

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

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

SESSION TWO

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 9.46 am

SWETMAN, MR TERRANCE JAMES

Team Leader, Karratha State Emergency Service, examined:

SWETMAN, MRS KATHRYN SUSAN

Acting Rescue Officer, Karratha State Emergency Service, examined:

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Good morning everyone. Thank you very much for making the time to come and see us. We are normally a committee of five, but three of our members were unable to attend this hearing.

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?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes, we did.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Would you please state the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

Mr T. Swetman: I am the senior team leader with the Karratha State Emergency Service. The address of the unit is Balmoral Road.

Mrs K. Swetman: I am an acting rescue officer with the Karratha State Emergency Service at the moment, and we are located at Balmoral Road, Karratha.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: When was your SES unit established; how many members does it have; and what emergency services roles does your unit perform?

Mr T. Swetman: Our unit was established back in 1983-84. We have approximately 46 members. The major combat roles that we perform are road accident rescues, cyclones, storms and general rescues. We all have a support role for cliff rescues, rescues from heights, mainly to do with Karijini National Park, as well as other areas within the district. However, our primary role with cliff rescue, rescue from heights, is at the Karijini National Park. We also provide a support role for Newman and Tom Price State Emergency Services. We support those in that area.

Mr S.R. HILL: Is Karijini National Park also supported by other units? I think the Geraldton SES also supports -

Mr T. Swetman: We can call in a number of units. For example, when our colleague was unfortunately taken from us and a number of people were missing and injured, we were able to call in all units from Geraldton to Perth rather than just Newman and Tom Price. It is mainly to support Tom Price, which has a combat role, and Newman has a combat role for that area. Our unit has a highly trained cliff rescue team that supports them when they are required.

Mr S.R. HILL: That has answered a couple of questions. Currently, the ESL process calls for local government to complete an ESL grants scheme application form for SES unit funding. The ESL grants scheme committee must then approve or reject the application for funding. If the committee approves the amount requested, the funding is provided to the local government, which then forwards it on to the SES unit. FESA is recommending that local government be taken out of the ESL application process and that the SES unit deal directly with FESA for ESL funding; that is, the SES unit would advise FESA directly of its funding requirements. Do you have any comment on that? Would that be a good concept, or are you happy to keep dealing with the local government authority?

Mr T. Swetman: We are quite happy deal with the local government authority, particularly our local government, the Shire of Roebourne. We have no complaints about how it supports and looks after us. It has people with the expertise, such as accountants, who can advise us and help us with funding. Without them we would struggle to work out the ESL and the funding.

Mr S.R. HILL: Obviously, that administration-type work would place extra stress on you.

Mr T. Swetman: Absolutely. The Shire of Roebourne has been 100 per cent supportive of our unit. I have been with the unit for 15 years and during that time, despite a change in the chief executive officer and in the administration within the shire, we have not had one complaint about the Shire of Roebourne and the way it looks after us. We would prefer that it stay in the loop. Another reason that we want it to stay in the loop is because it is our shire. We are an SES unit within the Shire of Roebourne. We would like to keep it on side. By keeping it as part of the ESL with us helps us, and it helps the shire because it does not feel as it is being left out. We like to keep it informed and in the loop about the funding.

Mr S.R. HILL: It would have a clear understanding of the vehicles and equipment that you already have.

Mr T. Swetman: It services and maintains all our vehicles. It also supports us if we need extra vehicles and often loans us vehicles. We have three vehicles and 46 members. To move that number of people in those vehicles would be logistically impossible, unless we were to start hiring vehicles. In the past the shire has lent us vehicles and equipment with no charge to the unit at all. I am 90 per cent certain that it has never taken money from the ESL to pay for any of that. It has done it to support us because it is the local government and we are a local unit. It has looked after us very well. We would like to keep the shire involved.

Mr S.R. HILL: Is the relationship very strong?

Mrs K. Swetman: Yes, it is very strong. Given that we are volunteers, we need that back-up support. I do not think things would work very well if we were left to manage everything. The process of applying for a grant and having it approved or not approved is a better back-up system. It must go through a process. As we are volunteers, we do not have the time or resources to manage that.

Mr S.R. HILL: How has the ESL impacted on your State Emergency Service unit? Has there been a noticeable change since the introduction of ESL funding?

Mrs K. Swetman: We now know that money is available and that a regular amount of money is coming through. In the past we have had to undertake a lot of fundraising and ask big companies to assist us to get the things we need. At least now we know that our vehicles and major equipment will be replaced when they need to be replaced. The ESL has had an impact on the bigger things.

Mr S.R. HILL: Can you detail on your asset register what has to be replaced in, say, 2010?

Mrs K. Swetman: Yes. We know that that side of things is covered.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Are you still doing some fundraising?

Mrs K. Swetman: We do some fundraising. Obviously if we are putting in for something big, we go through the ESL; however, with the smaller things, we like to do a bit of fundraising. We also do fundraising for community awareness. We use the donations that we are given for the smaller things that we do not want to put through the ESL.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How often are you called out?

Mr T. Swetman: It depends. We attend to approximately six road accidents a year. That does not sound like a lot, but for us in this area, we are quite happy to attend only six a year. We do a lot of air searches. We also do a lot of general rescue. We do a lot of air searching from aircraft as well as drop masters. The Karijini guys get called out at least twice a year to do the back-up. They are on standby at least three or four times a year. Even if you are not called out when you are on standby, you still have to go through the process of calling people in, getting the equipment ready and packing it up, organising aircraft and helicopters etc. There are a lot of logistics even on standby. All up with everything that we do, we are called out approximately 16 times a year. That is right across the board with everything we do. We are an active unit. Our 46 members share the load so that the same people are not always carrying the workload.

Mr S.R. HILL: Getting back to your membership, what is the average age of your members?

Mrs K. Swetman: The average age of our members would be in the 30s. It is a young community and a lot of people do shift work, so we need to have that number of people. The membership comprises men and women. A lot of couples are members, which is good because they can support each other after an incident. When we are recruiting, we let people know what sort of courses we do and what sort of things they will be up against. They are given peer support, because people find certain things a bit daunting. We let them know that we are a big family and that we look after everybody. There is not a big turnover in membership. However, given that most of our members are involved in shift work, we need to have a high number so that we can rotate those on call.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: How do you envisage we could improve emergency services in WA or your local area?

Mrs K. Swetman: With regards to FESA, we need more support with the paid staff. It is starting to happen now, but we need a bit more help, especially with the assets register. We are volunteers who attend on Monday nights to do our training. To call people in during the week to go through the assets and to deal with money and budgets etc is hard because often the volunteers cannot get their heads around those things.

Mr S.R. HILL: So do you need more support from your district office?

Mrs K. Swetman: Yes. Support with administration and the logistic-type things would be helpful.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: You said that you are comfortable with the level of support you receive from your State Emergency Service unit, the local government and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority; therefore, you are basically happy with the level of support you receive.

Mr T. Swetman: We are happy with the support we receive from the local government. We are pretty comfortable with the support we receive from FESA. The only thing that concerns us greatly is that the local office in Karratha - the Fire and Emergency Services Authority office, which has all full-time staff, is heavily staffed by fire and rescue career firefighters. There are no people with an SES background in that office. We have not had any problems with the guys in that office to date. Its staff have been very good to us and very supportive. However, if it came down to showing loyalty to us or the local fire and rescue service, we know where their loyalties would lie. That is fine, because they are career fireies; however, the balance is tipped against us. We are noticing right across the state that most of the jobs are being filled by career fireies. There is a big concern right across the board with the SES that we are losing our identity. Like I said, in this town particularly, those guys have been good to us and have supported us. In the back of our minds we are a bit concerned because, for example, in the past a lot of permanent jobs within the SES or FESA went to

volunteers. A number of my colleagues who had an association with FESA over the years have picked up full-time jobs within FESA across the state. That is not happening now. Those jobs are taken up by career fireies. We are concerned that the balance has been tipped against us.

Mr S.R. HILL: For a number of reasons FESA is proposing that it be re-established as the "Department of Emergency Services". This would mean the removal of the word "fire" from the corporate name. FESA's argument is that the removal is appropriate because fire is just one of the many emergencies to which volunteers attend. There has been objection to this on the basis of the claim of a loss of identity. Should the authority be re-established as a department? Do you have an opinion about the name of such a department?

