

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PINJARRA
FRIDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2006**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)
Mr S.R. Hill
Ms K. Hodson-Thomas
Mrs J. Hughes**

Co-opted Member

Mr P.D. Omodei

Hearing commenced at 12.03 pm

FLATT, MR RAYMOND CHARLES

Senior Firefighter, Coolup Bush Fire Brigade, examined:

JONES, MR KEVIN ALLAN

Captain, Pinjarra Volunteer Fire and Rescue, examined:

LEACH, MR MAURICE CHARLES

Captain, Coolup Bush Fire Brigade, examined:

WOODS, MR SHANE DAVID

Captain, West Murray Bush Fire Brigade, examined:

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for coming down today, gentlemen. The Community Development and Justice Committee is part of the Legislative Assembly, and we are currently investigating the emergency services legislation within Western Australia. The purpose of our tour to the south west is to get to the coalface and talk to the people who have to implement the emergency plans and look at how we can better improve the situation for the people who are at the coalface. Thank you very much for allowing us to bring the committee to your area and making yourselves available to speak with us. 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: We have.

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

The Witnesses: We do.

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

The Witnesses: We did.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: We have a list of questions that we have been asking for responses on so that we can gauge the views of people in various areas. It is important that we gauge the effectiveness of our current emergency services arrangements and ways they can be improved. I will invite my colleagues to ask some questions of you and get your responses. I will turn firstly to the volunteer fire service here in Pinjarra. Captain Kevin Jones, when was your fire and rescue service established, how many members do you have and what emergency service roles does your brigade perform?

Mr Jones: Our brigade was officially opened in September 1972. We look after all aspects of structural advice within our town, road rescue, building collapses and assisting the bush fire services in the surrounding districts.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: What are the key emergency risks for the Murray community?

Mr Jones: At this stage it is the hazardous materials that pass through our town.

Mrs J. HUGHES: How many members do you have?

Mr Jones: We have nine at the moment.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I will now turn to the captain of the Coolup branch. When was your unit established?

Mr Leach: Many years ago. In the mid-70s, I suppose, the concept was first developed.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: How many members do you have?

Mr Leach: Active?

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Total.

Mr Leach: About 30 or 40.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: What sort of activity do you have in your area on an annual basis?

Mr Leach: Mainly bushfire control, fighting emergency fires and preparation for the fire season - doing controlled burn-offs etc. The main activity is bushfire assistance.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you work in conjunction with CALM in the controlled burn-offs?

Mr Leach: We do assist CALM when asked.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Mr Woods, the West Murray Bush Fire Brigade is on the Pinjarra Road in Ravenswood.

Mr Woods: Furnissdale.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Could you give us a rundown on how many members you have and when it was formed.

Mr Woods: The brigade was formed around May 1983. At this stage we have about 40 members on the books, and 25 of those are active. Our main function is bushfire control, bush fire fighting and supporting the other bush fire brigades in their efforts.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: How important is local knowledge when it comes to fighting fires in your area?

Mr Woods: Extremely important.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Could you give us an understanding of what the terrain and the conditions are like?

Mr Woods: Most of ours is flat but we have a few swamps in our area. It is very boggy to get vehicles through. A lot of the times you can come in to one fire, come around the back and get stuck. You need to know which way to get in there, which is the best way.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: So it is particularly hazardous?

Mr Woods: Yes, some of it is hard to get into.

Mrs J. HUGHES: May I have a similar answer from Mr Leach?

Mr Leach: We stretch from the estuary, which is sandy bush country, through to a lot of farming country on the flats up into the foothills.

Mrs J. HUGHES: And local knowledge is important?

Mr Leach: Yes, local knowledge is extremely important for the same reasons.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Mr Woods, how many times would you have activated a response in the past 12 months?

Mr Leach: We have had around 45 to 50 callouts in the last 12 months.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: How long does it take to control a particular fire?

Mr Woods: Generally around 10 minutes from the time we get the crew to the station, get them there, get on the road and get to an incident in our area. Sometimes it is 10 to 15 minutes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: How critical is that to a fire situation?

Mr Woods: Extremely critical. The quicker we get there, the smaller it will be; it will not have a chance to escalate, especially in some of the rural areas.

Mrs J. HUGHES: May I ask the same of Coolup?

Mr Leach: Our response time is possibly a bit longer. The way Coolup is set out, there are not a lot of people close to the station. A lot of it is farmland. Our response time is probably 15 to 20 minutes from the time we get rolling.

Mr S.R. HILL: The ESL levy was introduced in 2001. What sort of impact has that had on your local brigades - the emergency services levy funding?

Mr Flatt: It has been minimal to us.

Mr S.R. HILL: Why is that?

Mr Flatt: Because of the dollars. We run our brigade now on about \$13 000 a year. That includes fuel and everything else - electricity, the lot. Previous to that we were still in the ballpark of around \$8 000 to \$9 000 in the shire anyway. I have not seen any great gains from it.

Mr Woods: I would have to agree with Ray. I have not seen any real gains from it. I think we have had one truck in the shire replaced and that was replaced with a refurbished unit, not a new one. The shire introduced a new fleet and we are trying to keep up with the replacement of those. We have been given a refurbished one.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Prior to the ESL, the standard of the equipment within the shire was pretty high?

Mr Flatt: Yes, pretty high.

Mr Woods: A fantastic job has been done on replacing a lot of the equipment. Most of the fleet we did have were beyond repair.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Fire and rescue?

Mr Jones: Unfortunately, I do not have much to do with the ESL. My district manager has never approached me on my needs. I am just told it will come when it gets there. I do not get involved in it at all. I know there are stickers on our vehicles saying that this vehicle has been purchased through contributions to the ESL but that is about as far as it goes for me.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So who manages your unit?

Mr Jones: It is my district manager, Greg Feeney. We have never sat down and discussed the ESL or any requirements. It is handled outside our realms.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you have any particular urgent need in your brigade?

Mr Jones: We got a brand new truck. It lasted at our location about 10 days. I sent it away with a lot of safety hazards on it, a lot of concerns from occupational health and safety, a lot of operational. It caused an injury to a firefighter the first time we tried to use it, namely myself, and it almost put me out of work for a couple of weeks. I got very angry and upset and we are now back with an old Mazda which seems to be going along fine. It is not the best machine but it will do. It is safe and easy to operate.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: I would like to pose a question to all four of you. A number of local governments are proposing that FESA take over part or all of the local government bushfire responsibilities. These responsibilities include those related to supporting and administering bush

fire brigades. FESA has suggested that legislation allow FESA to take over bushfire responsibilities but only when the local government and the respective area wants this to occur. