

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT LAKE GRACE
MONDAY, 6 NOVEMBER 2006**

SESSION THREE

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)

Mr S.R. Hill

Ms K. Hodson-Thomas

Mrs J. Hughes

Hearing commenced at 11.17 am

ALTHAM, MR BRUCE MARSHALL
President, Shire of Kent, examined:

WRIGHT, MR ALAN BRUCE
Chief Executive Officer, Shire of Kent, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Good morning, gentlemen. Thanks for coming in this morning to the committee and giving us the benefit of your experience. I have some information to read out to you first and then we will ask a couple of questions. I ask that you verbalise your answers, rather than give a nod or a shake of the head, because the Hansard people cannot get that. You have to say yes or no fairly loudly. 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 a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee normally has five people, but for this inquiry, just to be able to get around as quickly as we want to, we split the committee up and different people go to different places. That is the reason you have only two people down here this morning. Could you give us a bit of a description of the Shire of Kent, the size, population, various different things about Kent and what it does?

Mr Wright: The Shire of Kent encompasses approximately 6 800 square kilometres. The population would be in the vicinity of about 480; mainly produce, wheat, sheep and cattle.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give us a bit of an idea of the role that your local government played in the natural disaster relief arrangements in the recent flooding?

Mr Altham: Basically there was only flood damage in a very small portion of the shire, in the north-eastern section of the shire, with approximately 10 roads, I think, affected. Basically after the flood damage we had to go through and just get them all up and opened up again.

The CHAIRMAN: Were they sealed roads or unsealed roads?

Mr Altham: There was one sealed road that we had to close, but the rest of them were unsealed roads. One sealed road is still closed at this stage due to floodwater being over the road still.

The CHAIRMAN: This is, what, 10 months later?

Mr Altham: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Can nothing be done to remove that floodwater? Do you just have to wait for it to subside?

Mr Altham: There is nowhere for it to go because it is in a depression that has never been full in white man's history, and because of the huge floodwaters, they just flooded into this depression. Apart from evaporation, there is nowhere for it to go.

The CHAIRMAN: I take it that it is in a very strong place, soil or something like that, so that it will not flow away.

Mr Altham: Yes; as you say, beautiful dam-holding country, and it just holds water and has just got to evaporate up to the sky.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the council planning an engineering improvement when it reinstates the road so that it cannot happen again, or is it a one in 500-year event type of thing that you are not going to worry about?

Mr Altham: Basically there are two approaches. It is probably a one in 500-year event, but also CALM is in the process of putting in a huge earth drain through the system and we have been working with them over the past 12 months to do that. Hopefully when all that is done through CALM, it may not ever happen again. CALM is spending millions of dollars on the Lake Bryde catchment area, putting a big drain through to, hopefully, alleviate the flooding.

The CHAIRMAN: That must be causing a huge amount of disturbance for wheat growers and farmers in the area, with transportation issues and things like that.

Mr Altham: Yes. We have built a bypass around it, but there is only a traffic road being built around it through CALM land. Luckily, CALM have let us build a track around it. So, yes, there are a lot of farms out there, especially coming out at harvest, wanting us to open this bit of road, but if we do, it will be destroyed.

The CHAIRMAN: How much under water is it - two, three metres or feet?

Mr Altham: Originally it was two metres under water; now it is out of the water about, I think, a metre and there is still probably another five metres to go down to ground level. There is still a lot of water to go.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would that mean that some of the farms are under water as well?

Mr Altham: There are a lot of these types of holes over the whole of that area that are still under water, yes. Because we have not had a lot of rain, everyone thought it was going to evaporate quickly, but it has not evaporated. I think because the subsoil is so wet from the big rain that it has just got to go up; it cannot evaporate out.

The CHAIRMAN: Have those farmers been able to access funding through WANDRA?

Mr Altham: A couple tried, but they did not think there was anything worth going for, or they decided in their own mind that there was no money out there for them that would be of any actual assistance, apart from getting the farm adviser to advise them how bad it is. Everybody knows how bad it is by looking at it, so they did not think there was much point in claiming that sort of money.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you know why they felt that way? Is there anything that you can put your finger on as to why farmers are not opting to access funds, or can they not?

Mr Altham: Really, to access what I understand is only \$1 500 to get a person to look at the situation and tell them, "Yes, you have been hit by flood"? No other money was available to do anything else with, so what was the point? Everybody knew how bad it was.

The CHAIRMAN: But \$1 500 is not limited to that. That is also for technical and financial assistance as well, or advice. So, they have chosen not to do that? It is just not worth it, and that is what they have chosen to do?

Mr Altham: The ones I have spoken to could not see any point in doing it, so they just have not done it.

The CHAIRMAN: What about the local government? Have you been able to access the funding to reinstate the other roads and infrastructure that you have lost?

Mr Altham: Yes, we have put into Main Roads for a grant, and I do not know if we have heard officially.

Mr Wright: No, we still have not heard officially that any funding through Main Roads has been granted for our claim; so our claim is actually in limbo.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the value of your claim in round figures?

Mr Altham: It was \$58 000, and we get two-thirds of that, which I think we are entitled to.

The CHAIRMAN: Seventy-five per cent?

Mr Altham: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And the remainder, as it is a very small rate base? Is the 25 per cent feasible for you or is that going to put other projects in your shire on hold?

Mr Altham: It will put other works on hold for a while but, yes, because we were not hit as badly as other shires, it is not a great loss. As long as we get the 75 per cent, the rest of it will be able to be stood quite easily with our shire.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the Shire of Kent rely in any great part on tourism or traffic through the area? Is that sealed road being cut causing a problem to other businesses around your town?

Mr Wright: We have through traffic. In itself tourism is not a major part of the shire, but because we are on the route from here through to Albany, we get a lot of tourist traffic through. The roads that have been affected, apart from the sealed road, is a main arterial road to a neighbouring council, and the other road that has been affected is in the farming districts and is also a connection between Pingrup and Dumbleyung.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The event happened in January. When did you lodge your claim?

Mr Altham: About probably April.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So you lodged it and you have not heard?

Mr Wright: No. Main Roads has said it is still being assessed.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So you are just covering the cost until -

Mr Altham: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So you do not even know whether it has been accepted as a claim?

Mr Altham: Yes. The rates have paid for the roads at this stage and when we are reimbursed, if we get reimbursed, it will go back into general coffers; but at this stage the shire is covering it.

The CHAIRMAN: So you have re-established all your roads except that one?

Mr Altham: Except that one, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And you have covered the cost of that yourself in entirety?

Mr Altham: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Then when Main Roads comes up with its 75 per cent, that goes back into your road funds?

Mr Wright: That would go back into our road funding and assist us in upgrading the roads that we have not been able to.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Have you had any indication as to when you may have your claim assessed and the money sent out to you?

Mr Wright: No. At my last road meeting with Main Roads, Albany is our head office for the section and they basically have not indicated anything, but they are still being assessed. Obviously they are waiting for funding, either statewide or federal-wise, to do an allocation. The allocation may come as a proportion of allocation, as they do with other funding.

[11.30 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you know whether yours is the only shire in the region that has not had an assessment, or is your shire one of many? Have the other shires been assessed?

Mr Wright: I cannot answer that, Judy; I do not know. I apologise, but it should be borne in mind that I have been down there for just over three months, so I was not personally involved with the direct funding. That is why the shire president is obviously trying to go through the whole lot.

The CHAIRMAN: Does that not seem to be an extraordinarily long time to get an assessment and approval through? I acknowledge that, although \$58 000 is a huge amount of money, in the scheme of this disaster, it is not a huge amount. It seems an extraordinarily long time to get through. It is 75 per cent of \$45 000 or \$48 000.

Mr Wright: Obviously, to us it seems a long time. I think it is because other councils are involved and assessments are being done of the whole lot, and the small ones have not been picked up. Assessments are being done overall rather than individually.

Mr Altham: We are in a different Main Roads zone. We are under Albany and Lake Grace is under Narrogin. We do not know whether that has something to do with the delay. That is why we do not know whether other shires have been paid.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the road that is still under water at the moment a main arterial road for your shire?

Mr Altham: Yes, it is.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that a Main Roads problem to fix or is it a council road?

Mr Altham: It is a council road.

The CHAIRMAN: Does your \$58 000 include the repair of that road?

Mr Altham: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Will that come on top?

