

# **ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT PERTH,  
FRIDAY, 31 AUGUST 2001**

## **FOURTH SESSION**

### **Members**

**Mr McRae(Chairman)**  
**Mr Day (Deputy Chairman)**  
**Mr Bowler**  
**Mr Masters**  
**Mr Murray**

**GILLAM, MR LINDSAY ROSS,**  
**Hazardous Emergency Advisory Team representative, Department of Health,**  
**PO Box 8172, Perth Business Centre,**  
**Perth, examined:**

**DI MARCO, DR PETER,**  
**Principal Toxicologist, Department of Health,**  
**PO Box 8172, Perth Business Centre,**  
**Perth, examined:**

**DALY, MS ALISON,**  
**Manager, Health Outcomes Assessment Unit, Department of Health**  
**189 Royal Street,**  
**Perth, examined:**

**JACKSON, MR MICHAEL,**  
**Director, Environmental Health, Department of Health,**  
**michael.jackson@health.wa.gov.au**  
**examined:**

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for coming. The committee 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. I ask each witness in which capacity they appear before the committee.

**Mr Gillam:** I was the Department of Health's hazardous materials emergency advisory team representative on the night of the fire and attended FESA headquarters. I am a member of that coordinating committee on behalf of the Health Department.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you fill out the witness form and understand the notes attached to it?

**Mr Gillam:** I filled out the form. Yes, I understood.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** I just need confirmation that you understood. Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet and guidance note, regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Mr Gillam:** I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand all aspects of that information?

**Mr Gillam:** I have.

**Dr Di Marco:** I am the principal toxicologist with the Health Department.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you fill out the witness form and understand the notes attached to it?

**Dr Di Marco:** Yes, I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet and guidance note, regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Dr Di Marco:** I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand all aspects of that information?

**Dr Di Marco:** Yes.

**Ms Dale:** I am the manager of the department's health outcomes assessment unit.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you fill out the witness form and understand the notes attached to it?

**Ms Dale:** Yes I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet and guidance note, regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Ms Dale:** I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand all aspects of that information?

**Ms Dale:** Yes.

**Mr Jackson:** I am the director of environmental health with the Department of Health of Western Australia.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you fill out the witness form and understand the notes attached to it?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet and guidance note, regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Mr Jackson:** I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand all aspects of that information?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** You have not provided a written submission. I do not know whether you want to organise this. I am happy for Mr Jackson to lead off and make a statement.

**Mr Jackson:** We have prepared a statement. We were under the impression that that report was available to the committee. We learnt this morning by chance that it had not got to the committee. We will provide copies.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** I am happy to have those tabled.

**Mr Jackson:** I also provide some working notes for your convenience. I have a summary introduction of the role of the Department of Health in the fire. If the committee agrees, I will work to that and answer questions either along the way or at the end.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** That is a useful way to proceed. The committee has now received "Submission regarding inquiry into the February 15 fire at the hazardous waste facility on Irwin Street in Bellevue to the Economics and Industry Standing Committee", in the name of Professor Bryant Stokes, Acting Commissioner of Health, Department of Health. Do you wish that to be accepted as transcript evidence?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Is there anything you want to amend?

**Mr Jackson:** No. It is our understanding that although the documents had been received by the committee, nothing was missing.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** The second document is "Bellevue hazardous waste inquiry, submission by Department of Health". It does not have an author.

**Mr Jackson:** That is a series of dot points to which I would like to speak.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Would you like that to be taken as transcript evidence of this hearing?

**Mr Jackson:** I do not think that is appropriate. The transcript will come as I speak to the points. However, the document is tabled.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much.

**Mr Jackson:** I provide an outline of the role of the Health Department. The points I wish to cover are the Department of Health's response to the fire; how it has consulted with the community and other stakeholders, particularly through its investigation and assessment into the public health issues associated with this fire and its impact; and the follow-up action. I also provide some estimates of what the department believes it did well and what actions could be improved, as well as some general comments and issues. We will bring you the latest information from the comprehensive health survey. Alison Daly will provide a verbal report at that stage.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** That is a good way to proceed.

**Mr Jackson:** I give an indication of our role in environmental health. Our responsibility covers 11 program areas, including toxicology; radiation health; pesticide safety; wastewater management; Aboriginal environmental health; mosquito-borne disease control; meat and food and dairy safety; drugs, poisons and therapeutic goods; applied environmental health, which picks up local government interaction; and stable fly. The public health portfolio also has an emergency management program.

The Bellevue fire was a major chemical fire. We had not experienced a similar fire. Such a fire probably happens once in 20 or 30 years. It was a major chemical emergency that impacted on several agencies, as the committee is well aware. Our responsibility is the protection of public health. I am happy to elaborate on the roles of other agencies, but ours is the protection of public health and safety. That applies outside the fence of that site. We had no knowledge of the site prior to the fire, with the exception of a cabinet request for comments on a proposal of Minister Edwardes some months earlier. The Department of Health does not have a legislative role regarding the regulation, treatment, storage, or disposal of hazardous substances. It has input in the Environmental Protection Authority's environmental impact assessments but, unlike some other States, there is no requirement in that process for a health impact assessment. I draw that to the committee's attention.

We regarded the fire and our response as an emergency issue, which triggers requirements under the Western Australian hazardous materials emergency management plan. The department has developed a series of emergency management procedures. Others deal with tropical cyclones, emergency diseases, etc. The procedure under which we worked concerns the emergency management of hazardous materials. We have a representative on the hazardous emergency advisory team - Mr Gillam. He is a non-core member and represented us on the night of the fire. The HEAT team is called out by the police, fire and emergency rescue services, etc. We were part of that team on the night of the fire, which was assembled at 11.54 pm. A number of issues are involved, which Lindsay will explain.

We were advised that the police evacuated 50 houses as a public safety precaution. Our representative telephoned me early in the morning following the event, which was followed up by a memo. I forwarded that to the public affairs unit and our executive within the Department of Health. I directed Dr Peter Di Marco, our principal toxicologist, to go to the site that morning as a number of issues needed to be addressed. I have outlined in the submission those issues: evacuation; the extent of contamination; major concerns of environmental contamination; exposures and run off; the risk to the volunteer fire brigade officers, from whom you have heard this morning; the concerns of workers in surrounding businesses; decontamination of the workplaces and buses at the site; and removal of contaminated material from gutters, roofs, etc.

We also started monitoring and collecting samples. We determined what samples should be taken and what they should be analysed for. A primary school was in close proximity to the fire. Dr Di Marco was in close contact with the principal of the school throughout the next day. The school was still in use and placed on alert ready for evacuation in case the wind changed. The committee is aware of the geographic and meteorological issues.

Dr Di Marco remained on the site the following day, a Saturday. A number of issues that required attention were outside our portfolio responsibility. Dr Di Marco requested that WorkSafe become involved in relation to the volunteer firefighters. The site was handed to the Department of Environmental Protection on the Saturday afternoon.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** On 12 February?

**Mr Jackson:** No, on 17 February. The fire occurred on the 15th. This part of the submission is staccato. It has many dot points and members of the committee would appreciate that they could ask many questions about it. The next section I would like to discuss is the Health Department's consultation and community involvement. The Executive Director of Public Health, the person who has prime responsibility under the Health Act, was available on Sunday 18 February to answer inquiries from general practitioners and members of the public about medical concerns. The department released a statement to the media on Monday 19 February, and the Health Direct line was activated. The Health Direct line is a free call 1800 number that allows important access to the community and enables 24-hour contact with the Health Department.

The department also responded with a letter drop that provided some important messages that it was engaged in work with the Department of Environmental Protection to develop responses to frequently asked questions. Those types of questions included the likelihood of the impact of the Bellevue fire on a person's health. We tried to provide that information to the community; however, I will refer to that issue later. The department encouraged residents who had concerns about the impact of the fire on their health to seek advice from general practitioners. The Health Department does not have a series of general practitioners at its disposal to respond to these issues; it relies on general practitioners having prior knowledge of a medical patient's history of asthma or some other pre-existing condition.

It was our role to provide information to the general practitioners on the nature of the chemicals and the likely effects that would occur so that they could effectively treat people and then provide that information to the Health Department. The department engaged in a series of radio interviews and further encouraged people to seek medical advice. At that point, it started to deal with the issue of on-site radioactive waste, to which I will refer in a moment.

On Thursday 22 February, the Health Department took a step that it had not taken in the past: it requested assistance from the Swan Hills Division of General Practitioners Ltd to provide the department with further information. That was the first time that the Health Department had done that in an environmental health emergency. The department provided information to the Swan Hills division and requested the general practitioners, through a questionnaire, to provide information to the Health Department on what happened in that area.