[10.00 am]

Mr T. Swetman: I have spoken to my members to find out their feelings about it. We think the "F" should be taken out of FESA; it should be ESAWA - Emergency Services Authority Western Australia. That way it covers every emergency service. We are a state emergency service, and there is no connotation of that. There is no state emergency service, no fire and rescue, no bushfire brigade - it is an emergency services authority that would cover all emergency services. There are a couple of examples. We had the Anzac parade recently. Fairly high-ranking, full-time officers of the Australian Army were organising the Anzac parade. They called out, "Could we have the FESA officers in front," - which is fire and rescue - "and behind them we'll have the State Emergency Service." That is just one example. My wife and I went across to Melbourne and New Zealand for the road accident rescue competition. We represented both the state and national team. Because of the badges we wear, they thought we were now part of the fire department. They were saying, "It's good that you've kept your orange overalls, even though you're now part of the fire department." We had to explain to those people that we are not part of the Fire and Rescue Service; we are the State Emergency Service, and we are still separate from FRS. There were a couple of examples like that.

Mrs K. Swetman: There is confusion, and it has been with FESA for quite a while. People say, "We've been to see FESA; now we're coming to see the State Emergency Service." We say, "Well, we're actually FESA too; it's all under the same umbrella." People still look at it and think that FESA is fire and rescue, and we are the State Emergency Service. It is very confusing for people. If the "F" was removed and it was completely renamed so that it covered everybody, even sea search and rescue could still say, "Yes, we're part of..." whatever it is called. If we all did the same sort of job, it would remove the confusion.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Have you been involved in any heavy industry rescue? Do you have any comment to make on the emergency preparedness of heavy industry?

Mrs K. Swetman: Not heavy industry.

Mr T. Swetman: No, we have not been involved in rescue with heavy industry at all. Woodside, Hamersley Iron and other industries have their own rescue teams. However, if anything major happened at installations out there, we would like to know that if they need us, we can be called in. We are quite happy to be called in to help them. If they do not require us, that is good, because it is up to them. We have never really been introduced to their members and they have not been introduced to us, so they have no idea of our capabilities, the equipment we have in that building, and what we could do to assist them. The opposite is also true: we really do not know a lot about those guys. If this town was hit by a major cyclone or a major incident and we needed their assistance, we would like to know what they have out there. In the past we have tried to contact these companies and talk to them. They have said, "Yep, we'll organise something", but at this stage nothing has happened. We would like to see more involvement between the volunteers and the industrial rescue teams, so that we are all part of one big team, which is a rescue organisation. However, we have not had much contact with them at all.

Mr S.R. HILL: It would be a bit of a concern if you had a major cyclone heading towards the community and you had two different organisations that had no idea of each other's capacities.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: They are not working in tandem.

Mr T. Swetman: That has been a concern of ours. We spend a lot of time training with the volunteer fire and rescue service. We know those guys very, very well and they know us very well. We know what equipment they have and they know what equipment we have. Although they are a fire and rescue service and perform a different role, in the event of a cyclone they are all in our building, helping us and being part of a big team. We would like to see the same sort of operation with the industrial rescue people.

Mr S.R. HILL: Terry, earlier you covered some of the joint training exercises you have with other emergency services units. Would you like to add anything to that?

Mr T. Swetman: Not really, although I would like to see more tabletop exercises. If we take all the equipment out and do a big rescue scenario involving whatever is required, it takes a lot of resources and coordination. In this town, particularly, we have a lot of shift workers and it is very hard for them to get together. However, we could get the main players - it does not need to involve everybody within the four or five groups - to sit down and have a tabletop exercise, list equipment and maybe go through each other's buildings. I would like to see that happen more often. Tabletop exercises are very, very good. They do not require a lot of resources or time commitment from people. There is no need to drag equipment out and set it up. As long as there is a list, people will understand what gear is involved.

Mr S.R. HILL: Do you raise this issue with your local FESA coordinator?

Mr T. Swetman: I have raised this with our local FESA organisation. They have tried to get on board, but the problem we have with FESA at the moment is that we really do not know who is in charge. In FESA, someone will be acting in a position, then things change in Perth and somebody moves into a new position, and the person who was previously acting for us moves on to a different job and someone else takes over that position. This happens on a monthly or regular basis. We are not really sure who we are supposed to contact. We have some SES staff in Port Hedland, but in Karratha they are all FESA. We get a letter from Perth saying, "We want ongoing training", and I have replied that they need to try to contact various different people, because we are not sure who is in charge or who is running the show.