Mr Altham: They are not allowing repairs to that road to be claimed as flood damage because it has not washed away. It is only under water, so apparently we cannot claim that as flood damage.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you not know what sort of damage is underneath it?

Mr Altham: No. Even if it had been completely destroyed, according to the criteria for flood damage, as we understand the rules at this stage, the council is completely liable for reinstating that road.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Will your shire fall within the criteria to claim funding for that road, because six months has well and truly passed?

Mr Wright: No. It would not. We will claim it under normal road grants in the following years. The council has just spent almost \$600 000 sealing the complete length of that road within our shire to ensure it is a main arterial road, so it has spent a fair amount of money on it.

The CHAIRMAN: What sort of a budget does the Shire of Kent have?

Mr Wright: We operate on a balanced budget of about \$3.8 million.

The CHAIRMAN: The sum of \$600 000 is a helluva lot.

Mr Wright: We have spent almost \$1.2 million on roads within the shire.

Mr Altham: The funding for that road is only 50 per cent from the shire; the other 50 per cent of funding is from the regional road group. It is under 20-25 roadworks, so we get funding from the government for half of it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So, eventually when the water recedes, will you assess the situation and see whether you can get some assistance to have it repaired, if that is what is required?

Mr Altham: Yes, we will wait until the water disappears. At the moment we can virtually walk on it and feel the road sponging underneath.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It has been under water for a long time.

Mr Altham: It has. It could be under water for another 12 months and then we will have to assess whether it is capable of carrying heavy vehicles. It is a heavy haulage route.

The CHAIRMAN: How are all your heavy haulage trucks getting around? Sorry, you said that a bypass had been created. It is just an unsealed bypass.

Mr Altham: That is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: How much extra distance does that add to the freight route?

Mr Altham: Very minimal distance because the distance on it involves only an extra quarter of a kay.

The CHAIRMAN: So we are talking about a localised route - like a hole in the ground.

Mr Altham: It is, yes

Mrs J. HUGHES: When you assess the damage on that road, would there be mitigation because of the lie of the land? Would you be considering changing some of the structure of the road?

Mr Wright: Probably the cost would outweigh the engineering value of changing it. It could cost up to \$2 million to improve it in that area. A council like ours could not afford that.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you not be better off sealing the bypass, which is only a quarter of a kay, and not worrying about a future event?

Mr Altham: If you get permission from CALM.

The CHAIRMAN: It is on CALM land. Is that a possible solution that you have considered?

Mr Wright: It creates a deviation in the road that is against engineering standards, basically, because of the need for vehicles to slow down. It is completely restricted to, say, a 40-kilometre limit. If it was approved for widening, which obviously would be the first hurdle, its structure would not meet engineering standards.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Can you give me some indication of any other proclaimed disasters that the Shire of Kent has seen, such as drought or is it just this flooding?

Mr Altham: Basically, yes, it is just the flooding issue that has hit us. Probably because of the flooding, drought is not a problem for the community because subsoil moisture has kept the crops going. We are therefore heading for a reasonable year. However, it has cost the council a lot of time and money. Farmers are quite well off at this stage compared to some of our neighbours.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the social impact? Which is the main town in Kent?

Mr Altham: We do not have a main town. Nyabing and Pingrup are approximately the same size. Nyabing has the council office.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any social impact from this flooding? A previous witness from the Shire of Kent told us that she must travel a number of extra kilometres to get her kids to school. I think she said it was an extra 60 or 80 kilometres. Is there any continued impact? Could the school bus not run around to pick up her kids?

Mr Altham: At one stage, children had to go to Lake Grace High School via a deviation. We built probably half a kilometre of road probably eight feet through a lake to open up the road for the school bus to use. That was done at our own expense to get the school bus to a farmer. It would not be just the cost. We were lucky because the gravel pit was very close, so it was just a matter of running two trucks to and fro and dumping the gravel into the water and building up what was there. That opened up the road and the school bus was allowed to use it. Basically, for the community, it was another event coming on top of the other things in the past few years. A few people have become very disheartened with the way things have been going. One person I know has felt that it was the straw that broke the camel's back almost. Through the floods, he has lost all the fences on his farm, and lost hundreds of sheep. I would be very surprised if he can keep going.

