

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO 2011 KIMBERLEY ULTRAMARATHON EVENT

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT KUNUNURRA
TUESDAY, 24 APRIL 2012**

SESSION THREE

Members

Dr M.D. Nahan (Chairman)
Mr W.J. Johnston (Deputy Chairman)
Mr M.P. Murray
Ms A.R. Mitchell
Mr I.C. Blayney
Mrs M.H. Roberts (Co-opted Member)

Hearing commenced at 12.45 pm**SALERNO, MR JAMES****Cattle Operator/Landowner, Salerno Pastoral, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for appearing before the committee today. This 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.

Before we commence, I need to ask you a couple of questions. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

Mr Salerno: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

Mr Salerno: Indeed; I have read everything.

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

Mr Salerno: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions about giving evidence today?

Mr Salerno: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we ask any questions, do you wish to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Salerno: Yes, if you do not mind. In my capacity as a witness, I believe that I understand the situation as well as anybody can understand that type of event because when we had El Questro I organised something of exactly the same capacity for six years in a row, and there were international competitors as well. I understand that whole thing fairly well. I also had the opportunity to speak to the chap who was organising it. As far as I know, his name was Carlos. That is the name I remember. I had a look at the path that they were taking and how he had organised it. From that perspective, I thought that he had everything under control, meaning that if you followed this path exactly, you would not get lost. From my perspective, it was well done. The other aspect is that regardless of how much you can try to organise something in this sort of country, let us be clear about it: it is not just going around an oval 50 times or going down a track from A to B. Unforeseen circumstances can definitely arise along the way. The night before I would advise the runners, the competitors, and try to tell them every possible thing that could happen, except as you know today we had 105 millimetres in one place at the station. It was not everything. When you have a million acres, there are places that have six millimetres and places that have 105 millimetres and right next door, 20 millimetres. Some places are dry. It just does not connect with that. You need to understand that about the tropics. If we had the run, I would never have thought of saying, “Just be careful of a flash flood.”

[12.50 pm]

One of the things I could say is that it is difficult to cater for everything. Without supporting or knocking whatever the organisers have done, all I can say is that I have had experience in it. We covered as much as we could but when they are going across that range where we stopped the other day just before the gorge, over that hill, they are on their own and do not know what could possibly happen. As I said to you on Sunday, it could be a king brown or even a smaller snake. It could be anything. There could be a bull up top there. People can slip and all sorts of things can happen.

They are the risks and I believe that that is what the competitors liked about it. I went in my events and other events such as this and that is what I liked about it. It was not on a straight track. If it was, I would not pay thousands of dollars to go in it. It is obviously what competitors want. They would want to know what they are getting themselves into beforehand. You would not pay that much money to go in a race if you were not that way inclined. As I said, lots of unforeseen circumstances can happen, and one of them was the fire. As I said to you on Sunday, normally it is not a problem. There are fires up here. Yesterday you saw that tall grass, the spear grass. I do not know whether you have had experiences with it. If I insult your knowledge, I do not mean to. Spear grass has to wait until it is bent a little bit until it lights but when it does bend, it all catches onto each other and it lights really well and goes up reasonably fast. Then you have the spinifex, especially on top of the hills and on the ranges. That is a different type of grass. Even if it is green, it still burns and it burns slowly but it keeps burning simply because of the content. We understand that. Even if there is a fire, there is the possibility of either stepping over it, jumping over it or basically avoiding it because in some places it just does not burn, whether it is spear grass or not. There are little patches of green grass or patches of complete rocky ground or bare rock. I would have thought that the safest place to be if I was competing would be on top of the ranges because that is what you could avoid. Again, I will say that it is a complete coincidence. When I first heard these people telling me that some people were burnt, I thought it could have been a slight burn as they were jumping over the fire. They did not tell me the seriousness of it; maybe they did not know. I thought they probably just burnt their socks or their shoes. I definitely did not think it was serious, not as serious as we later discovered. From my experience—not too many people have organised things like this—that incident was a complete coincidence. It must have been a perfect situation for that to happen, as unfortunate as it may be. Besides the other statement I made, that is what I want to make clear.

The CHAIRMAN: What kind of events did you organise in the past? You mentioned that you organised six.

