

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT KARRATHA
TUESDAY, 8 AUGUST 2006**

SESSION ONE

Members

Ms K. Hodson-Thomas (Acting Chairman)

Mr S.R. Hill

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)

Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)

Mrs J. Hughes

Hearing commenced at 8.57 am

ROBERTSON, MR STUART JOHN

President, West Pilbara Volunteer Sea Search and Rescue, examined:

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Welcome. This committee hearing is a proceeding of the 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?

Mr Robertson: Yes.

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

Mr Robertson: Yes.

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

Mr Robertson: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: We have some very generic questions. I will start with those. There will be plenty of opportunity for you to ask questions afterwards if you wish. When was your volunteer marine rescue group established and how many members do you have? Can you describe the type of rescue operation your group performs?

Mr Robertson: Our group was formed in the 1960s, operating out of the Hampton Harbour Boat and Sailing Club by club members. It was officially affiliated as a sea rescue organisation in April 1978. We currently have 41 active members. The membership moves from the mid-30s to the high 50s at any given time, depending on the movement of members. We provide a wide range of services, from tow jobs, security alerts and medivacs to quite complicated rescues involving boat incidents - basically whatever we are called on to do within the parameters of our operating guidelines and whatever the police ask us to do.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How often is your group called out to assist?

Mr Robertson: Approximately once a week, but that varies. Sometimes we go two weeks without anything. Some weeks we will get four or five call-outs. It varies as to whenever people get into trouble.

Mr S.R. HILL: Are these call-outs for injured farmers or boats that have gone out and cannot get back in?

Mr Robertson: There are a huge range of things, including vessels running aground, medivacs and searches such as the *Nego Kym* incident. Generally, people just run out of fuel or require a tow, but sometimes it is quite complicated, such as people getting stranded or lost.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Prior to the establishment of FESA, the volunteer marine rescue service was part of the water police. Has there been any significant change in your operations since the administrative support for the group was transferred from the police to FESA?

Mr Robertson: No, I do not think so. We have seen a growth in our work and an upgrade and improvement of our equipment, but that is a group related thing. I do not know that the water police used to administer us. It was certainly the HMA, but as far as administering sea rescue, I am not quite sure what you mean by that in this context.

Mr S.R. HILL: Currently the Western Australia police and FESA share responsibility for the volunteer marine rescue service groups. FESA provides administrative support and the police provide operational support. Is this arrangement working well for your local VMRS group? How does it work at the local level? You said earlier that in the past the police did not provide you with administrative support. Is it working differently now with FESA?

Mr Robertson: The police have limited involvement as a management authority. Other than that, they leave it to us. If it gets to a complicated search, they will set up a coordination centre. I would not call it a shared responsibility. FESA is the overriding organisation, the way I see it. The police are still a management authority that control the searches, but as far as providing support and resources to VMRS, we do not get much support. The only thing we go to the police for are search and rescue coordinator courses, which the police run and some of our members attend.

Mr S.R. HILL: Do you get support from local government?

Mr Robertson: Local government is very good around here. The shire supports us as we request. We get annual T-shirts and it services our car and tractor for us. We get support from the Dampier Port Authority and the mining companies. Without them we would not have the gear we have or a local service we can run at such high level. The multinational mining companies and the Dampier Port Authority are major supporters, so we have an arrangement with them. If they call us, we do what they need us to do. They do a lot of radio relays for us. They also sponsor us to make sure we have a relevant service in the port of Dampier. We cover a huge area of coastline.

Mr S.R. HILL: What is the area you cover?

Mr Robertson: As far as they want us to go. Our boat has a 400-mile range. We go as far as the Fortescue River out to the east and up to Port Walcott or Nicol Bay out to the west.

Mr S.R. HILL: How old is the boat?

Mr Robertson: We have a new boat. It is six months old. We have two boats. We have an inshore rescue boat; it is a five-metre boat we use to deploy up and down the coast. We have launching sites all the way from the Fortescue, Maitland, Forty Mile, Cleaverville and Cowrie Cove. People launch from everywhere around here on the coast. We have a boat we can deploy anywhere up and down the coast and it will go a fair way out to sea. We call it our inshore and river rescue boat. Then we have our other, big boat, which has just been commissioned. It is a 9.3 metre Air Rider, fully equipped for anything we need to do.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How did you fund those boats?

Mr Robertson: They were funded mainly by local industry and ourselves. We did have some support from FESA. We also had an insurance claim from our last boat, which unfortunately we had an incident with. The North West Shelf venture is our major sponsor for that boat and it put some serious money into it. We made use of the remnants of our other boat and we got a capital grant through FESA as well.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Speaking of FESA, the committee is aware that the emergency services levy funds other emergency services-related organisations. Has the fact that it does not fund your group been an issue for you?

Mr Robertson: Somewhat. I am involved in fire and rescue as well as sea rescue, so I am across that. Since the introduction it has become a lot more difficult for all services to raise funds. For instance, with the fire brigade the equipment is fully funded now, but we still need to raise funds for other things, such as education materials and our annual dinners. We also run an extra vehicle because we do not have enough vehicles to run our crews around. It has become difficult. People now very visibly see that an ESL comes out of their rates. They are planning for a service now. The ESL does not cover sea rescue. They have been quite specific about that. We have had to do a

lot of talking to the shire and our sponsors, writing letters saying, "It does not cover sea rescue. We still need you."

Mr S.R. HILL: Do you think sea rescue should be covered by the ESL or a portion of it?

Mr Robertson: There should be some sustainable funding model worked out for sea rescue. I am not saying that it should come out of ESL. It could be an imaginative thing like a fee on boat licensing if the government is adamant that ESL is only a land-based tax so it only supports land-based services. Somewhere along the line we really need to consider the funding model, especially given the expectation of the community and the appropriateness of the equipment we need to put in the water. In the old days the boats did not have to be surveyed and they did not have to be a certain standard. We have training levels and equipment levels. There is the cost of that equipment to consider. The latest boat we put on the water was worth over \$300 000. We had to get half of that from the community. We rely on local businesses a lot for the equipment that goes on that boat. I believe for sustainability and into the future we should be looking at another model for funding and servicing the marine rescue groups.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How do you envisage we can improve emergency services in Western Australia or perhaps just in your local area?

Mr Robertson: Because I have been on the state consultative committee I have a wide-ranging view of this across all the services. I think FESA needs to look at the structure and how it places its resources and services currently. There is a lot of duplication within the organisation. If it removed that duplication and amalgamated the resources for a service provision, I think it could recognise a lot of synergies, especially across things such as training and other support mechanisms. I think it could do a lot. There are still really three silos within an organisation.

Mr S.R. HILL: So particularly training.

Mr Robertson: Training and community awareness programs. I think there are a lot of synergies that could be gained by regionalising or synergising the total systems across fire, SES and VMRS.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: FESA is proposing that it be re-established as the 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 just one of many emergencies that volunteers attend to. There has been an objection to this on the basis of a claim of loss of identity. Do you have a view on that?

[9.10 am]

Mr Robertson: Yes, I support renaming - getting imaginative about it. The renaming aspect is emotional because the dominant service is fire. I am lucky enough to have spent 30 years in both fire and sea rescue. I guess that on the one hand one could say that the loss of identity that one group is claiming is quite an emotional issue. On the other hand one could say that the other two organisations covered by the FESA do not have an identity because FESA is dominated by that name "fire". Call it by whatever one wants to call it - combined emergency services Western Australia, or whatever. I am not keen on departments. Renaming the organisation would go a long way. I understand the emotional argument because I belong to both associations. I am sympathetic towards that argument because recently it was known as fire services, and other organisations have amalgamated with it. Somehow I think it should be renamed.

Mr S.R. HILL: We now come to question 11, which deals with training. What portion of training is provided in-house by FESA or by the water police?

Mr Robertson: The only training we get from the Water Police is in search and rescue coordination courses to which we are invited. Because it is a management authority, these courses are provided to police. FESA does not deliver much training to volunteer marine rescue services. It is outsourced through Challenger TAFE or other TAFEs on an ad hoc basis.

