

ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE

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

FIFTH SESSION

Members

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

STEVENS, MR RUSSELL JOHN,
District Manager, Fire Services of WA,
Fire and Emergency Services Authority,
480 Hay Street,
Perth, examined:

CUNEO, MR LINDSAY,
Acting Director Planning,
Development and Special Risks,
Fire and Emergency Services Authority,
480 Hay Street,
Perth, examined:

TRUSWELL, MR JOHN PATRICK,
Manager, Water Resources, Special Risks,
Fire and Emergency Services Authority,
480 Hay Street,
Perth, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Have all the witnesses completed the details of witnesses forms and do they understand the notes attached to them?

Mr Stevens: Yes.

Mr Cuneo: Yes.

Mr Truswell: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did all the witnesses receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet and guidance notes for giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Stevens: Yes.

Mr Cuneo: Yes.

Mr Truswell: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee has received the submission from Mr Cuneo. Before the submission is accepted into the documents of the committee, do any of the witnesses wish to make any amendments?

Mr Stevens: No.

The CHAIRMAN: We have been going through a standard process for the past few days' hearings. If there are natural breaks to the witnesses' submissions and the witnesses want to stop and discuss what they have said to the committee, we can do that. I ask Mr Cuneo to discuss the submission.

Mr Cuneo: The submission put forward by my department was addressed to the terms of reference. The first part details the relevant sections of the Act and the powers thereof as they affect the fire services. Section 33(e)(i) of the Fire Brigades Act details that the fire service has powers to abate dangers but we look to other competent authorities to provide expert advice on chemicals. Hence, the Department of Minerals and Energy provides advice on those areas. Section

34 of the Act also provides for us to deal with incidents involving hazardous materials. That is obviously when the incidents occur. Buildings in fire districts are inspected on a regular basis. This was the case with Waste Control Pty Ltd in Bellevue. It was inspected on an annual basis by the Midland fire crew. They identified various problems with the site. At various times, they called in people within the organisation to inspect the site. They also asked for expert advice on occasions from the Department of Minerals and Energy. It culminated in an incident in 1999 when there was a leak. The agencies were again called in to assist. The agencies requested Waste Control Pty Ltd to take action in respect of cleaning up their site.

In reference to our submission and the response of relevant government agencies to the incident on 15 February 2001 and the post-crisis management, the fire services attended the emergency as has been detailed. They conducted a series of operations that lasted for several days. Subsequent to that there was a post-incident review that identified a number of practices in the organisation and other agencies involved in the emergency services in Western Australia that could be reviewed and improved. A number of actions were taken in regard to that.

As part of that ongoing process, concerns were raised by both career and volunteer firefighters about health aspects. FESA set up complex arrangements to identify all those people who had attended the scene. They were interviewed by toxicologists and advised as to the likely outcomes of their exposure. They were interviewed and asked to provide details of where they were on the site. All the information was mapped. After that they had the opportunity to receive a medical check up. There was a major incident debrief, with DEP, DME, Health and Worksafe, with some of the people that were obviously involved on the scene, and so on. HAZMAT arrangements were studied and a number of in-house matters identified that could be improved.

There are a couple of points that FESA wishes to make in relation to the regulations regarding the storage and disposal of hazardous materials. There is an ongoing problem with some of the sites where this material is stored, and the in-built protection equipment that is on those sites. In the case of the one in Bellevue, it probably was not up to the standard of some other sites. On a general note, I will refer to some other relevant matters. FESA makes note of the issue that recovering funds from agencies and organisations that have created a hazardous chemical spill is not always easy, and involves bills being sent to FESA, the DEP, the police or other organisations. FESA suggests that mechanism should be reviewed and improved in some way to enable funds to be more easily recovered.

Mr CHAIRMAN: You do request payment in some circumstances like this.

Mr Cuneo: Yes. Part of the arrangements are that you are allowed to recover money from the recovery phase. That is not a problem with many of the big organisations, but a small organisation may not have the money to clean up the site if it comes to a considerable amount of money. There are issues of insurance in those arrangements as well.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Does that apply to the cost of fighting the fire as well?

Mr Cuneo: It has been known to occur, but it is not really covered in our legislation to enable us to do that. We have done it, but it really comes back to the organisation being willing to pay. The DEP seems to be the major one to be left with the cost of cleaning up the site, if the money is not available from the people who have contracted the site.