Mr Salerno: The event was more or less like the one you are inquiring into here. Really good people would probably do it in two and a half hours. Most people would take between three and four hours. You can imagine how far it would be. It is close to 40 kilometres. I always told them it was 36 kilometres but they would come to me and say it was more like a marathon. You cannot measure it that well when you are going over ranges. Even though it was a little more rugged than this one, there was not a lot on track. We had ranges all around the homestead. I tried to organise it so it was never too far away from the homestead. If there were any problems at all, a competitor could basically discontinue at a checkpoint or come directly to the homestead. We had that luxury. That was my way of making sure that it was as safe as possible. That is the type of event it was. It was more or less exactly the same.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you run a number of these in a row?

Mr Salerno: Yes. We ran it every year. People knew about it.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you charge for entry to it?

Mr Salerno: From what I remember, the Argyle diamond mine had a diamond for the women and money for the men, \$1 000 or something. It was quite good.

The CHAIRMAN: I understand it was filmed.

Mr Salerno: Yes, Channel Seven or Channel Nine in Darwin has it.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you ever have any accidents?

Mr Salerno: We did, which is the one I told you about. I think a chap was so enthralled with the scenery, he was running along the edge of a cliff and he basically just kept going. The next thing he knew, he was dangling on the edge, trying to put his leg up.

The CHAIRMAN: You told us a story about doing it with your son.

Mr Salerno: That was not in the race. That is near that gorge where we were. My nephew was taking my son, who is not here at the moment. He was only two or three years old. We placed him on the top of the ledge. My nephew was sitting there and a king brown was curled up right there. If he had moved one way or the other, he could have been finished because it would have taken quite a while to get him to Kununurra, especially being a young child. They are the types of things that can happen anywhere.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you have any correspondence with RacingThePlanet? They went across your land. Did they get in touch with you?

Mr Salerno: They contacted the people at El Questro, the management. They let us know as soon as humanly possible what was going on. We found that was a good way of doing it. They let us know what they were doing. They had a course that was going to go in another place, which was further inland from the Gibb River Road. I could not agree with that. Firstly, it was where we were shooting cattle and there were lots of cattle in that area. Carlos, reluctantly, had to divert the course.

The CHAIRMAN: Did he have correspondence with you?

Mr Salerno: No, he did not have it with me. I coincidentally met him on the track, which he was setting to go one way. I said that I agreed with everything but I could not let him go that way.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: When was that?

Mr Salerno: It was the day before the race.

The CHAIRMAN: You just coincidentally met him out on your property and he would have taken them to a more dangerous area.

Mr Salerno: It was not along a track. It was way out, further south than where we were.

The CHAIRMAN: And there was an issue of cattle.

Mr Salerno: I just thought there were too many cows there, which meant there was a bull there. You can understand that they are wild. We have people culling at the moment so there are certain animals we do not want to breed, and they do breed, so we shoot them. We do not waste them; we give them to the crocodile farm, so everyone is happy.

The CHAIRMAN: How did you have correspondence with Carlos?

Mr Salerno: Official correspondence came through the management of El Questro. They received the physical correspondence. They would call our manager and he would tell us what was happening. We would say yes, no or whatever.

The CHAIRMAN: Did he go to you and say, "Listen, we've run these events before"?

Mr Salerno: He may not have known that. I happened to meet him a day or so before.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you see the track before?

Mr Salerno: Initially, yes. When they were going to have it, a year or so before that, they said they were going to have this run through the Kimberley, somewhere from El Questro. I remember telling my family, thinking, "I don't know if they know what sort of country they are going through." It is different. I lived with the Aborigines in central Australia. I am initiated with the Pitjantjatjarra, so I understand a bit about the land and the type of land. I would rather be running through the desert than running through country like this. If you do not know it, it gets to you very quickly. I remember saying, and I am sure they remember me saying, that I do not know whether they should be doing this. Then I heard they were going to do it at night-time.

The CHAIRMAN: That was the 2010 race.

Mr Salerno: Yes, and I thought “definitely not”. They invited me to go in it. Night-time walking through that sort of bush is asking for trouble, I think.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you see the track that they had laid down that Carlos was in charge of before the race started?

Mr Salerno: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did he ask you what you thought?

[1.00 pm]

Mr Salerno: Yes, he said that to me. I initially said he cannot go that way. He said, “What about going through Emma Gorge?” I said that sounded more reasonable. We had a track there. They are never too far off the track. They go up the hill and down the other side there is a track. We have done that track. We have gone from the corner of the road that goes to Wyndham and walked from there over to the gorge. It is not too bad. It is rough. I thought that was not too far for them to call a chopper in or someone to ask for help.