Mrs K. Swetman: We do not get enough notice of what is happening in regional training. We need more notice. The volunteers need more notice.

Mr S.R. HILL: Maybe FESA should come up with a monthly newsletter or send something out to the SES units to give you notice of who is doing what in the organisation.

Mrs K. Swetman: We need more contact about what is happening. We have had to approach them and say, "Come and see us and let us know what is happening. Give us an update on who is in charge, who we report to and things like that", so that we are actually in the loop. A lot of it has been left out for a while.

Mr T. Swetman: We would also like them to give us a lot more notice. We have a lot of accredited instructors in our units, and we teach all over the Pilbara-Kimberley region. One of our members recently flew to Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands as a volunteer to teach the local units over there. We are happy to do that, and we really enjoy doing that, but we would like them to give us enough notice - at least six to eight weeks' notice - to ask whether we can provide an instructor. Quite often they will give us two or three weeks' notice. As volunteers, we have other jobs and other lives. Not many of us have lives outside FESA, unfortunately! However, we would like to have more notice so that we can organise leave from our employers to do these courses and teach these people. We really enjoy teaching. I believe that people like us, who have been there and done that, have hands-on experience to pass on to other people. However, we need them to be

more supportive of us - to give us more notification and more time to organise ourselves. Unfortunately, we are sometimes not getting that.

Mr S.R. HILL: Obviously that has an impact on your recruitment. Potential volunteers from the community need to be trained and informed. This would not cause embarrassment to your unit, but if people are asking, for example, to be trained in cutting a vehicle open, does the lack of certainty about training have an impact upon recruitment of members?

Mrs K. Swetman: It does not have a major impact because our unit runs a program during the school term and we can provide our own training. It becomes messy when people want to do the extra regional courses. We can do our own training term-to-term, but if someone cannot do that training at that time in that program, they can do the regional courses. If we do not have the program and there is only two weeks' notice, they may not be able to do it.

Mr S.R. HILL: So a 12-month program would be great for you, because you would have it 12 months out.

Mrs K. Swetman: That is right. "I can't do this one because I'm working shifts, but I can do the regional one in three months' time." It would make it a lot easier if we had much more notice of the regional programs.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: I think you have already covered the last question, but I will pose it anyway. Training and administration reporting procedures has been raised as an issue at hearings by at least one SES unit. I understand that not all units have members with experience in this area. Is anything being done to address this?

Mr T. Swetman: Our unit is very fortunate and better off than most units because we have a lot of long-term members who are accredited instructors. We have, pretty much across the board, our own internal instructors. We do not require a lot of support from Perth or from our local office to train our own people internally. We do it all ourselves.

Mr S.R. HILL: I think the unit was getting at was the admin side of things. There is such a burden for someone to do all the reporting.

Mr T. Swetman: Yes, I apologise. With that side of it, we do not really have a huge problem because, like I said, the Shire of Roebourne -

Mr S.R. HILL: It pretty much picks a lot of that up for you.

Mr T. Swetman: Yes, it picks a lot of that up for us. We have a lady, Carol, in our unit who does a lot of administration work voluntarily. She tends to send things off or ask questions, and it takes a long time for her to get answers back from Perth if she has queries about certain things that we need to know about or we need to fill out on the administration side, like certain forms that we are required to fill out. I will be honest with you: I am not really up on that side of it. I do all the rescue and that, and the paperwork and budgets just do not go really well with me. I know with Carol that quite often when she is asking questions, she does not get a lot of feedback from Perth or locally. It takes a long time for her to get answers back. Quite often she will have to ask three or four times.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: So has she not been trained in any way in administration?

Mrs K. Swetman: No, the major thing is that there is no training. It is a case of, "Okay, would you like to do our books?" They then run away because we have no skills in that area. She has some skills because she does admin work in her own work, but there is no actual training as in explaining how the ESL works: "This is how you put in submissions." Another problem we have is putting in submissions for grants and such things. We have no training on how to do it or how to word it. We have been knocked back on something twice. They said, "But if you word it differently . . ." We get no training in the ways of submitting it and how to put it across.