We dealt with a range of concerns from the primary school, parents the community, the ratepayers association and employers of Cleanaway. I remember calling Peter Di Marco one afternoon when he was mowing his father-in-law's back yard. Cleanaway was concerned and so Peter went immediately to the site. We dealt with many people who were concerned, including employees of the workplace, members of the public and community groups.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** It appears that your submission from here on will refer to toxicology and the process of monitoring, data collection and analysis. Is that a fair analysis?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** First, we will deal with the response followed by the consultation process. At least one witness suggested that little information was provided to the Swan Hills Division of General Practitioners about the nature of health problems that the general practitioners needed to examine in their tests and blood samples. It was claimed that the advice provided by the Health Department was general and did not provide sufficient guidance and direction to local GPs to deal

with people who were either concerned about the long-term health effects or who went to their GPs with symptoms they believed were associated with their exposure.

**Mr Jackson:** I address that issue later in my submission. The information that was available to the Health Department and other agencies in the early days of the fire was sketchy, which made it difficult to give precise information to GPs on the nature and possible toxicology of the chemicals stored at the site. I will ask Peter to comment on that issue. It was not until several weeks later that we found out more about the site.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** You said that on 22 February the Swan Hills Division of General Practitioners was faxed advice on the type of chemicals on-site and that a questionnaire was distributed to those GPs to provide monitoring and feedback analysis to the Health Department. Where had the Health Department drawn its knowledge of the types of chemicals that it was looking for?

**Mr Jackson:** At that stage we had information that the major chemicals on-site was perchlorethylene and white spirits. Many of our judgments about that emergency situation were general professional judgments made on little evidence and on the basis of the protection of public health and safety. That was the basis upon which we worked. Therefore, the criticism raised by the Swan Hills division is justified because we did not have adequate information.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** When the Health Department sent the notice to Swan Hills Division of General Practitioners on 22 February, did the department have sufficient knowledge about the full range of chemicals with which it was dealing?

**Mr Jackson:** We did not have the information at that time that we have now. We gave the Swan Hills division the information that we had at the time and we provided it with an indication of the type of clinical symptoms with which we expected it would have to deal. We gave them the best information that we could.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Have you provided the committee with a copy of the fax that you sent?

**Mr Jackson:** I do not believe we have.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Would you forward that to the committee?

**Mr Jackson:** I beg your pardon, it is in the file. However, we will forward it to the committee again because we have provided a lot of information.

**Mr MASTERS:** Can we have a copy of the media statement of the 19 February and anything else that the Health Department provided publicly?

**Dr Di Marco:** That is in the submission.

**Mr Jackson:** Would the chairman like me to ask Peter Di Marco to comment?

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Is the media statement in the document headed "Submission", authored by Professor Bryant Stokes?

**Ms Daly:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Attachment two is a press release. I will trawl back through the two sections about which Mr Jackson has spoken. At the bottom of page three of the document headed "Health Department's Response to the Fire", a dot point says that the department directed Dr Di Marco to attend the site and provide advice on a number of matters including the collection of samples. Did the collection of samples occur on that date?

**Mr Jackson:** I will ask Peter to talk about that.

**Dr Di Marco:** The collection of samples refers to environmental samples. The Department of Environmental Protection was shaping up to be the lead agency to check samples of river and ground water contamination; therefore, I requested that it collect a number of samples to determine the extent of contamination in neighbouring buildings -

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Are you referring to the sites outside of Bellevue?

**Dr Di Marco:** That is right. I requested the Department of Environmental Protection to take swabs of roofs and windows in the south westerly direction of the plume within the most immediate area to begin with, and then work back.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Was any sampling done on-site?

**Dr Di Marco:** A number of samples were taken on-site; however, they were taken much later rather than immediately after the fire.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** When was that done?

**Dr Di Marco:** It would have been early in the week following the fire. I was away that week, so I cannot say for sure.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** When did the sampling adjacent to the site commence?

**Dr Di Marco:** Again, I do not know when that commenced. That information would be best provided by the Department of Environmental Protection, which retained an environmental consultant to obtain the sampling for it.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Dr Di Marco, was one of your tasks to ensure that a collection of samples were taken?

**Mr Jackson:** To provide advice on the collection of samples.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Thank you, Mr Jackson. Dr Di Marco, did you want to confirm that a process for the collection of samples was already under way or was planned?