The CHAIRMAN: The NDRA fund does not cover fences. Now that you have mentioned fences, do you want to talk about the impact of the flooding on fences? The idea of WANDRA is not a compensation fund; it replaces what is lost but it does not cover fences. Does that have a major impact or is that impacting only on individuals at various times? Can that situation be helped? Is it covered by insurance? How should that be done?

Mr Altham: I suppose it could be covered by insurance. Very few people can afford to insure fencing for flood damage. I doubt that any farmers around this area ever insure fencing for flood damage.

The CHAIRMAN: How are fences damaged? In my mind's eye there is a rush of water that washes the ground away but this was a raindrop event. Was there still rushing water?

[11.39 am]

Mr Altham: Yes, a huge rush of water. Basically, what causes fence damage is that you getting running water, gravel stubble, tree material, building up against the fence. You end up with a solid wall and the only place it has to go is to push the fence over or go over the top. It always just pushes it over. One farmer I know probably lost at least eight kilometres of brand new fencing, and it is literally not usable again; it has just gone.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give us an idea of the cost of that eight kilometres of fencing, if you know? You might not know.

Mr Altham: You are looking at probably \$2 000 a kilometre of fencing to buy and erect. That would only just cover the cost.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is that labour?

Mr Altham: Yes, that is erection. About \$1 000 to \$1 200 a kilometre just for the material. There is also the time and effort of having to do that without doing all the other work as well. The amount of water is incomprehensible - how high the water level got out there. I am six feet and there was stuff in the trees above my height. It was just one of those rare events.

The CHAIRMAN: What about other property damage - farm buildings, houses; did they escape mostly or did you lose a lot of those?

Mr Altham: No, I think most farm buildings escaped. A fair bit of machinery went under water. I know one farmer who still has two tractors under water. He does not really know quite where they are in a lake. Things like that. Basically it is just water damage, washing huge drains through their farms. One I have seen is probably eight feet deep. It was dead flat before the flood; now it is just a big drain through the middle of the farm.

The CHAIRMAN: In your opinion is there anything more that the WANDRA funding should cover? Is there anything major that is not covered by funding that you think should be covered?

Mr Altham: Personally I think farmers should be able to get flood damage for fences and that type of stuff, even if it is only an interest-free loan to be able to replace what was lost.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that not covered under the \$150 000 loan with the four per cent interest rebate? Cannot farmers access that to replace their fencing?

Mr Altham: From what I understand, as long as they can go to their normal bank and get the finance they are not capable of getting that money. It is a question of whether the banks will lend them the money. That is my understanding of the situation.

The CHAIRMAN: So they have to be in a situation where the bank is saying that we are not giving you any more money. Then they can access this \$150 000 which gives them an effective three per cent interest rate.

Mr Altham: That is my understanding.

The CHAIRMAN: Roughly. I mean, I know the interest rate changes. Are you saying they are really in a catch 22 situation? The bank will not lend them the money and NDRA and WANDRA funding conditions say that if they get a loan of up to \$150 000, government will cover four per cent of the interest. Would a bank then say, okay, we will give you the loan on that basis - for a farmer? I do not think the bank would do that in a residential area.

Mr Altham: I suppose it depends on each farmer's personal circumstances. It has to be looked at from the bank's point of view as to how it would help, I would imagine. There just seems to be too many - not loopholes - barriers in the system that farmers have to go through.

The CHAIRMAN: That is a kind of contradiction, is it not? A four per cent interest rebate will be made available, but for a farmer to get that the bank has to say in the first place that the farmer cannot get a loan.

Mr Altham: That is right, yes. Usually if you are that far in debt, the bank will not give you a loan and there is no point. You might as well sell up anyway.

The CHAIRMAN: We might find out the exact mechanism for getting that \$150 000, because we have a belief that that is not exactly the case from the evidence that has been given to us already. We will have to see if we can clarify that. When this inquiry was passed on to us from the Assembly, they were the sorts of things that people were raising. I think it was Graham Jacobs and the member for Stirling, Terry Redman, who raised issues like that - that there was confusion as to what farmers can get, and that what farmers can get is not enough. There was a complaint that \$1 500 is not enough; it is a waste of time. Then there seems to be this quandary of the four per cent rebate and up to \$150 000 by way of loan. There seems to be some confusion as to how people access that. We will see if we can get that clarified for a start.