The only other point of relevance is the issue of land-use planning. There are normally buffer zones around these sites, and what has come of this facility is that there was no buffer zone around those premises, which makes it difficult. There needs to be some discussion and interaction between various government agencies to ensure that chemical plants are not built next to schools or other community facilities, or vice-versa.

Mr CHAIRMAN: So quite clearly, the fire and rescue service had knowledge of the site of this fire. What was the degree of concern, and what action was taken by FESA to adequately manage the problems, as you saw it?

Mr Cuneo: They were aware of the issue, and, because it was a bit unusual, they went down there, and the inspection process revealed that there was grounds for concern, and hence the action taken back in 1999. As a result of those actions, they then did a risk plan, which was a pre-plan for the site, providing some expert advice in the event of an emergency. In the best circumstances, crews would train against that pre-plan, to ensure that they were familiar with the site, and the water supplies and other facilities on the site.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Given that the fire did eventuate, is it the case that your crews were better prepared as a result of the preparatory work that was done, than might have otherwise been the case?

Mr Cuneo: You could argue that that was the case, albeit, marginally, I would say. The review revealed that the pre-plan was not substantial enough to provide sufficient advice. Perhaps the core knowledge about the site was restricted to the crew from Midland, more than anyone else involved.

The CHAIRMAN: Was that the fire plan, prepared by the Midland crew, that was lodged in the canister at the front gate?

Mr Cuneo: Yes, I believe so.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you know whether that was accessed on the night, when the units attended?

Mr Cuneo: It was accessed, but quite some time into the incident, not in the first two to three hours.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Why was that? Was it hard to get that close to the site, or oversight?

Mr Cuneo: I think it was oversight. I cannot speak on behalf of those people who were there at the time, but I assume it was oversight.

Mr BOWLER: So your first officers arrived there, knowing that there was a fire plan on the front gate, that there is a manifest in there as well, and did not go to it?

Mr Cuneo: In my understanding there was no manifest in that pocket. All that was there was a pre-plan. There were no material data sheets whatsoever. That is the information that I have been given.

Mr BOWLER: So, when they accessed it, several hours later, there was no manifest in there?

Mr Cuneo: A couple of hours later. There was no manifest.

Mr BOWLER: What time did they access it?

Mr Cuneo: Do not quote me on this one, but I would say about 2.30 am.

Mr BOWLER: Can we speak to the officer who was on duty?

Mr Cuneo: Mr Stevens may be able to give some advice on that. He was there.

Mr BOWLER: Did you attend the fire?

Mr Stevens: I did. It was some time into the incident. There were some basic -

The CHAIRMAN: What time, do you think?

Mr Stevens: Like Mr Cuneo, I would be guessing, but it was definitely after midnight. The pre-plan did contain some basic information, but they were very sketchy details in terms of total quantities, and, as evidence given here previously has stated, they were class 3 materials, perchlorethylene, white spirits, and some processed thinners.

Mr MASTERS: I direct a question to all three witnesses. To me, one of the most important questions that needs to be answered is: why was it not recognised, virtually straight away, that this was a hazardous materials site? Looking at the FESA submission, it appears that FESA put its own crews into the down-wind plume, and the volunteer bush fire brigade people had their staff, all volunteers, working in the plume as well. I cannot understand, firstly, why the Midland brigade did not know, automatically, that it was a Hazmat site. Secondly, I cannot understand why a sign, saying Hazmat, was seemingly ignored on the night. Thirdly, I cannot understand why the canister was not accessed. Fourthly, unless your full-time paid staff were using breathing apparatus, I cannot understand why you were not getting reports back from your staff downwind in the plume, that there were air pollution and toxic gas problems. That is the key question I wish to ask. Can you respond to that please?

Mr Cuneo: I can, but I have probably forgotten what the first question is.

Mr MASTERS: Did your Midland crew actually formulate the plan on the basis that it was a Hazmat site?

Mr Cuneo: I do not know. I cannot speak on behalf of Midland. I gather that they arrived, and it is not uncommon for fire services to address the fire first and the Hazmat incident as a secondary issue.

Mr CHAIRMAN: It that usual practice in dealing with such an emergency?

Mr Cuneo: The report refers to the fire as against the Hazmat incident, and they are talking about a new classification of fire Hazmat, or Hazmat fire - I forget what the report says - that is a relatively new consideration that is being taken at this point. I can only talk about what I know, but the crew responded, and started addressing the fire, as such. The responding crews from other backup stations, when they were called for assistance, which is the norm, self-deployed to fires as they came upon them. There was therefore no contact or consultation between the Midland officer in charge, who at that point was the incident controller, and the officers on the responding vehicles from other stations.