**Dr Di Marco:** No, I discussed the issue with the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Environmental Protection at the time, Dr Jenkins. In our discussions about the situation, I suggested that we should take some samples of some of the buildings to determine the extent of contamination because people had asked when they could get back to work and to their properties. Until we knew the extent of the contamination, it was difficult to give them advice on that. That is why we requested the samples be taken.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** What was Dr Jenkins' response?

**Dr Di Marco:** At the time, he agreed to do the sampling.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you have any subsequent conversations with Dr Jenkins about that sampling?

**Dr Di Marco:** We got some results.

**Mr Jackson:** In the following couple of weeks we engaged in extensive discussions with officers from the DEP about sampling. The DEP had been assigned the responsibility for the management of this issue, and immediately after, a lot of samples were taken. The Health Department was engaged in consultation with the DEP about what samples should be taken and about what should be analysed in those samples.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** I am not trying to understand the direct role of the Health Department but, rather, the extent to which the department used information from other agencies. I would also like to know, from a couple of points of view, about the range and duration of sampling and for how long that went on. It has been asserted that there was a significant delay in getting samples from the site. However, I understand that the Health Department might not have had direct knowledge of that process and that its first concern was the immediate environment. I want to understand how much knowledge the Health Department had of the sampling in the immediate environment and possibly on the site itself.

**Dr Di Marco:** The Department of Environmental Protection has provided the results of sampling to the Health Department. I am not in a position to say whether that is the complete set of results at

its disposal or whether it provided only what we requested and perhaps some additional sampling. My role was to assess whether there had been off-site contamination and fallout and whether that posed a public health risk. In addition, it was my role to assess whether it was safe for owners and workers in the immediate vicinity to return to their premises.

**Mr BOWLER:** How far away from the site were those samples collected, and how long did it take for the results to come back to the Health Department?

**Dr Di Marco:** I did not take the samples. The Department of Environmental Protection retained an environmental consultant to obtain the sampling and to analyse it. Various areas were swabbed, including roofs of some of the nearby buildings. The area from which samples were taken initially extended for about 50 metres or so.

**Mr BOWLER:** What about the samples taken downwind?

**Dr Di Marco:** In the initial stages, the samples taken would not have extended beyond Military Road.

**Mr BOWLER:** When did you find out whether the results were negative or positive?

**Dr Di Marco:** I do not recall the exact date, although I can provide that information to the committee later. It would have been at least a week or 10 days later because the samples had to be collected and analysed, and the analytical process takes time. There would have been a delay before the Health Department got back the samples.

**Mr BOWLER:** Why was it taking the department so long to find out exactly what was on site?

**Mr Jackson:** There were some issues relating to the immediate action taken by the HEAT team. I understand from our representative that the owner of the site was asked what was on the site, and that they did not take advantage of the documentation that was available to actually ascertain what was on the site; so that left us in a very difficult position.

**Mr BOWLER:** They did not take advantage?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes. In other words, the people on the HEAT team did not access the information that would have given them the inventory -

**Mr BOWLER:** The manifest?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes, of the chemicals on the site. We have been listening to some of the issues that have been raised. Information was raised that there was no lead on the site.

**The CHAIRMAN:** When was that?

**Mr Jackson:** It was maintained by the chemist whom you have just interviewed that there was no lead issue on the site. That information was not available to us.

**Mr MASTERS:** You assumed there was lead on the site at the time?

**Mr Jackson:** Yes. There were allegations that there were significant quantities of lead batteries, which would have been vaporised. That was of concern to us, and we did testing to find out whether that lead posed a risk. There was a paucity of information in those early hours and days about the chemicals on the site, and that made our task difficult.

**Mr BOWLER:** Who were you trying to contact? Were you going through the DEP?

**Mr Jackson:** It is important to recognise the HEAT team, and maybe you should be aware of the way that operates in the first instance.

**Mr DAY:** Before we go to that, I want to clarify the role of the Department of Health. Is it correct that your role in taking these samples, or at least in suggesting that samples should be taken by the DEP, was an advisory one?

**Mr Jackson:** That is right.



**Mr DAY:** Do you have any legislative basis for action in relation to a fire from a public health point of view, or whatever?

**Mr Jackson:** Our role is the general protection of public health and safety, as I said up-front. We do not have a legislative role. The incident controller handed responsibility to the DEP; and I will come to that issue later.