Mr Altham: Like most government money, there does not seem to be enough information put out to the public that is clear enough to say this is what you have to do. It seems to be "You apply and we will tell you what the next step is, but you have to apply first." There does not seem to be a person who can say, "These are the exact steps" or "These are the criteria to go for this money." It was the same a few years ago with the drought - probably 10 years ago now - when we had to go to the Ag department. They said, "Just apply and we'll see whether you fit in it." They were not able to tell the person who was applying what all the criteria were. No-one seemed to know.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So farmers would be reluctant to carry out any major works in fear of the fact that they may not pick up funding?

Mr Altham: That is correct, yes. A lot of people think that by the time they wait three months after applying and doing all the paper work and then find out that they are going to miss out, they might as well get out there and do it themselves.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Just do it?

Mr Altham: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: As far as the assessment processes for the shire to access WANDRA funding and so forth are concerned, is the shire equipped with staffing expertise, management, engineers and all that sort of thing to access that funding?

Mr Wright: We are not at this stage, Judy. I believe what the council has done is go out and do all the works to reinstate and it has not tried to access funding outside the normal flood damage and road improvements applications.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you believe that due to the resources you have in the shire there is a possibility there are areas in the shire that probably were not assessed as well as they could have been? Was there someone on hand through FESA or some other government department that could come in and help you assess your damage?

Mr Wright: Basically we did self-assessment, and once the application went through to Main Roads it came out and did evaluations.

Mr Altham: It would have been a big help if we could have sourced an engineer from somewhere else under the disaster relief scheme to come and say, "This is the situation", but if we had to employ someone to come in it was an extra cost we had to bear.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You cannot add that staffing to your relief?

Mr Wright: We could, but if we do not get it council has to pick up the tab.

Mr Altham: It would be nice if the government said, "If you are going to put in for flood relief, there is a certain amount of money available to get in expertise" and say whether we can or cannot get funding before we apply. We thought we could not afford to take that chance. We have just done it. We may be short-changing ourselves. We may have got a lot more money if we had had proper -

The CHAIRMAN: It is a gamble, isn't it?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Were you clear on how to access the funding arrangements or was it not clear as to where you were to go first?

Mr Altham: I think it was fairly clear where the money was going to come from. What was less clear was what was classed as flood damage and what was classed as normal wet weather funding. A classic example is the road that is under water. Technically it is not flood damage but we still class it as flood damage because without the flood it would not have happened. There were quite a few roads in the same boat. The road used by the school bus would still be under water now if we had not built up the road, but they have classed that as not being flood damage - it is just water on the road.

[11.50 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: The works that were done there are not claimable either to assist your social patterns to continue through your shire.

Mr Altham: That is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the council provide any relief to its ratepayers through rate relief?

Mr Wright: Proportionally, but not in funding. The way in which council has assisted has been to try to keep the rate increase to a minimum. Council has also given a non-penalty period of extension; in other words, instead of penalising ratepayers immediately after non-payment of rates, the council has allowed an extension of non-penalties to the end of January 2007 in this case. That is the only way we have directly benefited the ratepayers of the district.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The shire would find it very difficult with its size and income to grant any complete deferment of rates.

Mr Altham: That would really hurt us. It would not send us broke, but it would definitely hurt our coffers if we deferred all those rates for 12 months or two years.

The CHAIRMAN: Even up to January, that is the normal time. Off the top of my head, rates need to be paid in about September or October.

Mr Wright: It is 35 days after the rates notices go out. Additional funding comes from investment funds, so we will possibly lose \$20 000 to \$40 000 in investment funds this year because of the decision that was made.

The CHAIRMAN: I think you said that there was minimal damage to buildings and that type of property. Do you have anything in place that allows fees for building licences or demolition licences to be waived if there was damage to those types of buildings, or has it not been considered yet?

Mr Altham: At the moment, the Shire of Kent does not have building licences on farm land; it is only on towns. Under the new act, it seems as though we will have to do it, but at the moment it is only on the towns.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you have any emergency groups in your shire to assist?

Mr Altham: Not really, no. The only ones we have are St John and Lions; there is no SES.

Mrs J. HUGHES: All the farmers were basically hands on deck and community minded.

