

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT GERALDTON
THURSDAY, 1 JUNE 2006**

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**

Hearing commenced at 10.15 am**MERRITT, MR MATTHEW JAY,
Captain, Geraldton Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, examined:**

Mr M.J. COWPER: I welcome Matthew Merritt from the Geraldton Fire and Rescue Service. 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 contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form, and do you understand the notes attached to it; and did you receive and read a witness information briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before a parliamentary committee?

Mr Merritt: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: First, would you mind giving us an overview of your group's operations?

Mr Merritt: I currently hold a position as captain of the Geraldton Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service. I have been a volunteer in that brigade for 13 and a bit years now. In that time I have held the position of captain for eight years. We are on active turn-out to back up the career station, with which we combine buildings. We have about eight active members turning out to incidents. They range from scrub fires to chemical spills and special service calls. We are trying to recruit new members so that, hopefully, we can get our membership up.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What are your key functions? What are the major hazards here that you attend to?

Mr Merritt: The majority of call-outs that we attend to are scrub fires and bush fires throughout the Geraldton area. We also attend a lot of house fires and motor vehicle accidents. That can range from truck rollovers to car versus car.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You said you have eight active members. As a matter of interest, I notice there have been three fatalities in the mid-west this year. I think there was a fatality at the new southern exchange on the Brand Highway. Have any of your staff received counselling about attending critical incidents?

Mr Merritt: Yes, we do. After every MVA or every job that we turn out to that involves trauma, we have a debrief at the fire station before anyone goes home. FESA supplies counselling through the brigade.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are there any other services that you interact with or do you work as a stand-alone unit?

Mr Merritt: We interact with the Waggrakine Bush Fire Brigade and the Cape Burney Bush Fire Brigade. We liaise with the police and ambulance numerous times through multiple agency drills in LEMC exercises. We have a good relationship with the BFB and other emergency services.

Mrs J. HUGHES: When you have to work with other agencies, do you ever have any communication issues in relation to working together on some -

Mr Merritt: The only communications issue that we have notified and brought up at the LEMC exercises is that we are on different radio channels. The police, fire and ambulance do not communicate well with each other on that avenue. We had an incident two weeks ago in which

there was a plane crash, and we took a bit of time to locate the crash. The ambulance was on the scene before the police and the fire.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Thank you.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Just a bit of history. When was your brigade established?

Mr Merritt: I am not sure what year the first Geraldton brigade was established. I apologise for that, but Geraldton was the first volunteer brigade in WA.

Mr M.J. COWPER: A number of local governments are proposing that FESA take over part or all of local government's bushfire responsibilities. These responsibilities include those relating to supporting and administering the bush fire brigades. FESA has suggested that the legislation allow FESA to take over bushfire responsibilities, but only when the local government in the respective area wants that to occur. How do you think that will work with volunteers? Do you have a view on that matter?

Mr Merritt: I am not sure at this stage because the Geraldton and Greenough councils are going to amalgamate, so I am not sure what the process of that will be. As we turn out to fires now involving the BFB and the FRS, we work well together. I am not sure how to comment on that.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Are you saying that your brigade is one of the oldest in regional Western Australia?

Mr Merritt: Yes, that is correct.

Mr M.J. COWPER: There is a bit of history there. I was just wondering whether some of the history might be lost if you were to be badged as, for instance, the department of emergency services.

Mr Merritt: That is correct. FESA at this stage is trying to amalgamate or relocate the Geraldton Volunteer Fire and Rescue. It may amalgamate with the Waggrakine BFB or SES. We have put a proposal to FESA that we do not wish to amalgamate because we do not want to lose our identity. The reason for that is Geraldton was the first brigade.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Where do you operate from?

Mr Merritt: At the career station.

Mr M.J. COWPER: At the fire station opposite the post office?

Mr Merritt: Yes. That is correct.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you have the opportunity to train with other agencies or do you train separately?

Mr Merritt: No, we can train separately, and we, the volunteers, do that every fortnight at the fire station. We ask the career firefighters to help us train so that we are familiar with their equipment and we try to get qualified to a higher standard. We also train with the BFB and the police and ambulance on numerous occasions.

Mrs J. HUGHES: That is good.

Mr M.J. COWPER: One of the precursors for this inquiry was a report by the Auditor General and another by the coroner that made some criticism of a multi-agency incident involving CALM and local government land that occurred in the south. There has been a suggestion that there be an amalgamation and that anything less would jeopardise the community of Western Australia. Have you had any specific instances where you have had a problem of who controls a particular event, such as a fire here in the local area? Has that ever become an issue?

Mr Merritt: No, not really. I think the Fire and Rescue Service has complete control when there is a fire. If there is a plane accident or anything like that, it is up to the police, so it works well in this community.