The CHAIRMAN: When you ran the races, what kind of communication systems did you have?

Mr Salerno: I invited the army around to do an exercise, so they had their walkie-talkies.

The CHAIRMAN: Were they on the ridge as volunteers?

Mr Salerno: They were in strategic positions, which I thought would be safe enough, between one place and another, and the communication was good. As I said, I had the luxury of being able to run it more or less around the homestead. When I say “around the homestead”, it was kilometres away but it would not be far to either carry someone or drive.

The CHAIRMAN: They had a race in 2010 that had some communication problems and then they came in, essentially, days before the race. We heard reports about lack of communication, Iridium phones with too many digits and not being able to access the UHF and all that stuff. What kind of communications do you use?

Mr Salerno: We use the sat phone. It is important up here to have communication. Anything can happen very, very quickly. We have had people who have just collapsed in a matter of hours, without water. I consider that we are taking a big risk. Obviously, if we have to sometimes, we do, but I would not put a lot of people in that position. I would not organise people who are not used to this sort of country to be in a position where the communication is not good.

The CHAIRMAN: Especially when running.

Mr Salerno: Yes, especially. As I said, when I heard that they were going to do the run in either April or September, this is not the time. May, June, July or August at the latest would be a better time.

The CHAIRMAN: What do you think the optimal time to run that race would be?

Mr Salerno: May, June, July, and no later than August.

The CHAIRMAN: Why?

Mr Salerno: Do you know how sometimes you can tell when it goes from autumn to spring? Something happens in the air. This is what it is like up here. It gets humid. The relative humidity is thick. If you know anything about that, the body cannot breathe. There is already moisture in the air. One of the amazing things about being in this area is there is not much breeze, especially in the wet. As soon as the wet comes, everything goes really still. That is exactly the time when you want it, when you are perspiring. Anyone who is up there will tell you that. You just wish there was a little breeze. That is why it changes dramatically in those times.

The CHAIRMAN: We heard that September was the optimal period to minimise fire risk.

Mr Salerno: We are lighting fires now. They are going slow, which is what we want. We do not want them to be burning all the leaves of the trees. Irrespective of who said that, I would have to say that September is as good as any other time.

The CHAIRMAN: But no time is optimal.

Mr Salerno: In the wet, you cannot light a damn thing. As long as you can light it, it will go. It is just slower. This time of the year is very good because it does not damage the trees or the bushes and the land does not get that hot. It does not burn all the seeds. It is a good time if you were going to do it.

The CHAIRMAN: Carlos was one of the organisers. I think he organised the route with John Storey and others, but a number of people were involved in organising the event. They did not approach you via email or seek your advice.

Mr Salerno: I think John Storey ran in the race that I put on. If he says he did not, I will accept that but I thought he did.

The CHAIRMAN: His wife ran in the 2010 race.

Mr Salerno: Yes, I do remember that. The first thing I said to John when he called me to go to his place is the same thing I would say to anybody—I do not think they should be running through this country. He said that they had run all over the world and they had run in Africa. I do not think that that climate is the same as this. There is something different about it, just in this area, about 150 kilometres square. I remember when I first came out to El Questro, we did not have air conditioning where we were. If we ever had to leave, I would take the children and drive about 150 kilometres down the road and camp because it was that much cooler. This area is two or three degrees warmer. It makes a big difference when you are already hot.

The CHAIRMAN: Did anybody contact you on the day? Were you at your station on the day? Did anybody contact you about events, issues and the emergency?

Mr Salerno: No.

The CHAIRMAN: The accident did not take place on your property, did it?

Mr Salerno: If it took place on top of the ridge, that is outside as the boundary weaves around. As I said to you on Sunday, we used the boundary, which is a good demarcation, like the ridges. Somebody might say, “That river is on your side.” That is how we do it when there are no fences.

The CHAIRMAN: But they did not contact the station owner for assistance?

Mr Salerno: No.

The CHAIRMAN: You have communication devices—Iridium.

Mr Salerno: Yes, we do.

The CHAIRMAN: Did they get your number? If you were running across the station, you would get the station owner’s number, just in case. You never know.

Mr Salerno: It would seem reasonable. I cannot remember any one of those wanting direct contact with us. They may have been with the homestead but not with any of us.