Mr S.R. HILL: How many opportunities are provided each year to people to undertake a training course?

Mr Robertson: It is up to the group. We do most of our training in-house. Once or twice a year FESA offers the opportunity to people who want to upgrade their training skills to travel to Fremantle to do that. Since the establishment of the new recreational skipper's ticket, we have not been sending people to Fremantle. It is done on a needs basis. Not a lot of training is offered on a planned, rostered, sustainable basis by FESA to VMRS groups. It is up to the group to initiate the training. Occasionally some training course opportunities are provided by FESA, but they are external courses.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Do you perceive the training levels and standards to be adequate?

Mr Robertson: No. That is the reason I believe that FESA should look at its whole training synergy across all of the services that it covers. We have great systems in place for fire. The district managers come around on a regular basis. They run training as it is needed. Courses are set up within the region on a monthly or even fortnightly basis to provide the basic skills. A model like that, whether it is under the regional office or a central office, is badly needed within VMRS.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Stuart, you touched on the recreational boating licence. Is your group an accredited training group? Do you run training courses?

Mr Robertson: We run them in conjunction with the Pilbara Camp School. John Lally at the Pilbara Camp School and our sea rescue organisation combine to provide this training. John handles the theory side and we assist with on-the-water boat stuff. Our group runs the radio courses for the general public. We are actually involved in a partnership to deliver recreational skipper tickets in the Dampier-Karratha area.

Mr S.R. HILL: I refer to question 12: the committee notes the comments made by some of the VRMS groups to the effect that new equipment requires younger and fitter people to operate it. That is certainly what the Geraldton sea rescue organisation has told me. It says that traditional membership has principally compromised retirees. Are younger members being attracted as members? Probably your work force is a lot younger.

Mr Robertson: There are two parts to that question. Typically our group members are under 40, and that is a concern. It really depends on the equipment being purchased by the groups. Recently there has been a move by some groups to ask for more specialised boats. There is supposed to be a risk and needs analysis, and we would be looking at the membership demographics and whether they are being put at risk by purchasing that equipment. I struggle with that question and the fact that either the group or FESA is not doing its job to ensure that the equipment going to the groups is fit for the required purpose. If we are putting equipment in place and the demographics of the group and the area remains at 60-plus, we are putting the people and the service at risk by not being able to man it.

Mr S.R. HILL: How do you get around that, Stuart? Should there be an advertising campaign targeted, for example, at the scouts, outlining the benefits of joining the organisation?

Mr Robertson: That could be done, but a much more sustainable and measured approach needs to be taken. If the demographic of people is not going to change, those people need to be equipped with appropriate equipment so that they are not knocked around by equipment that is not suitable for them. Irrespective of whether we are doing 40 knots or 30 knots, the outcome is the same. Even if the boat is a different model, the outcome is similar. There is a preference in the style of craft. I was surprised to read that question, because it is up to the group, in conjunction with FESA, to determine what equipment will be purchased. If there has been an influence to provide equipment that is not suitable to the group's requirement and the demographic, then the risk and needs analysis has not been done correctly.

Mr S.R. HILL: Stuart, what do you do to recruit members?

Mr Robertson: It is mainly by word of mouth. Members bring new members along. A lot of our new members are people whom we have rescued. They probably did not know the organisation was around until its members turned up in the yellow boat. There are a lot of cross-services in these smaller areas. People belong to fire as well as rescue, or whatever. Generally, it is through word of mouth, friends and people who have been rescued. There is no actual drive or advertising. Sometimes we put out a notice in the community that the volunteers are here to support the community and if the community does not support the volunteers there will not be a service for the community. We do little things like that. It is sustainable. People come and go. Our population is young and the membership is young and the equipment that is in service definitely would not put anyone at risk.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: What level of follow-up post incident support and debriefing is provided?

Mr Robertson: It depends on the incident. In 90 per cent of cases when we have towed someone home the situation is, "Well done, guys. Let's go home to bed." In the case of a traumatic incident in which we have had a fatality or fatalities to deal with, we organise counselling through the local police. It is one area in which the local police have been very helpful. In a couple of cases where we have had to deal with fatalities the police have organised the local chaplains. The local Mission to Seamen's chaplain is one of our members. We arrange for full-on counselling, ongoing support and peer support for members of our group. FESA has a peer support group that we can call on. We do that by getting in touch with the local area managers. There are peer support people in the Pilbara. It depends totally on the incident, the outcome and whether people may have been affected by it.

Mr S.R. HILL: Stuart, earlier you mentioned the education of the public on boating safety. How do we get around the issue that the volunteers are not paid a service fee for waiting for a call? Is the education provided only by way of government advertising on boating safety? What sort of work does the local volunteer sea rescue group do? Obviously there are different weather conditions in the area; for example, cyclones and things like that.

Mr Robertson: We do a bit of community education ourselves. We go to the shopping centres once a year on Volunteer Day and we provide safety displays at schools for the kids. That is good because out of that a lot of the parents become members. FESA does not do a lot as far as VMRS is concerned. The Fire and State Emergency Service does a lot which has a spin-off for us. It is still separate in the way it does its work. The Department of Planning and Infrastructure provides most of the education through boat safety displays and distributing pamphlets. The education provided by FESA is limited. Locally education is provided by word of mouth, school displays and a shopping centre display each year. People understand that we are a volunteer service. We are very lucky. People live close to our facilities and we can get onto the water fairly quickly. It is a seamless operation for the people on the water unless it is a life-threatening emergency.

[9.20 am]

Mr S.R. HILL: What about your interaction with personal watercraft users. This is a personal interest of mine, being one of those mad users.

Mr Robertson: In the past, we have run joint education days with DPI involving the police and so forth at the boat ramps. DPI has ramped up its effort in recent times, and that is a very good thing. We have also recently implemented a water police presence, so the actual policing and education in the past 12 months to two years has taken a big jump. Members of our group are very active, very public and do a lot of work around boating safety and in educating the public.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Do you have any other matters that you would like to raise with us? This is your opportunity to tell us anything that comes to mind, particularly about the region. You have a vast area to look after.

Mr Robertson: No. We are very lucky. We have a great regional FESA office with good people in it. I am not sure, but I understand that some groups might not have that support. We find being sea rescue and not having full access to that regional office is probably a restriction. FESA has some great opportunities to restructure and synergise all its services. Renaming might do that. The VMR organisation within FESA has done a fantastic job but times have moved much faster than the size and funding of that organisation. Training requirements and other things are moving a bit faster and public expectations are becoming greater. We need to professionalise our organisations much more than the current speed at which it is happening within the FESA organisation.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How many recreational boats are there?

Mr Robertson: There are 4 700. It is the highest number of boats per capita in Australia. It is a 365-day-a-year boating fraternity. We do not have a winter or an off season, so our group works 24/7, 365. Typically, there are from 400 to 600 boats out on any weekend, launching from nine locations anywhere within 130 to 140 kilometres of the coast here. We also have a huge influx of pensioners, the people who camp in all the places up and down the coast here from Fortescue to Forty Mile, Maitland and Cleaverville. There are hundreds of them. We carry out a few rescues of people who get into trouble in remote locations, too. Hence we run a small boat and a four-wheel drive to be able to deploy anywhere along the coast.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Do they radio in to tell you that they are going out or coming in?

Mr Robertson: We do not run a dedicated radio service for people. We run only home-based stations. Given that we have a younger population here, most of our people work. We do not have what I believe is the luxury of areas in which there are a lot of pensioners, whereby you can have a roster of people who man radios and things. Typically, the experience with people who do man radios is that very few people log on or off. We have an arrangement with the Dampier Port Authority, which has our roster. If it hears a mayday or a distress call, it calls us directly. We then notify the police, and the police give us a WAPS number and we carry out the job. Even though it is not an official service, DPA is a very safety-conscious organisation and supports us greatly. We are quite confident that if anyone calls for help on a radio, they will be picked up and we will be there.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Do you want to offer any more information?

Mr Robertson: No, not really - not without being controversial.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: 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 and the sense of the evidence cannot be altered. Should 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. Thank you very much for your time.

Mr Robertson: Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 9.25 am
