright. It was horizontal.

Mr Plowman: So in a matter of seconds it was just absolutely flying.

Mr Bush: At that time of year, the watsonia is just like dry hay. So it is just there and just sucks it in. We have had much bigger fires but not like that.

The CHAIRMAN: In your particular bushfire area, so your brigade areas, are you at less risk this year? Has all that fuel, or most of the fuel now been burnt and you should not have a greater risk this year because there is less to burn?

Mr Bush: Not in Roleystone.

Mr Plowman: Now, all the area that was burnt out will have got the grass and weeds all coming back up, and it is all getting two and three feet high and is still nice, green and lush at the moment. Unless someone starts to get in to cut those paddocks down, it is going to be there.

Mr Bush: Same thing.

Mr Plowman: Same thing, but there will not be so much thicker fuel and higher fuel because a lot of the trees are still—

Mr Bush: We will not have the leaf litter and that sort of fuel. It is light fuel that is blowing—from yesterday those grass fires, how quick they can spread because the wind just gets behind them and takes them out. Even the thicker, denser stuff if you have not got that wind it burns slower, but hotter. We are going to have a problem with the weeds once they all dry out.

Mr Plowman: And this is where we need to get all the owners of the properties to do something. That is where the rangers within the City of Armadale are starting to really push. They are out there now checking and pushing to try and make sure everyone is aware, and there are more notices going out from council in the local papers and newspapers and all the local magazines and that. Hopefully we will make people aware of it, but there are still other areas within Roleystone where the same conditions are going to happen again.

Mr Bush: When they start becoming aware and they cannot do it, then they turn back to the brigade and say, “Look, can you come and burn our blocks?” If they are made aware by council going on and they say, “Look, you are going to have to do something to your property.” And they cannot physically do it themselves, or they do not want to light up or slash it down, then they turn back to the brigade. So that comes back to us and they ask if we can burn it. Our books for controlled or

prescribed burning are just ridiculous. We try to earn a living during the week, and you spend all weekend burning and evenings, afternoons—whatever you can do.

Mr Plowman: So we burn off whenever we can as much as we can, but we have only got so many days before the season gets closed off and it becomes a total fire ban.

The CHAIRMAN: I will come back to the council because you mentioned the council, but for those property owners who are down there who need to either slash or burn their property, and for some reason they do not do it, is there not an enforcement there that says you get hit with a fine or the local government comes along and either slashes or burns it for you and charges you appropriately?

Mr Plowman: The City of Armadale and the rangers will actually go out and do the inspections. Once it is the end of November, they are out there doing the enforcements and really pushing, because people have to have their breaks in by virtually by the 30th, and then they must maintain them right through the summer.

The CHAIRMAN: 30 November.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Now that policy has been there for a long time.

Mr Plowman: That has been there for a long time, yes.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: So what was the deal last year? Was it just a freak?

Mr Bush: You mean in February? Well that is because a lot of it was domestic properties and they were just long streets. Now long streets, obviously, if you are just on a half-acre block or a quarter-acre block, and if you have to put a three-metre firebreak all the way around, you would have no house! So it is only on the larger properties—

The CHAIRMAN: But even on a half-acre block you are still required to maintain it to a level that reduces your risk of bushfire. Now that does not mean that you have to do a three-metre break all the way around. That means you actually just keep the fuel loads down. I have a 700 square metre block in a rural area and every year I get a notice to say that I have got to slash it, and I have it slashed every year, and sometimes twice a year perhaps—it grows back that quickly. So why should residents of Roleystone be any different?

Mr Plowman: Because in some areas it is too steep to get machinery in to cut a firebreak. To get away from the requirement of firebreaks, the council will issue an exemption, but to get that exemption they must reduce the fuel loading on a lot the properties. This is why a lot of people with the grass paddocks will put sheep on it or slash the grass down to about 50 millimetres high, and that is deemed to comply with reducing the fuel loading. However, the February fire was just running across that paddock so fast and it was actually jumping three-metre firebreaks. They did not even slow it up one little bit!