The CHAIRMAN: If you were organising an event somewhere else, not on your own property, what would you do? Let us say you were going to do it.

Mr Salerno: I would be looking for so many things because I just understand how dangerous it is. I have been in this area for about 30 years. It is like home. I understand it well. One thing I like about it is that you either do it right or it does not give you a second chance. A lot of people who have been here for a second time say this. That is what I like about it. It makes me do things right. If I was organising it, first of all, I would be a little apprehensive about it, either through country like

this or in Africa or even through desert. I would have to know everything about it. Personally, this is more than what I thought they knew about this country, without knocking anybody.

The CHAIRMAN: On the day, as we understand it, they went from checkpoint 2, close to where you took us on Sunday. Then they went up through the ravine, up over the hill. As they were approaching the other side, they saw smoke.

Mr Salerno: There is no doubt they would have.

The CHAIRMAN: They saw smoke, and they kept going. They got down further. They might have gone quite a way down and then they saw flames. Evidently, there was a substantial wall of flames.

Mr Salerno: If it was coming down the hill, it would be. That is when it rages.

The CHAIRMAN: They might have hit a high fire load area. As you say, it is probably the worst place to be at that time.

Mr Salerno: It is, definitely.

The CHAIRMAN: From a race protocol, if you came over that ridge, between checkpoints 2 and 3, would it not be reasonable to say, "Where there's smoke, there's fire. We're cancelling. We're going back"? There does not appear to be a protocol in there that says, "What do you do if you see a pile of smoke coming your way?"

Mr Salerno: I do not want to be smart after the event. I think I said something like this on Sunday. I will give you this example again. I would have had everything in place to advise the competitors in my run or in this run but I would not have thought of a flash flood. It could have happened. I would have seen the smoke, seen the flames and I would have thought that there is a way around this. I do not want to say you are not a competitor, but you might like running. If someone likes running and they like running in that sort of situation, they just love the idea of a challenge. If you do not like it in the first place and you saw smoke, I think you would get out of there. If it happened to me, I would be thinking there must be a way around this, stupid as it may sound.

[1.10 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: There might be a way around hell.

Mr Salerno: You know what people do; they make all sorts of stupid decisions.

The CHAIRMAN: A lot of people spend their life doing that.

Ms A.R. MITCHELL: You made a comment earlier about catching up with Mr Storey. Was that before the event?

Mr Salerno: It might have been before 2010. It was before they even decided to do it. I did not know anything about it, this race that they run around the planet. He asked me where would be a good place to have it, maybe through El Questro. I think I said something like "none of it".

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of communication with RacingThePlanet, we have received advice that they were in touch with you weeks before the race.

Mr Salerno: We arranged that whatever communication they have, they have it through the management of El Questro and they would let us know and that is how we knew that they were doing it. This may or may not be important, but we clearly communicated the information to the station, to the tourist people.

The CHAIRMAN: At El Questro?

Mr Salerno: Yes, the tourist people at El Questro. We said, "We do not want them to go through that area." I do not know whether it was on the day I met Carlos. I said, "I thought you were told not to go through this area." I was quite direct. He said, "We did not receive the information."

The CHAIRMAN: When was that?

Mr Salerno: I told you about the situation, and I met him.

The CHAIRMAN: When did you advise El Questro that you did not want the race to go through that area of your property?

Mr Salerno: As soon as we heard about it. It would have been weeks. We can look it up, but it was a long time beforehand. If they planned it in two weeks, they would have given us two weeks to respond and we would have responded straight away.

The CHAIRMAN: On the day there was an issue about emergency services. As you say, you have to plan for all events and you have to plan for an adverse outcome.

Mr Salerno: Definitely.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it hard to organise FESA, SES, St John or any other support backup?

Mr Salerno: It is not difficult, as you know. We could have had some sort of vehicle at the gorge at the other end. It did not have to be an ambulance or anything like that, but definitely just in case. It would not be difficult at all.

The CHAIRMAN: If I run on people's stations, I would try to get you guys involved, not just in the planning.

Mr Salerno: You are absolutely right. I could have got the Army or the police involved. I did ask them to. The more that can be involved in monitoring, the better it is for everybody.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: You had a look at the course with Carlos the day before. You met him out on the course and you had a map seeing where the course was. Was the section between checkpoint 2 and checkpoint 3 the most hazardous stage of the course or were there other hazardous parts of the course?

Mr Salerno: I just know it because I have walked it so I did not have to look at a map. That particular part of the gorge, where it goes up and then goes down, it is not just going up and then down; it does not go that way. You have to go up and down and around another gully. If you are fit—they had water, of course, and there is plenty of water in the gorges—I do not think it would be that hazardous.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: Do you mean “hazardous” in terms of the danger of fire, the difficulty in being rescued and that kind of thing?

Mr Salerno: If you are in that sort of country, it is difficult to be rescued.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: It would not have mattered what stage of the course you were on. Are all stages equally difficult to get rescued from?

Mr Salerno: We travelled on a rough track on Sunday. That is not too bad; it is not a problem. It is fairly flat land. You can almost go through that flat land with a vehicle, providing you do it slowly. When you are up there, you do not know. You are taking a chance. If you saw it, that is all you can say. Imagine trying to get somebody on a stretcher or carrying somebody up a cliff or down it. It really is an extreme race.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: If someone was injured towards the end of the day when light is failing, how would you get someone out in the late afternoon or early evening?

Mr Salerno: Can you imagine why I said, “Are you crazy going out at night-time?” Our snakes come out at night because it is cooler up here. They are not forgiving. You could run in the day in the desert. It is still dangerous but at night-time, no way. Whether it be day or towards the end of the day, that is really serious.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: From what the Heliwork people said, they are not rated to fly at night to get in there. Presumably, the only way in is by four-wheel drive and/or walking.

Mr Salerno: If you want to go up there, basically you have to have three or four people or more than that to carry the person out. It would not matter how light the person is. It is just so difficult.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: If someone slipped and got a back injury —

Mr Salerno: Or an ankle. It could be anything.

The CHAIRMAN: In other words, there are circumstances that you cannot guard against.

Mr Salerno: You cannot advise. As I said to you on Sunday, we are humans not gods. Once they have gone up that cliff, there is nothing you can do. It is a pure risk. That is why at the El Questro race, people probably did not notice this; it was interesting, it was challenging but it was on the edge of the cliff. We could almost see them. It was good running. They did not have to go up and down. They are lost, once they are in that range. I have walked through there several times. Once you are down in a gully, you have to climb up again. Imagine carrying a stretcher! Only a chopper can get them out if you are not licensed to fly at night.

The CHAIRMAN: And there is no winch.

Mr Salerno: That is right.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think the competitors knew the risks that they were getting into?

Mr Salerno: You know what I said about being stupid before? If you are that way inclined, you go into it but you do not really understand. You know it is challenging and interesting and you like this whole idea but you really do not think of everything. Does that answer the question?

The CHAIRMAN: In your view, who is responsible for organising the risk management; that is, identifying the risk, trying to address what the scenarios would be, trying to get help, if need be, trying to organise communication and whatnot? Who is responsible for ensuring that that is done?

Mr Salerno: Obviously not the PR person. I would have thought it would be the person on the ground, put in two kilometres from here to here, knowing what that two kilometres entails, whether it entails something that humans can do or it is a bit difficult.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think it would be a major omission if the people organising the race, wherever they may be, did not contact the shire and say, “We’re going to do it. What do you need? FESA, St John, SES, police, you”?

Mr Salerno: I definitely would have contacted a company that had a chopper at least, at least one company.

The CHAIRMAN: Here is what they did. One of the offshoots that were doing the filming contracted Heliwork to put a big camera on it. They had a camera chopper. They asked about having a standby for emergencies. The firm said, “Yes, but you have to pay for two hours. You can keep it all day but you have to pay for two hours.”

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: They had it on standby.

[1.20 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: They had it on standby but they declined to accept that. When the accident happened, they found that the chopper with the camera had a big camera poking off the rails so they could not get in there.

Mr Salerno: That is why it could not get down.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: And other equipment inside.

The CHAIRMAN: Luckily, the other one was available; the smaller one was on standby, and it saved the day.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: They took a considerable risk, affecting the rescue.

Mr Salerno: That is exactly right. It was night by the time that was done.

The CHAIRMAN: It was close to it. They got to the hospital around dusk. Things came together. They hit a bad spot, as you say, but things came together with the chopper and the people on the chopper. They really saved the day.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: In the meantime, the burns victims had been out there for three hours.

The CHAIRMAN: Three and a half.

Mr Salerno: That is what I could not believe. I did not imagine that they could have been so badly burnt. I thought someone had jumped over the fire and burnt a garment or something like that.