The CHAIRMAN: Just to clarify that, I would be interested to know how long the Midland officer was the incident controller.

Mr Cuneo: The first arriving officer is the incident controller. He takes on that role until a more senior officer arrives.

Mr MASTERS: Can you tell us the name of the first officer in charge, at the very beginning?

Mr Cuneo: Station officer Antunovich.

Mr MASTERS: Was he then replaced by a more senior person?

Mr Cuneo: Yes, I think by about 11.40 pm district manager Brooks arrived.

The CHAIRMAN: About 45 minutes after the first call.

Mr DAY: Was it the case that other crews came to the site, or the general vicinity of it, and did not make contact with the then incident controller? If not, should they have done so?

Mr Cuneo: In the first instance, I gather that they did not. As they were coming from a different direction, as was the case with the Bassendean unit -

The CHAIRMAN: From whom were the calls coming, that these units were responding to?

Mr Cuneo: The communication centre mobilises everybody.

Mr MASTERS: Is that in response to 000 calls?

Mr Cuneo: The communications centre receives the telephone call, and they mobilise crews. The first response was two pumps, which would have been Midland and Bassendean. The Bassendean crew was on its way, and said this fire there was a third alarm, which was then also responded to by

Belmont. Belmont and Bassendean were coming from a different direction, but by the time they got close to the incident, they had already identified other fires burning, and they commenced firefighting operations on those. They did not make contact with the Midland unit. They may have done so over the radio, but not face to face.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Was there anything out of the ordinary there, or should they have done things differently?

Mr Cuneo: The best practice would be that they should respond and talk to each other and determine what the strategy should be.

The CHAIRMAN: So your training manual -the best practice - would suggest that all responding units would go to the site, confirm with the incident controller of the time, as to the conditions on the scene, and then if they were to go back along the direction from which they had just come, they would do so with some knowledge of what the incident controller would -

Mr Cuneo: They would be tasked to do whatever action, given a communications channel to talk on, and so forth.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Would it have been the case that it was getting to be such a visually obvious big incident that they thought they had better get into just trying to combat the fire initially? Is that a reasonable scenario?

Mr Cuneo: That is a reasonable scenario that would be put forward at the time, about what occurred on the night. They arrived upon fires that were burning quite fiercely in other premises, and they would have deployed to those accordingly, to save property.

Mr BOWLER: Were they bush fires?

Mr Cuneo: No, I think there were also structure fires under threat, and so on, from debris. They were not just bushfires, when the units arrived.

Mr MASTERS: Mr Chairman, I would like to revisit the question I asked -

Mr CHAIRMAN: You are up to number two, I think.

Mr MASTERS: I am not satisfied with number one, yet. Mr Antunovich arrived at the site at 11.01 or 11.02 pm. How will I find out, other than by asking him direct, whether he was aware of the fact that a fire plan had been put in place for that site, that the information was in the canister, and that it was a Hazmat site? Would he be the only person that I should ask?

Mr Cuneo: I would assume that all officers on the station would be aware of the plan.

Mr MASTERS: Under what circumstances would FESA accept that the plan not be acted upon? It is clear that the failure to recognise that it was a Hazmat site has great consequences. Under what circumstances could you explain that and say that the officer was doing a good job, as other priorities came forward?

Mr Cuneo: I am trying to understand the question, not trying to be difficult.

Mr MASTERS: If Mr Antunovich knew it was a Hazmat site, and knew there was a fire emergency plan there, why did he not act on the basis of that knowledge, and why did he not go to that Hazmat plan?

Mr Truswell: Mr Chairman, I actually spoke to Mr Antunovich about his actions on his first arrival. When they opened the engine-room door they saw a big glow, because the fire was virtually directly opposite the Midland Fire Station. When they got down there, they saw explosions, and drums flying all around the place. They were in some fear of their own safety. They realised that the drum depot was beyond help, given the resources they had with them at the time, but they could see that the fire was spreading into the concrete works, which had about half a dozen agitators and other property, and Gus Antonuvich determined that his best efforts would be to

try to stop the fire spreading into that area. Then, apparently, from what Gus Antunovich told me, station officer Harper from Bassendean responded from the west, and he came across other property, where the drums had landed in the backyard of houses, and the fire was spreading to those. Those first two arriving officers concentrated, under our operating procedures, on protecting exposures first, and trying to stop the fire from spreading.

Mr MASTERS: And then work back?

Mr Truswell: Yes.

Mr MASTERS: I pull you up because, according to annexure A of the paper you have given us, the first priority is to protect the safety of your people.

Mr Cuneo: The people present.

Mr MASTERS: If it were a Hazmat site - and so many people seemed to know it was a Hazmat site - and some of your employees were going into the plume, therefore being exposed to gases that could potentially cause serious health impacts, why was your first priority, namely safety, put to one side?

Mr Cuneo: It is standard operating procedure for people responding to a call-out involving smoke to wear breathing apparatus. I assume he assumed that the responding crews went to work with appropriate breathing apparatus and clothing to protect them from that environment. That is normal.

Mr DAY: Did they do that?

Mr Cuneo: Yes. He would have put actions in place. I can assume only he thought it was a flammable liquid fire. Firefighters regularly fight flammable liquid fires involving thinners etc. He may not have fully comprehended what materials were on site.

Mr MASTERS: Can you confirm that the extra crews that came to the site - from Midland, Bellevue, Bassendean and Belmont - wore breathing apparatus?

Mr Cuneo: It is normal practice for the officer in charge to direct his crew to wear breathing apparatus if they are working in smoke.

Mr MASTERS: How could we check that that happened on the night?

Mr Cuneo: I spoke to them as part of the debrief process and they said they wore a considerable number of breathing apparatuses.

Mr BOWLER: Did "a considerable number" or all firefighters wear them?

Mr Cuneo: Some of them said they wore a number of cylinders over the night; that is, they changed the cylinders.

Mr MASTERS: Many of the first people on site knew that it was a Hazmat site. If what you have said is your standard operating procedure, why did your communications centre not know that it was a Hazmat site? The previous witnesses were from the Department of Health, and one is on the hazardous emergency advisory team. It was not until many hours later that HEAT people learnt about the Hazmat nature of that fire.

Mr Cuneo: My understanding is they thought it involved white spirits - I think perc is the term - and were fighting it as a flammable liquid fire. I gather that information was obtained from the owner of the site, who was there on the night, and was relayed to the communications centre by the incident management team. The communications centre would have been aware of the nature of the fire.

Mr MASTERS: You are telling me something I already know, so at least you are consistent. However, Mr Antunovich knew it was a Hazmat site. Why did he or other people with that

knowledge not pass it on to your communications centre, so that your centre could tell the HEAT people, who could, in turn, advise the volunteer fire brigade officers who came in five hours later?

Mr Cuneo: My only response is that I do not know how much Mr Antunovich knew about what was on the site, and whether he thought the storage was flammable liquid - thinners, white spirits and bits and pieces - or was aware it was other chemicals. I know that he was aware of some things, because one of the initial actions was to provide exposure protection to a building that had mercury etc in it. They were aware of some elements that were on site, but I cannot respond to the extent of their awareness of others.

Mr MASTERS: I am still stumbling because the site has a HAZMAT sign next to the front gate. Based on what I have heard and what you have said, I cannot understand why that sign was effectively ignored in the communication.

Mr Cuneo: I suppose the issue is not only whether they saw it, but also that the HAZMAT sign depicted class 3 flammable liquids, which has been discussed.

Mr DAY: Is there a significant difference between regarding it as a HAZMAT site and a site for flammable liquids? Is the terminology different? Would it have made a big difference if it were classified as a Hazmat site from the beginning?

Mr Cuneo: With an intense fire, crews wear breathing apparatus and protective clothing, which they did. They cannot wear PVC suits in a fire of that nature. Crews have two options: tackle the fire and the burning chemicals, which they did on that night; or, if they know the fire involves chemicals that cannot be treated with the equipment they have, withdraw and wait for the fire to burn out.

Mr DAY: I do not want to put words in your mouth. Is it the case that the HAZMAT site classification had no significant practical effect on your response to the fire in the first couple of hours?

Mr Cuneo: The practical difference was that there was no identification of a hot, warm or cold zone, because it was deemed as a flammable liquid fire and not a HAZMAT incident. That may have had impact on downwind evacuation and, perhaps, recognition of what was in the plume.

Mr DAY: It did not make any difference to the response?

Mr Cuneo: No; not to the people tackling the fire.

Mr BOWLER: District manager Brooks took control 45 minutes after the fire started. How long did he remain the officer in charge on site?

Mr Cuneo: I cannot tell you exactly, but it is in the report.

Mr BOWLER: Did he call out the volunteer fire brigade?