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned the City of Armadale and the rangers a couple of times. What is the relationship between the brigades and the City of Armadale? FESA fund you, but you are under the auspices of the City of Armadale; is that correct?

Mr Plowman: That is right, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: So what is the relationship there? Are they supportive and encouraging and things like that?

Mr Plowman: Up until now, with our last mayor, Linton Reynolds, he absolutely backed us 100 per cent. If we wanted something, he would bend over backwards to make sure we got it. Our current chief bushfire patrol officer is the same. He really looks after us. In years gone by we have had hassles with different mayors and people. Some people think that within local government it is not their role for firefighting. That should be FESA's role, or someone else's role. Their job is to look after the community and make sure the roads and infrastructure are in place, but not

firefighting. It just depends on each year with the elections and that. We are waiting to see who our new mayor is and hopefully he will be very supportive as per Linton Reynolds.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Tonight.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it tonight or was it not Saturday night? Did people not know on Saturday night?

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Not the mayor.

The CHAIRMAN: Oh, you do not have a popularly elected mayor yet obviously.

Mr Plowman: No, he is elected by the councillors.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Tonight.

The CHAIRMAN: Alright.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: One of the things is that there is a division—that is not the right word—a difference between the permanents and the volunteers. Is that what you call them; the “perms” and the “volunteers”?

Mr Plowman: Yes.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: They are both under dangerous situations. Are the voluntary firefighters adequately insured?

[3.05pm]

Mr Plowman: That has always been a bone of contention because we have had a few firefighters who have been injured in incidents where the workers’ compensation for them has run out, yet they still have to have ongoing medical treatments. We have had a few of them over the years where they have actually ended up on social security because they cannot go back to work. They are still injured—they will not probably work—but the workers compensation has run out because the payments—

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I am about ready to volunteer. As soon as they saw that I had a heavy vehicle driver’s licence they all smiled and said, “Come on down!” I wear the orange suit, I get in the truck, but if I get injured is it a different system? I would not be covered?

Mr Plowman: No, if you are signed up as a member, you are covered under the workers’ compensation. Fire and rescue are covered and bush fire brigades are covered. Ours is with the bush fire brigade through the City of Armadale, and they have a workers’ compensation policy for us, and it is the same for fire and rescue under FESA.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: But there is a limit?

Mr Plowman: There is a limit and I think it is the same. It does not matter whether you are a permanent, career—there is a limit to the money that each person would get depending on the injury. So if you get someone who is badly injured and they are going to be in hospital for 12 months, then ongoing recovery for the next two years, that money is not going to stretch that far.

The CHAIRMAN: That is not because of any fault of FESA or the City of Armadale. That is just the legislation that determines—

Mr Plowman: That is just a fault of the system and the way it is at the moment.

The CHAIRMAN: Noel, does the bush fire brigade report to the City of Armadale or to FESA?

Mr Plowman: No, we report to our chief bush fire control officer, and he is at the City of Armadale.

The CHAIRMAN: And then he reports back to FESA or—so what are the memoranda of understanding, if you like, between FESA and the bushfire brigades and the local councils? How does that all come together—any idea?

Mr Plowman: It is like a chain of command. Within FESA we have a district manager who looks after and liaises with all the chief bush fire control officers within his area. We have Brett Finlay at the moment, and he liaises directly with Brian Watkins, our chief bush fire control officer, and also Rod Wallington for Gosnells, and Dave Gossage from Serpentine–Jarrahdale, and he is our funnel then back through to FESA for any additional things we require. We have also got a representative on the state training committees. I am also the local government training coordinator for Armadale and I go to the south metropolitan training committee, and from there we report back through to the state committee through different channels. So for any extra things we need, we have different avenues through which we can actually get those requirements.