The CHAIRMAN: Everybody, including John Storey, was very surprised. He saw fire. It was rather sedate. At about 11.30 he saw that it had picked up significantly in that area but he could not contact anybody. He contacted the other helicopter pilot, who then landed and shouted to one of the organisers with the helicopter on saying there was a fire coming. There was a complete lack of communication.

Mr Salerno: Do you realise that that fire was going for quite a while?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Salerno: We could see it coming. It is important for us to know that because we have cattle and equipment along the way.

The CHAIRMAN: Your cattle would run from it.

Mr Salerno: As I said, we have never found any cattle that have been affected in that way. They probably have a track that they always go to and get away from it.

The CHAIRMAN: The cattle are smarter than some of the runners.

Mr Salerno: I will not comment. I am a runner.

The CHAIRMAN: So am I. There is a psychology to it; once you are in a race, you go in one direction.

Mr Salerno: Are you talking about common sense?

The CHAIRMAN: You said that you would try to run through it.

Mr Salerno: Having lived here and knowing, if I saw spear grass, I would not be running through the spear grass. You can identify it. If you run through spear grass, you are asking for trouble. I would be looking for a clear spot, stopping there or heading for a clear spot.

The CHAIRMAN: Could you have imparted that knowledge on somebody new to the area in time to incorporate that into the race?

Mr Salerno: Definitely.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: That is what the geologists attempted to do.

Mr Salerno: It is a common sense thing.

The CHAIRMAN: The geologists would have been trained and known. If you were going to give somebody a briefing on fire in the area, you would say that if you see smoke, here are some things that you would do.

Mr Salerno: Definitely. "Spear grass is like this. This grass is like this. Head for a clear area. Do not go that way."

The CHAIRMAN: The geologists knew it because they work at Telfer. The real issue is whether we found evidence of that happening with people new to the area.

Mr Salerno: If you are running through country like this, that is the problem—you do not know everything.

The CHAIRMAN: Several witness statements referred to competitors and volunteers coming into contact with you or at least one of your sons during the emergency response after the event. Do you remember this and can you confirm the discussions you had with competitors and volunteers on the afternoon of the race?

Mr Salerno: I remember what I wrote, that two people waved me down. I forgot their numbers now; they had numbers on. They said that somebody had been burnt. At the time I felt that they did not seem to be really concerned. That is probably why I got the idea that it was not bad. It was not like, “Quick, quick, this person is completely burnt or has third-degree burns.” It was not like that. I do not know whether they knew the degree of injury or not. I felt that they were purely saying, “Look, there is somebody here who has got burnt and somebody else should know about it.”

The CHAIRMAN: Did they ask for your assistance?

Mr Salerno: From what I remember, I volunteered to tell the organisers. I said, “Where is the checkpoint?” As soon as I knew somebody was burnt, obviously, they needed assistance.

The CHAIRMAN: Did they ask you to go to a checkpoint?

Mr Salerno: I think I volunteered. I asked them where the next checkpoint was so I could go and tell somebody.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you go there?

Mr Salerno: Yes, definitely, straight away. I was going that way anyway.

The CHAIRMAN: What did you find?

Mr Salerno: There was a group of people there—15 or 20 people. I wanted to find somebody in charge so I could give them that information. I told them that two people had given me this information. I gave them the numbers of these people and I said that these people had said that somebody had been hurt. If I had the idea that it was bad, I would have said that they were badly hurt and they needed assistance straight away. I did not say that.

The CHAIRMAN: Did they know how bad it was?

Mr Salerno: It seemed like they did not know anything. I carried that sort of feeling with me.

The CHAIRMAN: Was there communication back?

Mr Salerno: It seemed that they did not know. It was like, “Oh, right”, that sort of thing.

The CHAIRMAN: Again, once you get up in the hills, you have trouble communicating, except perhaps with the Iridium phones. Which checkpoint did you go to?

Mr Salerno: The checkpoint on the corner of —

The CHAIRMAN: Can you point to it on the map?

Mr Salerno: I do not think it was an official checkpoint. It was on the corner of the road going to Wyndham. A lot of people gathered there.

The CHAIRMAN: Was it on the track itself?

Mr Salerno: It was on the Gibb River Road, the T-junction. They were all gathered around the big sign there.

The CHAIRMAN: Were you and your sons managing fires on the property throughout the day?