[10.25 am]

Mr M.J. COWPER: The old policy statement 7 sets out the authorities, but I am wondering whether you have had any issues with the control of fire depending on whose land it is; for instance, where the fire has gone from private property onto CALM-managed land and then to land that comes under the local government authority?

Mr Merritt: We possibly could have, but not when I have been involved.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It has not been an issue?

Mr Merritt: No.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I would love your views on this: FESA is looking at taking control of brigades with the cooperation of the local governments, which would also give it the power to establish or cancel brigades. Do you have any view on that?

Mr Merritt: I am not sure about the question.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It is about whether FESA then has the ability to cancel a brigade if numbers were down or re-establish brigades in other areas depending on management issues of brigades. Do you have any comment, being a volunteer?

Mr Merritt: Yes, I do. FESA may have the opportunity to do that. For example, Geraldton had 40 members on my book and now we are down to about 12. We are doing a recruitment drive; we are in the process of starting that. I have heard that FESA has shut numerous stations down south and combined them as a FESA unit.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Has that type of news affected you as a volunteer or your brigades here?

Mr Merritt: No, not at this stage.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What is the general feeling of the volunteers?

Mr Merritt: Of closing fire stations?

Mr M.J. COWPER: No, about the entity issue.

Mr Merritt: Over the past couple of months we have had meetings regarding the relocation of the Geraldton volunteers and amalgamating with BFB and SES, and we have stated clearly that we are not happy with that idea. We want to keep our own identity. The main reason for that, as I mentioned before, is that Geraldton was the first brigade and there is a lot of history in our brigade.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You said that you had 40 on the books and that it is now down to about 12. Have people left the brigade because they are unhappy with what has been happening or is it -

Mr Merritt: We used to have a large running team, and our running team folded about three years ago. Ever since then we have not had that membership. It is hard to recruit members because we have only got a single-cabin appliance. We are pushing for a dual-cab appliance plus another light tanker, which is another fire and rescue vehicle. It is very hard to hold people when we have to turn out to incidents and we have to take the more qualified people.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Has the ESL not kicked in for you at all?

Mr Merritt: No.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Have you had any indication of when it will perhaps be able to supply you with equipment?

Mr Merritt: The replacement vehicle for the vehicle the Geraldton volunteers have now is 2009. We have had two light tankers for about three to four months in the summer season. Then they are removed. So we are pushing very strongly to get a dual-cab appliance and another light tanker.

Mr M.J. COWPER: How do you go about turning out at incidents if you have only got a single cab?

Mr Merritt: Very hard. It is a driver, a firefighter and an officer in charge. That is breaking the rules of our BA qualifications or regulations. That is the first turn-out vehicle. We have a second turn-out vehicle, which is just a station ute and is not a fire appliance. It is not a direct-attack vehicle. It is very hard on our brigade at the moment.

Mrs J. HUGHES: This is the Geraldton brigade. If that is happening within your CD, how is it going with the other brigades further out? What are their appliances?

Mr Merritt: The other appliances through the BFB have been maintained highly. They have more vehicles, or better vehicles, than we have. We are in the process of drafting letters to push FESA for better facilities at our station.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you think that is impacted because you have the career firefighters in town?

Mr Merritt: That is what FESA comes back with, yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: That adds further fuel to the problem of getting additional volunteers.

Mr Merritt: And members to the fire ground. On numerous occasions we have had to drive our own vehicles to the actual fire ground. That is a large insurance issue as well.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I would just like your view on this, if you can: currently the legislation empowers the three bodies - FESA, the local government and CALM - to have control of any fire at any given time. The control of the fire is dependent on the land tenure. The Auditor General and the coroner have both criticised this arrangement, claiming that one body must be accountable and responsible for the control of the fire during a multi-agency incident. Both claim that anything less jeopardises the safety of the community. Do you have any views on control?

Mr Merritt: There has to be one agency that takes control, depending on what land it is on. If it is reserve or crown land, CALM will take control of that. I have not had any instance in Geraldton where that has happened, but I have travelled to New South Wales and I have been to the Pickering Brook fires in Perth, and that is a multi-agency task where FESA and CALM work together. It has not happened in the Geraldton area.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If there were a fire at Kalbarri - that is under CALM, I imagine -and it jumped into a local government area so that CALM and local government were involved, they would become hazard management authorities over that land. Do you believe, if it is a large fire, that there should be an opportunity for FESA to come in over the top as the responsible manager of that fire?

Mr Merritt: I believe so. In my opinion FESA would take control of that fire, especially if property or lives were in danger.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Therefore, it would be very important for people to be trained the same way so that they all know how the incident should be managed. Quite often we have local guys who fight fires in a particular way and then the FESA guys, who are trained, and CALM. Should all the training then become the same?

Mr Merritt: Yes, I believe so.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you know if that is happening at all?