The CHAIRMAN: How do you interact with DEC, because DEC has a responsibility for bushfires as well?

Mr Plowman: We get on really well with DEC.

Mr Bush: We have got to, because we are surrounded by them. Basically, they take over any fire within five kilometres of their land, and Roleystone is only this little island in amongst DEC land, so if you do not get on—we have got members in DEC as well who belong to the brigade, so it is good because then they can actually bring their training and their experiences back to us and visa versa.

The CHAIRMAN: So between DEC and FESA, have they actually worked with you to do any controlled burns or have all the controlled burns that you have done been instigated off your own backs this year?

Mr Plowman: We are doing a whole big lot on our own, but DEC at the moment has been doing huge amounts around Roleystone and Kalamunda through to Mundaring. They have been taking in some large areas. They have done 1 900 hectares between Albany Highway through to Churchman Brook Dam, which now protects Roleystone from the south-easterly wind direction. They have also taken out Gardiner Road, which was about 1 790 hectares, and Stinton Cascades, Bickley—these are huge areas that they are doing. DEC do that every year.

The CHAIRMAN: Are they doing that independently of you? They do not rope you into—

Mr Bush: They asked for assistance earlier, which is unusual for them because they get paid double time and a half and that, so they prefer the overtime. They are actually now communicating a lot better. They actually did ask for our assistance earlier.

Mr Plowman: We are working quite well. Kevin Pollack, who is in charge of the DEC's fire area, generally lets us know what is going on. The same thing happens with Greg Standing from Jarrahdale. They liaise with us through our bushfire advisory meeting. They let us know what they are doing and we try to coordinate our work with theirs as much as we can, especially with some of the reserves and smaller bits of land. We try to knock those off at the same time as they do; so we try to combine to give the maximum protection we can.

The CHAIRMAN: But have FESA actually gone out and said that it needs to do some prescribed burns as well in this area as a preventative for the upcoming bushfire season?

Mr Plowman: FESA has started up its bushfire mitigation group, and they have done one burn within our Roleystone area, but they have all the unallocated crown land, and that is a huge amount of land that they have got to look after. We have not had much to do with them at this stage because they are brand new. The careers do not do any controlled burning because they are on call for road crash rescue and most of the others. Basically, it just comes down to the volunteer brigades who are doing a lot of the burning.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: We know that you have said to us that the volunteers are trained in fighting bushfires and how to look after them or whatever. Have they had any training and are they aware of evacuation processes? Do they get involved in that?

Mr Bush: No. When it comes to evacuation, that is when the police and that are called in because we are quite busy in these situations normally, squirting water and that sort of thing, so we have to rely upon —

Mr Plowman: Depending on the fire and the situation, that is normally left with the incident management team. With the February fires, that just blew everyone away with the speed of the fire.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: Do your volunteers actually have any authority to override if there is no authority around in your structure?

Mr Plowman: Basically, the power of the Chief Bush Fire Control Officer flows down to the lower firefighters. He is the senior person, so he can actually assume the responsibility and evacuate the whole area if need be, but when do you do that? That is the mind blowing situation; when do you make that decision to actually get people out and evacuate?

Mr I.M. BRITZA: As terrible as that fire was, it is pretty extraordinary we did not lose anybody. What would you put that down to?

Mr Bush: A lot of luck and just very good—there was also a dynamic that was going around. The communications out to the public I do not think were quite as good as they should have been. People were just—I think most of them were being sensible. They realised that it was coming through and you can only—I mean some were staying there with the hosepipes and that sort of thing. You can advise them but you cannot force them to leave that situation. Everything came from everywhere—

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I have just come back from Japan and we were just briefed on how aware they are of tsunamis and earthquakes. As soon as there is an earthquake, everybody's phone is interrupted. Every bit of communication or whatever is interrupted. We have nothing like that. Has something been looked at in that case?

Mr Bush: We do have some SMS programs around, but it is mostly—I do not know who is controlling it. It should be coming through FESA.