**Mr DAY:** Your role at all times was advisory to other agencies and to the public at large?

**Mr Jackson:** Correct.

**Mr MASTERS:** On page 2 of your submission you say you had no prior knowledge of the site of the fire other than comments in a cabinet submission. I interpret that to mean that until that stage you had received no complaints from the public about any real or perceived health risks or problems, such as leakages or pollution?

**Mr Jackson:** That is correct. This is an important issue, and perhaps I should explain further. The Department of Health previously had responsibility for sites of this nature -

**Mr DAY:** That was up until when?

**Mr Jackson:** Up to 1994, and that was then handed across to the Department of Environmental Protection. There is no person currently employed within our branch who had any working knowledge of that site. This is a question that we have interrogated ourselves with. We had virtually no knowledge of that site prior to the event of the fire. All we remembered afterwards was that we had been asked for comment on a cabinet submission.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Do you have knowledge of other sites that you might regard as posing a potential public health risk?

**Mr Jackson:** Following this fire, we have had significant conversations with local government. We have a close working relationship with local government, and we have asked that question, and we have received advice that there are other sites that pose a potential risk. We need to talk about that risk. A petrol station is a risk, but we have a petrol station on almost every corner in the metropolitan area.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** But this is a particular type of risk, of a magnitude -

**Mr Jackson:** Of a very large magnitude. However, from my further discussions with local governments, there are other sites that also pose a risk.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** You probably do not know, but we have already had some evidence put to us about a failure in the system to keep local government informed of incremental changes to the licensing and operating parameters of this site, and that is highly likely to be the case in other places. I guess for our purposes, as we are inquiring into the systemic problems that are magnified and shown up from this disaster, I am trying to get a handle on any mechanisms that we might think about that would link the Department of Health with local government, and local government with licensing and regulatory authorities. It seems that the chain is not in place - the links are quite separate at the moment.

**Mr Jackson:** Yes, and we have some proposals to put to you with regard to how you may address that.

**Dr Di Marco:** It is more likely that we would come to know about these places when we are requested by the EPA or the DEP to comment on an environmental review or assessment, either when setting it up or changing the licensing conditions, rather than from local government, which does not have that sort of information. However, it does not always happen. They are selective in what they request us to comment on, and that is their prerogative.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Is it their prerogative?

**Dr Di Marco:** Yes. It is up to them whether they request the Department of Health to comment on a particular issue. There is no statutory requirement for them to do so, as I understand it.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** In the case of Bellevue they did not exercise that prerogative as far as you are aware?

**Dr Di Marco:** We commented on the cabinet submission -

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Yes, but there had been licence changes over a period of time, and that prerogative was not exercised by any of the licensing agencies for those changes as far as you are aware?

**Mr Jackson:** The environmental impact assessment usually occurs where a new proposal is under consideration.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** But not an incremental change?

**Mr Jackson:** No. A site may be simmering along with changes, but unless there is some recognition within the DEP that there may be some health issues, then we are not in the loop.

**Mr DAY:** Your submission makes some recommendations about this issue.

**Mr Jackson:** Yes, on page 8.

**Mr MASTERS:** Mr Gillam, page 3 states that the HEAT representative was told that evacuation had occurred and 50 houses were evacuated by the police for safety reasons. Who would have made the decision to evacuate those houses?

**Mr Gillam:** The incident controller.

**Mr MASTERS:** The incident controller at that time was a FESA person?

**Mr Gillam:** That is correct.

**Mr MASTERS:** Do you have any understanding of the basis on which he made that decision in terms of the radius from the fire within which the evacuation would be implemented?

**Mr Gillam:** I was not aware at the time, but it appeared subsequently that it was based on proximity to the fire - more of a fire safety issue than a toxic plume-type issue.

**Mr BOWLER:** At what time did you arrive at the fire?

**Mr Gillam:** The paging system initially asked us to attend a fire, and five or six minutes later we were paged again saying could we now report to FESA headquarters, which is the norm. I arrived there at about 12.10 am.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** That arrival time is important to some other comments that have been made to us. When you arrived at the communications centre, what information were you given about the nature of the fire?

**Mr Gillam:** The information we were given was that it was a chemical recycling plant, and there was a large amount of combustible or flammable material. That is reflected in the memo that I wrote later to the director, in which I said there was up to 300 000 litres of tetrachloroethylene and some white spirit. Basically, we were under the impression that this was a fire of a highly flammable substance, with the accent being on flammable rather than toxic.