Mr T. Swetman: We have never been told how to word things correctly. As a simple example, we are after a trim for a large ram for doing road accidents and rescue. We have put in a submission a couple of times now. We have put the reasons for wanting the equipment, the costing, all the research on the type of equipment we want, and we put it through. It came back stating that it was worded incorrectly.

Mrs K. Swetman: Or stating that more information was needed on how it could benefit the community, and things like that.

Mr T. Swetman: To me, the benefits to the community would be very obvious. If there is a road accident and rescue, and you have a larger ram to do the job properly, to me you do not need to explain to them the benefits to the community.

Mrs K. Swetman: We can see it, but it is just hard to get it across.

Mr T. Swetman: Yes, it is hard to get it across to them. We can see the benefits because if we can do the job better and quicker and safer than we were doing it previously, that to me is the answer required, but they still come back to us. I think they are looking at it from the bureaucrats' way of doing things. We are not bureaucrats; we are rescuers. I am a rescuer and I know how to put it in my terminology, and I think that they need to recognise how I put things down from my perspective. I have spent 15 years doing this sort of thing; as a rescuer, that is all I can do.

Mr S.R. HILL: Maybe this report or anything going back to FESA could suggest that perhaps twice a year training be provided on the admin side of things. You do all your training on the rescue side, but obviously the admin ladies or the admin gentlemen also need some support as well. They could have that training twice a year or whatever.

Mrs K. Swetman: Yes, but we do not just want to give it to them and say, "Here, you do it." That would be of no advantage either because you would still not know how it is done.

Mr S.R. HILL: You would then lose that volunteer because he or she gets frustrated and says, "Oh, it's too hard."

Mr T. Swetman: We certainly do not want to hand that side over because we need to have control of that aspect. We do not want to come in and say, "We would like this piece of equipment; can you write something up for us?" If they are an administrator or a bureaucrat, as I am saying, their wording is the same, but we need to explain to them about the rescue side of things. We need to put both together to come up with the solution. We would like to maintain that side of it because we know the equipment that we require and we know what is needed for our unit. We would like to retain that area. We would also like them to come to us and say, "Right, this is how you do the administration or the wording side of it. You can put that with your section to come up with the correct way of writing it all up." Yes, we need support in that area.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: I have no further questions.

Mr S.R. HILL: I have no further questions.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Would you like to add anything else?

Mr T. Swetman: There is just one thing. We talked about FESA. Since FESA has come on board, yes, we have had problems with FESA and fire and rescue. I must admit that having been involved in this for 15 years, I know what has happened in the past with equipment and trying to resource things has always been very hard. The ESL and FESA have been of huge benefit to our unit - they have been exceptionally good. We have not had to try to borrow equipment or raise money or do things like that. We have got some very, very good rescue equipment and good support there, so that side of FESA has worked exceptionally well. However, I would like to see more SES volunteers taken from the floor and put into full-time jobs so that there is a balance between the fire brigade and the SES. If we need to go to the organiser, whoever that may be, which is FESA at the moment, we want to talk to a State Emergency Service person who knows and understands us,

particularly as a volunteer; that is, someone who has come through the ranks, so to speak, and understands our language or how we talk. I would like to see that happen. It used to happen in the past. It now seems to have gone. I would like to see that side of it emphasised. A number of people like Alan Gale, Rob Tee, Les Hayter and Phil Peterson have come through the organisation and are now full-time FESA staff, but ex-SES people. We would like to see more of that because at the moment, particularly in the north west region, we have some, but a very limited number of, State Emergency Service members in the organisation. It all seems to be geared towards the career fire and rescue people. I would like to see the balance changed evenly between us and them.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: Thank you for that. I have some closing comments. 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 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.

Mr T. Swetman: Thank you for coming up and doing this for us. We appreciate it.

Mrs K. Swetman: Thank you.

Hearing suspended from 10.17am to 10.19am

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: For the benefit of Hansard, we have reopened the hearing and Kathy and Terry would like to table a document from their local manager who has answered the series of questions we have posed at the committee hearing. Would you like to add anything further?

Mrs K. Swetman: Trevor Patten, who is the acting local manager at the moment, cannot be here today as he is training at Cocos Island. I believe that his comments will be very valuable because he has been in the unit for 20 years.

The ACTING CHAIRMAN: It is tabled. Thank you very much for that and for the valuable contribution that you make to the community.

Hearing concluded at 10.20 am