Mr Salerno: Yes, we were definitely watching. We had something parked there. We had vehicles. We wanted to know and then back-burn.

The CHAIRMAN: You saw that fire coming?

Mr Salerno: We saw it for days. We drive there all the time. We head backwards and forwards. We saw it immediately when it started and we were watching where it was heading.

The CHAIRMAN: The methodology was that you watch it and see if it comes to your property.

Mr Salerno: And then do a back-burn.

The CHAIRMAN: If you knew this was coming, to the extent you might have to put a back-burn in, do you think it would be wise to run a race in there?

Mr Salerno: I am talking about myself. If I had other people, I would have been very cautious about that, definitely, especially where the fire was going and where they were going.

The CHAIRMAN: What work were you conducting on that day? You had equipment there.

Mr Salerno: We were doing work around the equipment, staying around that area where our equipment was and where our camp is, which is all our communication equipment, all the trucks, motorbikes, horses and things like that.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: On the day before the race when you bumped into Carlos marking out the course, did you have any discussion with him about fires or did he ask you anything about fires in the area? Were you aware whether any of the pink ribbon had already been burnt out?

Mr Salerno: That is a good point. The only thing I remember was that the cattle had eaten some of the pink ribbon. I do not know if they told you that but they laid it out and the next thing it was gone. The cattle just loved to chew it.

I want to clarify something. I am not sure whether it was the day before the race or a couple of days before the race but I know it was very, very close because I was thinking, "What is this chap doing here? This is two days or a day before the race and he is right here." He had to change it.

[1.30 pm]

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: He changed the course because of your advice?

Mr Salerno: Yes, that is right.

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: By how much would it have changed and over what distance?

Mr Salerno: It was going along a road rather than going into the bush. That is all. It would have been five or six kilometres out, without going into the bush.

The CHAIRMAN: Was that between checkpoint 1 and checkpoint 2?

Mr Salerno: Yes, that is right. If you look at the start there, you go along the road and then on your right, the green goes around to your right. I think he had it going that way.

The CHAIRMAN: Straight through.

Mr Salerno: Yes, following that green track. I suggested that he go straight down the Gibb.

The CHAIRMAN: That was the race the previous year.

Mr Salerno: That is right. One of the reasons I did not want him to go that way is because this country is very delicate and I am concerned about erosion. Where they went in with their vehicles—he promised me there would not be a lot of vehicles—a creek has now formed. It has worn hundreds of tonnes of dirt away, and I just do not like to see that.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Mr Salerno: I am going to keep adding the fact that was an incredible coincidence, having lived and run through this place and organised hundreds of people running through here, that fire situation.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you get a lot of people coming to you when you ran El Questro to do things like this?

Mr Salerno: Not things like that, but taking groups of people up on the Cockburns. There are so many incredible places I will not even go through, only keen walkers who just go for days at a time. Nothing like this has ever happened.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think we need to put in place some sort of protocols for people, particularly out on the station?

Mr Salerno: As I said, we are all smart after the act. I think up here you at least need to talk about bushfires and how to deal with that. They are raging almost all the time from May to when the wet starts, which is November or December. They are just everywhere. There is a fire somewhere.

The CHAIRMAN: How would you get people to do it? You do not want to kill people's desire.

Mr Salerno: No. As I said, we could be saying that it is not completely out of the question to do this. You need to be aware that this type of grass does this and this type of country does that. Lots of people would know what I am telling you.

The CHAIRMAN: If you get people from Hong Kong, from around the world, coming here and wanting to go for a walk, what kind of protocols do we put in place to make sure that these people are at least informed of the magnitude and diversity of risks that they face, without putting them through an SAS course?

Mr Salerno: As I said, it would just be advice, like the type of animals we have.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes, something like that, and make sure they check it.

Mr Salerno: Yes, like, "These are the animals you could encounter."

The CHAIRMAN: Does everyone have to go through the shire?

Mr Salerno: Now we know this, we would have a page or three pages saying that between this month and this month there are fires and there are flash floods, even though it does not rain in that particular area. That would be another one we would put down, which we have not had problems with. We have. I have had my wife and two children stuck on one side and I am on the other side and you cannot swim across. We have not had problems with that one but we should still talk about that. It would be a good idea for tourism in Western Australia and the type of country this is. That is a good point.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on a particular point, please include a supplementary submission when you return the transcript. Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 1.35 pm