Mr Plowman: They have the state alert phone system, which they can actually pinpoint an area and actually send a message out to everyone's phone and everyone's mobile within that area.

[3.15pm]

Mr I.M. BRITZA: That does not mean everyone understands though.

Mr Plowman: No.

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I do not want to bring the Japanese thing out, but because it is just fresh. Everyone has been educated about how an earthquake and a tsunami go together. They simply go into their role of what to do and, as terrible as that last one was, many lives were saved because of that procedure. I wonder whether it comes back to this question again about the education of the public and what to do when they receive a message of danger.

Mr Bush: I know that a lot of people have said that they—if you look at what you have said about DEC, if you ever see any smoke around and it is in DEC land, you go straight on their website and it is always listed where their controlled burns are et cetera. My ex-wife lives in Bedfordale and they use this system if there is a fire there and they use the SMS system. Straightaway she phoned me and said, "What is going on?" I said, "I do not know, I will get back to you!"

Mr Plowman: Bedfordale has set up its own SMS—they actually go back to their street coordinators of the BRAG groups and they just say, "Just be aware that we have received a fire call about a fire in your immediate vicinity. Please start your bushfire ready action plan." That is all they do. It is just advising that there is a fire in the area. They have tried it now for two years and it seems to be working fairly well. Most of the residents in Bedfordale are fairly happy. They have

only got about 1 800 people living in Bedforddale. However, Roleystone has 6 000 residents within that little area, and to try and sent out a message for that with the—

Mr I.M. BRITZA: We are not totally convinced that they understand the real danger.

Mr Plowman: No, most people have never seen a fire and they still do not believe that there is a major danger from a bushfire. For someone to see a fire that crowns out, that is creating its own wind and the noise and the roar and the heat coming through; it is absolutely mind-blowing to see it.

Mr Bush: It is like a jet engine and it just goes through the top and then just drops everything down, just lights the ground, just keeps feeding itself, faster and faster.

Mr Plowman: If you get a firestorm that comes through it will burn a power pole and it drops in a matter of minutes just with that much heat. You are talking about decent sized wooden poles, and that is just from one storm coming through on its own!

Mr Bush: Literally it is like a blast furnace. Do not get me wrong, at night if it is not near you, it is spectacular to see, but you do not want to be anywhere near it.

The CHAIRMAN: Noel, you mentioned a minute ago that DEC and FESA you meet with them regularly. How regularly do you meet with them about their controlled burns and about what they are planning and what is up for the future?

Mr Plowman: About this time each year at our fire advisory meetings, DEC comes along with all their maps and they advise us what they are planning to do during this coming season. If they are burning near our area, they will always give us a phone call to let us know. If we have a burn that we want to do that is right beside their reserve or we want to utilise part of their reserve as well, then we will give them a ring and liaise with them as part of those burns. We talk to each other at least yearly, but more in the lead-up, so you are getting from July to August. They are starting to get their planning into gear, and we are starting to do the same as well. During the summer period we meet each other quite regularly out on the fire ground.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks gentlemen for coming in this afternoon. I will read you a closing statement, which tells you what happens from here on. Again, thank for your evidence before the committee this afternoon. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction or minor errors. Could you please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period, we will deem it to be correct. New material cannot be introduced by these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, could you please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. So we will send the transcript out to you within a few days and then you have 10 days to send it back to us with any corrections—if we have heard you wrong or quoted you wrongly or anything else like that. Are there any questions you have of us?

Mr Plowman: No, not really. We are just hoping it is going to be a quiet season.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any closing statement you would like to make?

Mr Plowman: All the firefighters on the ground are all working really well together and the upper management levels are now starting to come together. With what has happened over the past 12 months, and what seems to be happening out there now, it should be all for the better. I just hope we do not get another fire like that, especially in Roleystone, because that was absolutely mind-blowing for us.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 3.21pm