Mr Altham: Basically, yes. If someone wanted a hand, he let everyone know and people went in and helped him. It was not done as a shire thing; it was done as a mate helping out a mate type of thing.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Did FESA visit you to talk about emergency operations?

Mr Altham: Not that I know of, no. We never saw FESA. The shire put in its graders and front-end loaders to help people reinstate their driveways to their houses and that type of thing. I never saw anyone from FESA.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you do that free of charge?

Mr Altham: Yes, it was free of charge.

The CHAIRMAN: That would have been a big help, because that is not cheap machinery to hire and make available to do that sort of thing.

Mr Altham: The shire decided that with any damage from fire or flood, the machinery would be available for use by ratepayers in an emergency. They pay for it, so in emergencies they should be allowed to have access to it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Basically, you are saying that the Shire of Kent has been quite lucky with its previous emergency events. Has this been one of your few emergency events? Do you have a regional strategy or a local emergency strategy that has come out of this particular emergency event?

Mr Altham: I would not say that it was the only emergency we have had. Two years ago we had a huge fire in our shire, and another fire was very close to us. The same thing happened then; the shire went in with its machinery to help fight it. We have not formed a task force to look at it; everybody seems happy with what we are doing. The shire shuts down and just goes into preservation mode.

Mrs J. HUGHES: All hands on deck.

Mr Altham: Yes. Whatever the community asks for and we have, it gets.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you get any advice at all from FESA on fighting strategies, for example? You had a big fire two years ago. Was FESA involved in that?

Mr Altham: No. It was tied up because it was the same day as the big Lake Grace fire. That night in Katanning we were just left to our own devices.

Mr Wright: Under the new emergency management act, the Shire of Kent is still awaiting approval for a joint venture LEMC with the Shires of Katanning, Woodanilling and Broome Hill. That is in its infancy at the moment. We met as recently as last week. That will tie into the recovery and all those other requirements under the act. We have not just sat back and ignored it. We are in our first step of the combined committee. Obviously we need approval from FESA for shires to combine.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You did not appear to get a great deal of DCD or FESA assistance for your residents who were affected by the disaster, whether that be by the fire or the flood. Did you get assistance from anywhere during those events?

Mr Altham: No, but I do not know whether that was because we did not know that funds were available and did not apply for them. We have never received any -

The CHAIRMAN: What about the Department of Agriculture and Food? You are a major farming community. The agriculture department probably would not have an officer in your area, but you would have access to an officer.

Mr Altham: As far as the fire was concerned, yes, the agriculture department assessed the livestock that was injured and gave permission to destroy livestock. Apart from that, there has been no input from any other department that I know of.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there anything else that you think should be included in the inquiry that we have not covered?

Mr Altham: I would like to stress the fact that communication is the number one priority. We hear schemes on the wireless about the government doing this or that, but it does not seem to follow them through with information on how, why or when all this will be done and how people can apply. It seems to like big headlines, but when it comes to communication and availability, it does not seem to flow through as I feel it should. It makes no difference whether people cannot get the money; it is just knowing that money is available and these are the hoops that they have to hop through to get it. There does not appear to be feedback to local people and the shires. If it were handed back through the shire, people would know who to contact to find out what to do to apply and if they did not fit the criteria, they would not get any funding.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It appears that the local government in the Shire of Kent seems to be the hub of information for the community, if there were any information. There does not appear to be another agency that can afford any assistance to residents. If you do not have the information, it is very hard to relay it to your people.

Mr Altham: That is right. The agriculture department is based in Lake Grace and Katanning, so those are the towns that people logically go to. However, we have none of that in our shire. When residents ask us to get information on their behalf, we are asked why we do not know; we should know, but no-one lets us know the information. If they let us know, we could pass it on, but there seems to be a brick wall and people do not want to tell us what is going on.

Mrs J. HUGHES: What is your staff complement?

Mr Wright: I have a total of 24 staff, and that is combined from both towns. We have employees from both towns within the shire.

The CHAIRMAN: Again, I thank you for appearing this morning and contributing to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of the 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.

Mr Wright: I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to attend.

Mr Altham: What is the time frame for that information to be afforded to us?

The CHAIRMAN: The transcript will be provided in three or four days. Thank you again.

Hearing concluded at 12.01 pm