Mr Cuneo: No, that was called out by the communications centre.

Mr BOWLER: Who made the decision it was needed?

Mr Cuneo: It is more complex than that. A further incident occurred. A second incident was identified and the communications centre mobilised additional resources for the secondary incident.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Is that in your incident map? Is that the incident sequence at page 5 of your submission?

Mr MASTERS: That is later.

Mr Cuneo: That map shows the increase in mobilisation from second alarm to fifth alarm.

Mr CHAIRMAN: The map shows the decisions from third alarm to fifth alarm. Are those pictorial representations of the unit?

Mr Cuneo: They are.

Mr MASTERS: They do not include the volunteer fire brigade, which were not on site at that point.

Mr Cuneo: No.

Mr MASTERS: They are not part of the chart.

Mr Cuneo: No. Additional appliances are called above the fifth alarm. That map depicts the first, third and fifth alarms. There were five appliances then. The reality is that above the fifth alarm there can be any number of appliances.

Mr BOWLER: When did they look for the manifest and the fire plan?

Mr Stevens: I think we have established that it was sometime after midnight.

Mr Cuneo: It was just after midnight - half past 12.

Mr Stevens: It was somewhere about then.

Mr MASTERS: Would district manager Brooks have made the decision for someone to check the canister?

Mr Stevens: I think district manager Brooks obtained the information from the council.

Mr BOWLER: Was Dr Claflin on site by then?

Mr Stevens: Yes.

Mr CHAIRMAN: He was at the site and not the communications centre?

Mr Stevens: Yes.

Mr BOWLER: Was Dr Claflin on site when you went to the canister?

Mr Cuneo: That is my recollection.

Mr BOWLER: When someone went to the canister and found a fire plan but no manifest, did he go straight to Dr Claflin and ask what he had on site?

Mr Cuneo: I understand they had already done that.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Was that before finding the canister did not have the manifest?

Mr Cuneo: They had already spoken to him on site. It is normal practice to get best knowledge from someone on the site.

Mr BOWLER: He said there were only two chemicals worth worrying about.

Mr Cuneo: Yes. He spoke to Russell.

Mr Stevens: I spent a bit of time with Dr Claflin who, on the face of things, was very cooperative. He provided us with a breakdown of the chemicals on the site. As I stated earlier, they were class 3 materials. There was also some concern about underground storage tanks and other paint pigments on the premises. He stated there was also a minor amount of acid on the premises. That information was conveyed to the incident management team and appropriate action was taken when firefighting.

Mr DAY: Apart from the perchlorethylene and white sprits that you knew were on the site, was there a significant amount of other material?

Mr Stevens: No. The information provided by Dr Claflin was that the significant risk was the flammability of the class 3 materials.

Mr DAY: Class 3 being flammable?

Mr Stevens: Yes. The other materials were in relatively safe areas that were cooled by the firefighting crews.

Mr DAY: Were you not concerned when you became aware that a certain quantity - albeit not a large quantity - of materials other than perchlorethylene and white spirits were on site?

Mr Stevens: The underground storage tanks are relatively safe. They have venting and in-built protection mechanisms. He said the other material was relatively safe. That was taken into consideration in the firefighting operations. However, the main concern was the flammable materials.

Mr MASTERS: At page 6 of your submission you state that at 0700 hours you reclassified the incident as a Hazmat fire. What was your understanding of the chemicals and the situation pertaining to that site that caused you to change the status of the fire from an ordinary flammable liquid fire to one involving Hazmat materials?

Mr Cuneo: About that time concerns were raised about run-off and contamination of the boots of the people who had been fighting the fire. Concerns were also raised about bagging the protective clothing for disposal. Contaminated hose was left on site. That was the first point at which people became aware that perhaps things were not, perhaps, normal.

Mr BOWLER: You were worried about run-off from the site but not the plume?

Mr Cuneo: It is not uncommon to worry about the run-off from many types of fire. It is always taken into consideration. It is hard to stop the plumes. We try to contain the run-off to a reasonable amount and certain location.

Mr BOWLER: Is it not strange that they were worried about the run-off but not the plume?

Mr Cuneo: Not if they thought it was a flammable fuel fire that was burning the material off at some heat. That decision was made.

Mr BOWLER: If it were a flammable fuel fire, why were you worried about the run-off?

Mr Cuneo: That can impact on the environment by going into the soil, drains and rivers, so we always raise that issue.

Mr MASTERS: What caused you at 0700 hours to reclassify the incident to a Hazmat category? Was it just the liquid or had information been provided to you that there were chemicals other than white spirits and dry-cleaning fluids on the site?

Mr Stevens: I have not seen any evidence of chemicals other than those which the ground testing has revealed. Records of the firefighting operations show that all the decisions were based on information that the only materials were flammable liquids.

Mr MASTERS: The seven o'clock reclassification was based on the liquid run-off from the site?

Mr Stevens: Yes, and the fact that the fire had been extinguished. The level of clothing protection for the crews would have changed. Once the fire risk had abated the crews would have changed out of the protective equipment that is worn in the fire environment into chemical spillage suits, which cannot be worn in a fire environment. That is consistent with the classification time.

Mr DAY: So you are really starting to focus on the clean up and the post-fire activities and so on, and the way you approached things then was somewhat different to how you approached them the night before. Is that the case?

Mr Stevens: That is correct. The biggest risk on the night, of course, was the explosion of drums of flammable liquid. Crews would not have wanted to be among any combustible material. Once that risk had abated, the protective equipment they wore changed.

Mr MURRAY: It is my understanding that the process you used to fight the fire was high-pressure water when your first identification was that it was a fuel fire. It seems a little strange to me that instead of trying to blanket out the fire using a finer-spray-type procedure, the strategy used was high-pressure multitudes of water.

Mr Cuneo: I will respond to that if I can. The issue was not necessarily about trying to extinguish the fire. At that particular time, it was decided that the fire could burn. The major emphasis was on the protection of exposures and various monitors etc were used to protect those exposures. It was deemed that because the fuel was drummed and stacked the way it was and all those sorts of things, a foam attack would not have been effective.

Mr MASTERS: We received a submission a couple of weeks ago from a member of the community who said that he had been at the site within half an hour of the fire commencing and had told senior personnel at the site - your staff I presume - that pesticides, mercury and other hazardous, toxic materials were present at the facility. Do you have any record or knowledge of that information being passed on?

Mr Cuneo: No.

Mr MASTERS: If you had been privy to that information, would that have changed the way you fought the fire and been concerned about other aspects of it?

Mr Cuneo: That information would have been relayed back to the HEAT team, which gives specialist advice on a number of factors about how to fight the fire.

Mr MASTERS: Okay; that is very important. So, if someone involved in the senior incident controlling side of your operations at the site had been told about pesticide, biocide, mercury and other potentially toxic and hazardous material, that information would have been communicated back to your control centre and you would have received an analysis of the implications of those?

Mr Cuneo: Yes, that information would have been captured in the incident management team and then relayed back.

Mr MASTERS: Right.

Mr BOWLER: It sounded like you were saying that they were concentrating on keeping that area damped down and cool and just letting the fire itself burn.

Mr Cuneo: What I do know about the materials on the site was that mercury and other bits and pieces were identified. I am not sure what the other bits and pieces were, but they were in the house, which, from memory, was at the front of the property. Protective exposures were put in place there; an aerial appliance was providing protection to the batching plant - the concrete works next door - and another monitor on the other side was providing protection. Lines of hose were withdrawn because of the danger of exploding drums, but protective lines of hose were put on underground tank vents and there was similar action occurring at the rear of the site as well.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I just ask a couple of things about the information that was coming to you? It has been asserted that Dr Claflin may have changed his advice about what was on-site. Do you have any first or second-hand knowledge of that?

Mr Cuneo: No, I do not. I was aware that he spoke to two or three people on the site on the night. Everything I have been told leads to the point that Russell made earlier about the types of product that were on the site.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you know whom he spoke to?

Mr Stevens: I spent considerable time with Dr Claflin and he never changed his advice. Again, we accepted Dr Claflin's information on face value and he was more than cooperative. We took his advice in the spirit that it was given.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Stevens, what was he advising at the time?

Mr Stevens: He was not providing advice about the firefighting operations; he was providing advice on the materials that were stored on the premises.

The CHAIRMAN: What time did he arrive?

Mr Stevens: I arrived at the incident some time after midnight. Dr Claflin was present then.

The CHAIRMAN: Did he draw anybody's attention to the need to get the inventory or the manifest of materials from the canister?

Mr Stevens: I think he may have. I am not sure. It was recovered some time after midnight.

Mr MASTERS: And Mr Antunovich or Mr Brooks would be the perfect people to ask?

Mr Stevens: Mr Brooks could substantiate that.

Mr DAY: He provided you with advice about what was on the site?

Mr Stevens: Our involvement with Dr Claflin was to interrogate him to determine what materials were on the site.

Mr DAY: Can you recall what he advised?

Mr Stevens: As I have said, it was restricted to class 3 flammable materials, which was the drum stack actually on fire. It was approximately 1 600 200-litre drums.

Mr DAY: From your understanding of what was actually on-site, was what he told you in accordance with that reality?

Mr Stevens: I have not seen what was actually on the site other than some testing that has been done. All the information I have seen from official records suggest that what Dr Claflin was saying to us on the night was what he was licensed for. We took that on face value.

Mr BOWLER: You knew there was acid on site?

Mr Stevens: He said there was a minor amount of acid, but I do not think that it was affected in the fire.

Mr DAY: And mercury.

Mr BOWLER: You do not think?

Mr Stevens: He told us where the acid was and it was not in a fire-affected part of the premises. Again, we could only rely on the advice provided by Dr Claflin.

Mr DAY: So he was concentrating on the area that was on fire?

Mr Stevens: He was providing us with what we believed at the time to be very valuable intelligence.

The CHAIRMAN: And he was providing that intelligence before the fire plan was accessed?

Mr Stevens: Yes, he was cooperating fully with us.

The CHAIRMAN: Before anybody went to check the canister to see if the site chemical inventory was accessed? What I am trying to ascertain and confirm was that he was the first point of call for information about both the site layout and the materials on-site, before anybody made an attempt to go to the canister to access that material.

Mr Stevens: I believe that is the case.

Mr Cuneo: Correct.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Cuneo, you mentioned mercury a couple of times.

Mr Cuneo: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: The last time you mentioned it you referred to it being in the house.

Mr Cuneo: My understanding was that it was located in the house and that was why a protective line of hoses were in place, as I said, to protect exposure to the house if there were an explosion.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay. There was no suggestion that there was mercury elsewhere on the site.

Mr Cuneo: No. By the way, I think there was more than just mercury in that house. From memory, I think there were other bits and pieces; but once it was being protected with lines of hose and it clearly was not under threat, it was not a concern.

The CHAIRMAN: Indeed, you were successful. The house remains.

Mr Cuneo: The house remains.

Mr Stevens: It was a strategic objective of the incident management to protect the house, the laboratory - the shipping container at the front - because that was where we believed there could be chemicals that were more hazardous than the flammable liquids.

The CHAIRMAN: It would have increased the risk?

Mr Stevens: It would have increased the complexity.

The CHAIRMAN: Finally, from me at least at the moment, the Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade submitted to us that the first calls to your communication centre were, as you say, just before 2300 hours, or 11.00 pm, on Thursday night and that the very first caller was asked what type of, and how many, chemicals were involved. The caller replied, "A shit load of chemicals". No other details were recorded, according to the Stoneville people. I understand that emergency-call personnel are rotated and that the initial call that provided an indication that it was a chemical fire plant and not a factory fire, which was the advice later given to the Stoneville brigade, was lost in the rotation of call-centre operators. Is that a reasonable -

Mr Cuneo: I think that is a reasonable assumption to make.

The CHAIRMAN: A reasonable assumption?

Mr Cuneo: Yes, I think so. I am not even sure what the call-out arrangements were to the Bellevue fire. When Midland was turned out it may have been to Bellevue Waste Control, it being on fire. It may not have been to a chemical fire, as you have suggested. I do not have that detail.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay, but in your submission to us, you said that you received a fire call at 22.56.59 hours on 15 February 2001, which was the first of a number of 000 calls from the public received at the Fire and Emergency Services Authority's communication centre through the Telstra 000 line. The communication systems officers were given various descriptions of the fires and incident. A sample of the 000 calls in sequence received at the communications centre followed. Five examples were given. Have you left off the first call?

Mr Cuneo: The first time I was aware of that call was when you read it to me.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay, so you do not have a record of that first call?

Mr Cuneo: The organisation may, but I had not heard those comments about that first call until you made them.

The CHAIRMAN: Sorry. This is your submission?

Mr Cuneo: Yes. It was put together by FESA. My understanding is that it is a sample of the sort of calls that we received.

Mr DAY: It does say a sample.

Mr Cuneo: And they obviously have not included the one that you have quoted.

The CHAIRMAN: But it says a sample of the 000 calls in sequence.

Mr MASTERS: It does not have to start from the first; it can still be in sequence.