**Mr MASTERS:** At 12.10 am that information was in the communications centre?

**Mr Gillam:** Correct, and continued throughout the night.

**Mr MASTERS:** The presence of hazardous materials on the site was not available to you at the time?

**Mr Gillam:** Correct.

**Mr BOWLER:** Did you or anyone else at the time ask for the manifest?

**Mr Gillam:** There is a FESA intelligence officer, as they are called, on site, who provides information. I understand he was attempting to find out some information. There was some suggestion that we had been given some false information. I am not clear on whether that eventuated, but we would find nothing more other than tetrachloroethylene and white spirit.

**Mr BOWLER:** Can you say a bit more about the false information?

**Mr Gillam:** I only heard this at third hand. I understood that the owner of the premises was there and was passing on information that might subsequently have been incorrect.

**Mr MASTERS:** When did you find out that it was a HAZMAT site?

**Mr Gillam:** The site was declared a HAZMAT site at 8.20 or 8.30 in the morning.

**Mr MASTERS:** That declaration was again made by the incident controller?

**Mr Gillam:** By FESA, yes.

**Mr BOWLER:** Why did they upgrade it?

**Mr Gillam:** I am sorry; I am not clear on that.

**Mr BOWLER:** What is your role in that? Why are you there?

**Mr Gillam:** I will tell you about the hazard emergency advisory team. There are seven agencies involved. FESA is the lead hazard management agency; and, if necessary, it calls on expertise from outside its organisation on various matters. I am saying it like that, because it might be a huge bushfire, but if it was not terribly toxic, we would not be called. There are four core agencies and three non-core agencies. The Department of Health is a non-core agency, which means that we would be called in occasionally where there might be some toxic result of a spill, or an accident or a fire or something of that sort. We used to attend the site, but that has now been changed. We now go to FESA headquarters, and that has been the case for at least three years, to my knowledge. We are provided with information by FESA, and now with our attending FESA headquarters, it is through a FESA intelligence officer on site, who relays information back to the HEAT team stationed in FESA headquarters.

**Mr BOWLER:** Would you have rather attended the site?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes. In retrospect I think I would have got a better handle on it. Despite the fact that it was night time and we had black cloud and all the rest of the problems, in retrospect attending the site would have been better. The jury is still out on whether we should attend sites. Having non-trained personnel on a hazard management site and close enough to the site to make informed decisions obviously carries some implications as well. I think FESA has enough to worry about without having a bunch of novices running around trying to make decisions on the run. There is nothing to say we cannot go to FESA headquarters and, if necessary, be taken out to the site in a FESA vehicle. It is probably the best option to be in a FESA vehicle, because often the police have the site roped off and we cannot get through if we are in a civilian car.

**Mr Jackson:** It might be important to you to outline the scope of that HEAT team. It deals with spillages of chemicals and pesticides, into the environment. It is not just fire. It covers all those aspects.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** That might be useful, but we will just pursue a couple of links between your experience and some of the other material which has come to us before we go to that. The Stoneville volunteer bushfire brigade states in its documented chronology of events that at 0.4.14 hours on Friday, 16 February, the brigade received a pager call from FESA com centre - this was some four hours after you had arrived at the communications centre. Upon receiving that pager call, the fire control officer called FESA communications centre and asked what was the background of the fire. The FESA communications centre operator advised the fire control officer of Stoneville that the incident was a factory fire, and the Stoneville people assert in their submission

to us that at that stage there was no mention whatsoever that the fire had any chemical nature. Do you have any ideas why that gap in communication occurred? You say that you knew at 10 past 12 when you went into the communication centre; and some four hours later they are still calling out volunteer fire brigades to the incident and they are not indicating accurately the nature of the fire. Do you have any understanding of that or have you heard of any discussion about why that gap in communication occurred?

**Mr Gillam:** I must have lost the plot. When I went in at 10 past 12 we were told tetrachloroethylene and white spirit. That information was all we were given until we were disbanded at five o'clock. I thought that was consistent with what you were just saying. I would imagine that the bush fire brigade was being told there were only flammable substances there. None of us knew, that is what I am saying. They did not know and we did not know.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** They did not know?

**Mr DAY:** They did not know there might have been a lot of toxic chemicals there? The emphasis was that it was explosive and highly flammable material rather than toxic?