Mr Merritt: No, I do not think it is.

Mr M.J. COWPER: There is currently a bit of a conflict with boundaries. On one hand there are the fire districts and then there are the emergency services levy districts, which overlap from time to time. It is proposed that they become one and are aligned. Have you had any incidents here in Geraldton where this has caused a problem for the ability of the volunteer fire brigade, the career firefighters or the bush fire brigades to delineate who looks after an area?

Mr Merritt: We have had a few incidents where a fire has got out of control and it has moved out of the Geraldton area and gone into the Waggrakine area. I believe that FESA took over the role because property and lives were in danger.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The committee has received numerous submissions requesting that the state government be bound by the same fire prevention legislation as private landowners. Whenever property owners are compelled to install firebreaks, the state government would be compelled to do the same on crown land. Currently the state government is exempt from having to install any firebreaks on its land. Do you have any comment on that?

[10.35 am]

Mr Merritt: It is necessary to have firebreaks, especially in Geraldton. That is up to the council, or the Geraldton-Greenough council. It is very necessary.

Mrs J. HUGHES: What is your view on a fire management plan in place of firebreaks?

Mr Merritt: We have established through the Geraldton council that we can start doing fuel reduction burns to minimise the impact on our summer. That is a controlled burn that we have done. We have noticed it is helping and it has reduced our number of call-outs throughout the year.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would they take the place of the installation of firebreaks, or should both happen?

Mr Merritt: Both.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Would you like to discuss how the emergency services levy has impacted on your brigade? Has there been any noticeable impact? We have heard about the vehicle issue. What about with equipment?

Mr Merritt: The ESL has not changed our brigade since it was implemented. As I mentioned before, the vehicle we have is not suitable for a brigade that has active members turning out to assist the Geraldton career firefighters. On numerous occasions, Geraldton career firefighters have turned out to an incident and we have had to be in charge of a second incident. The appliance, and we have only one, is not suitable for our community or for our role in the community.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What did you have previously?

Mr Merritt: It was a 1970 International ACCO. It was a very old appliance. We have had this appliance for 11 years and it will not be replaced until 2009.

Mrs J. HUGHES: And personal equipment?

Mr Merritt: Personal protective equipment has been very good. FESA is right on the ball with that with PPE. Personal equipment has been brought out to a high degree.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you get any support from your local government?

Mr Merritt: No.

Mrs J. HUGHES: None whatsoever?

Mr Merritt: No.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You are now the fire chief of the greater mid-west district. How can we improve it? How can we make your brigade better?

Mr Merritt: Better resources; more staff; more fire reduction drills; more burns; and implementing firebreaks and stuff like that. Definitely more resources, more appliances and better staff.

Mrs J. HUGHES: For a number of reasons FESA is proposing that it be established as a department of emergency services. This will mean the removal of "fire" from the corporate name. FESA's argument is that this removal is appropriate because fire is one of the many emergencies

that volunteers attend to. There has been objection to this on the basis of a claim of loss of identity. Should the authority be re-established as a department, and do you have a view on the name?

Mr Merritt: I do have a view on the name. The name should stay as it is, because it gives the Fire and Rescue Service its own identity. As I said, they want us to change our name from Geraldton Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service to a FESA unit, and we have told them straight-out that we are not happy to do that. FESA needs to have "fire and rescue" involved in its name.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If it were to become a department as such, do you believe that the bureaucracy of it would impact on volunteers?

Mr Merritt: I am not sure.

Mrs J. HUGHES: At the moment, do you have very much paperwork being attached to the career firefighters?

Mr Merritt: In what way?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Reporting on fires or -

Mr Merritt: At this stage the career firefighters do paperwork on fire reports. If we had our own fire station, we would do our own fire reports. The volunteers and the career firefighters are in one building.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would that become a problem for volunteers, do you think?

Mr Merritt: I do not believe so. The other volunteers throughout WA that are stand-alone still have to do fire reports.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Thank you for coming in. Is there any particular issue that you would like to raise that you think may assist the committee?

Mr Merritt: The only issue I would like to raise is the appliance of the Geraldton Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service. I have mentioned numerous times that it is not suitable for the community and it is definitely not suitable for the members we have. We are trying to maintain that vehicle, but we still want another appliance.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You talked about a recruitment drive: are you doing that as a brigade or is that happening through the career firefighters or FESA?

Mr Merritt: Yes. We are waiting for FESA to say that we have some money to advertise and we are trying to do a recruitment drive through the media. That is up to the district manager, Gordon Purvis, to implement. FESA will probably do that throughout WA.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So FESA is in control of the recruitment drive?

Mr Merritt: It will be, yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: With that recruitment, will FESA initiate all the training that is required?

Mr Merritt: That is correct.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced in the sense that the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on a particular point, 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.

Mr Merritt: No worries. Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 10.41 am