The CHAIRMAN: No. I am just asking. That is the point I am getting to: you have not put the first call in, which indicated that the very first contact to FESA through the 000 line suggested that it was a chemical fire.

Mr Cuneo: If that is the case, that is the case.

Mr DAY: Could you access the records of the night?

Mr Cuneo: We can certainly go back and determine the story about the first call.

The CHAIRMAN: I just want to get the story very clear. I want to understand what the very first contact was, what information you had and when you had it. I wonder why you would not put that information in even a sample of calls, if indeed that was the first call?

Mr Cuneo: Okay. I think we will have to go away and come back with that.

Mr BOWLER: Can you trace the number of where the first call, or any call, came from?

Mr Cuneo: Yes, they can.

Mr Stevens: In most cases.

Mr BOWLER: In most cases. Have the police contacted you to try to find out who made the first call to your centre?

Mr Cuneo: Not that I am aware.

Mr BOWLER: Have you tried to trace that.

Mr Cuneo: Not that I am aware.

Mr DAY: Do they normally ask for the name and contact details of the caller?

Mr Cuneo: Yes. I think that information needs to be sought and returned to the committee.

Mr Stevens: It is actually displayed as part of the call-line identification.

Mr DAY: Does it appear if it is a mobile phone or a silent number?

Mr Stevens: If there is some sort of bar on the number, you may not get all of it. That is why I said that it is not in all cases. It is displayed in the majority of cases.

Mr BOWLER: If you subpoenaed Telstra, could Telstra give you that information?

Mr Stevens: We have access to that information from FESA.

The CHAIRMAN: Could you please make those inquiries?

Mr Truswell: You have to be a little careful. Access to call-line identification has some Telstra privacy issues, so you might have to talk to someone from the commonwealth communications authority to see whether you can have that information.

Mr DAY: If the name and address of the caller does not come up, do you normally ask for it?

Mr Truswell: No. We just take the details and mobilise. We know that we can trace it back through that call-line identification. From past history, seconds count in getting appliances on the road to a fire. If we get a call for help, the main objective is to get someone in a fire appliance and out that engine room door as quickly as possible. If we stop and interrogate for names, it makes the call-taking process longer. It will cause greater delay in getting someone to the caller's assistance.

Mr Stevens: In this case, I do not think it would have been used to substantiate the details of the caller because there would have been a number of rapidly escalating 000 calls. It is not used unless there is a specific reason. The main reason it is used is to verify that the caller is in the vicinity of the location, which reduces the number of false reports. I do not think that would be an issue here.

Mr DAY: Obviously what we are getting at is if indeed that call was made, and you are going to try to corroborate that from your records, it would be very interesting to know who made it.

Mr MASTERS: I think we are delving into police business here.

Mr DAY: It should be delved into if that information could be useful in determining the cause of the fire, how it started or in providing other information.

The CHAIRMAN: I note the time. We will conclude after this.

Mr MASTERS: My last comment is to defend the three people who are our witnesses at the moment. The term “chemical fire” means different things to different people. Even the very first phone call that reported a bucket load of chemicals, does not imply toxic, hazardous or really nasty things. I want to draw everyone’s attention to the bottom line of page 8, which shows that a caller said that the place on the corner was on fire and that, “It’s some sort of toxic place.” That would have set some alarm bells ringing. We need to be careful in the use of the terms “chemical fire” and “chemicals”. Clearly white spirit and turps are chemicals, but they do not have the same consequences as pesticides and other substances.

Mr Cuneo: Even when information is received at the communications centre, I do not know what guarantees there are that the information has been passed on; it may not have been passed to the crews who attended.

The CHAIRMAN: We will have to continue this. We are taking evidence next Wednesday and Thursday. Do you have some difficulties?

Mr Cuneo: Yes, I fly out to the country tomorrow morning, and I will be back on 17 September. Other representatives of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority can perhaps attend.

The CHAIRMAN: If you are comfortable with that, it would be useful so that the committee can keep going. If you feel you need to give evidence yourself, we can do that later in September.

Mr DAY: Can you ensure whoever is here is fully briefed.

The CHAIRMAN: I can understand that it is tough being called before the committee. However, we have acknowledged that the people who were directly involved in fighting this fire and managing the incident were under extraordinary stresses. We look forward to continuing the dive down into understanding all the sequences that led to this hearing. The community of Western Australia is entitled to answers. If we are to do everything we can to avoid a repetition of the Bellevue incident, you guys will have to come back and continue to dive down those paths with us.

Committee adjourned at 3.47 pm