**Mr Gillam:** That is correct.

**Mr DAY:** That was the view up until the next morning?

**Mr Gillam:** That is correct. That is consistent with what I have been saying.

**Mr Jackson:** Maybe it has not come across clearly. From my understanding, this was initially regarded as an industrial fire and not a chemical fire, and that is consistent with the advice that you have received from the volunteer firefighters. I understand there was a secondary fire that occurred in the grasslands behind, and they were called to that. This was regarded as a factory industrial fire rather than a hazardous emergency chemical fire.

**Mr Gillam:** That is correct.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** There was another issue - we are yet to speak directly to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA to confirm this - but the evidence that has been put to us so far is that the very first call identified the fire as a chemical-based fire. This was just before 2300. An unidentified caller said that there was a chemical fire burning at Irwin Street, Bellevue. The caller was asked by the comcen operator what type of chemicals and how many chemicals were involved. The caller replied, "A shit load of chemicals." No other details were recorded. That is a quote from the comcen emergency call number, and that was the very first contact and notice of the fire. When you got in some hour and 15 minutes later, you heard no mention initially - forget the vernacular - that this was a serious chemical fire?

**Mr Gillam:** No; that is correct.

**Mr BOWLER:** You have to find out whether there are any nasties there, any toxic chemicals, how bad they could be, and you then advise the other authorities whether they have to evacuate or not. You were trying to find out what chemicals were there?

**Mr Gillam:** Correct.

**Mr BOWLER:** And you were meeting a dead wall?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes.

**Mr DAY:** From what you have said, you were told that there were white spirits and old dry-cleaning fluid?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes; that is correct, which are recycling-type chemicals and that is what we thought was on fire. There was no doubt that we knew it was a fire on chemical recycling premises. I think FESA will be able to provide you with a transcript of all of its paged messages. There is no doubt in my mind that this was a chemical recycling plant. When we got there we were told there were

300 000 litres of this tetrachlorethylene and white spirit. That fits the bill of a chemical recycling plant. There was no reason at that stage to think any more than that.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Would that not be, in your mind, a chemical fire having some toxic risk?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes. Then we were told that evacuations had occurred and that people had been relocated into safe areas. I accepted that on face value.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Who provided you with that advice?

**Mr Gillam:** When you get into FESA there is a duty officer and he gives a briefing as members of the HEAT team arrive, or we brief each other as we arrive. It would have originated from FESA.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did they have knowledge at the centre as to the extent of the evacuation?

**Mr Gillam:** No more than I had. We had been told 50 people had been evacuated.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Fifty people or people from 50 metres?

**Mr Gillam:** No; 50 houses as I understood it on the night.

**Mr BOWLER:** Did you provide advice about the distances to which they would need to be evacuated?

**Mr Gillam:** No. I accepted that what had been done was a fair and reasonable assessment of the removal to a non-toxic location. You are asking whether this will be one of the problems of not being out on-site. When I saw the fire on television the next day I went "Whoa!". I had no idea it was that large; that is how big it was. When we arrived at FESA, we were told that this is a big fire, there is all this stuff combusting, and 50 houses have been evacuated. We accepted that on face value. I think FESA had made a fair and reasonable assumption at that time. We did not know there were other chemicals there and that did not emerge for some days.

**Mr DAY:** It is the case, of course, that a lot of what was there was old dry-cleaning fluid and so on?

**Mr Gillam:** Correct. I think that was what was providing the pyrotechnics - the exploding drums.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Earlier today we heard a continuation of evidence from Stoneville Bush Fire Brigade, and one of their officers was talking about the standards for dealing with particular types of incidents. Were you aware of the manual that they were talking about - the Australian-New Zealand incident manual?

**Mr Gillam:** I am aware of it, but I do not have a copy.

**Mr MASTERS:** It is the "Initial Emergency Response Guide SAASHZHP76 Standards Australia."

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** This is the 1996 version. I understand that the latest edition is 1999. Does that accord with your understanding? I will pass this to you.

**Mr Gillam:** I have since been made aware of this book. I did not have a copy with me at the time; I was not aware of it, no.

**Mr BOWLER:** Is there a copy of that book in the FESA headquarters?

**Mr Gillam:** No. There may well be now; there was not at the time, to my knowledge. I have not seen one.

**Mr BOWLER:** Did you find it amazing that there is not a copy of that at FESA headquarters, and also that you did not have one? Your job is to advise on these types of incidents.

**Mr Gillam:** No, I do not. I think we have been able to make fairly well-balanced judgments without recourse to this. We have recourse to a large amount of material. We have databases, CC info and all sorts of things. We have material safety data sheets, which we can bring up very quickly.

**Mr BOWLER:** The same sort of information?

**Mr Gillam:** Basically, yes. This is one tool.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you pull up any information on the chemicals that you knew were on that site on that night to check?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes, I did.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Did you make a particular note of the evacuation procedures that were advised on those databases?

**Mr Gillam:** No. At that stage we were more concerned with the run-off which we thought would have had this substance in it. Based on that, we talked about closing the Helena River for recreation purposes. At that stage we were concerned more about the water run-off.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Why was that your initial concern? I can understand it in the heat of the moment - please excuse the pun - with large numbers of agencies being involved and you grappling with all sorts of demands, and it is midnight and you would probably rather be home in bed, but what sort of things made you say that you needed to deal with the run-off first? Is that the sort of decision you made?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes, except you are talking about the environment. I am talking about contamination of the environment, which would lead to health concerns. I am not talking about pollution of the river in terms of pollution per se, but pollution of the river in terms of people swimming or fishing in it the next day. I was making an environmental judgment on public health grounds rather than on the environment itself.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Would it be fair to say that that judgment came to your mind because you did not have a picture of the scale of this fire?

**Mr BOWLER:** You had not seen the plume?

**Mr Gillam:** There is no doubt; correct.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** And if you had to compare the water run-off versus the plume, do you think that might have altered the priorities that you arrived at?

**Mr Gillam:** Yes. As I mentioned earlier, if I had been on site I think that would have affected my priorities.

**Mr DAY:** It is probably relevant for us to hear what would have been the effects of the plume at the time of the fire, soon after and in the longer term.

**Mr MASTERS:** Mr Chairman, I am just looking at my watch. I think we have at least another good hour with the people from the department, and unfortunately we have some people here from FESA. Can we resolve something?

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Mr Jackson, we have scheduled and not yet confirmed witnesses for next Wednesday and Thursday. I can understand that getting four senior people together is a big demand on the organisation, but is it possible to arrange with us and our staff to come back?

**Mr Jackson:** This is a very important issue to us. We have a lot of information that we would like to present to you, and we will make ourselves available to be here.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Thank you. Is there anything else in relation to those first couple of sections?

**Mr Jackson:** May I make a comment regarding this document?

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Yes.

**Mr Jackson:** As you appreciate, the HEAT team member does not know what he will be called out to; it could be a spillage of a pesticide in Kellerberrin or whatever, so the database that we have provided to our officers must be absolutely comprehensive. We may not have that document; it

may be appropriate for a volunteer person, and FESA should have that. Our task is to provide information on the chemicals, hook them up, and determine the acute effects. This officer has that information in his vehicle at all times. I do not want you to take away the impression that just because Lindsay did not have that book, he was not adequately informed or had adequate information available. We must have that information.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** I am not sure that that is a conclusion that I am yet to draw either way. It has been brought to our attention that this is the standard established for Australia and New Zealand for dealing with particular chemical incidents.

**Mr DAY:** That book actually relates to dangerous goods transport, if I recall. Am I correct in saying that you have other information available, including a manual or books or whatever the case may be, in vehicles and in the department and so on other than that?

**Mr Jackson:** There are thousands of books; there are huge texts. We have all of that now on a computer database, which is like carrying a library with you. That is what we have to have, and that is what Lindsay has.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** My question was to get an understanding of whether the database that you have provides you with the knowledge necessary to respond reasonably and use the standard of 800 metres as an evacuation standard - or that is what I am particularly interested in. Does the library that you carry include the Australian New Zealand standard of evacuation?

**Mr Jackson:** I cannot answer you. We will come back to you on that.

**Mr CHAIRMAN:** Although I am not suggesting that you need to carry around every book that every person in Australia who has an interest has published, but if there are standards, you would expect standards to be incorporated into all databases and data sheets for the chemicals.

**Mr BOWLER:** Mr Gillam, when you accessed your information, it did not say to evacuate to 800 metres?

**Mr Gillam:** No.

**Mr MASTERS:** We need to know why the database did not say that. At our next meeting, I am interested in finding out what is the chemical composition of the major chemicals that were involved in the fire, what are their likely conducting properties and information on their toxicological properties of all the products.

**Mr Jackson:** We will be able to brief you on that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** We might set aside a greater period on Wednesday or Thursday next week than we have had today. The executive officers of the committee will be in contact. Thank you for your time today and your directness.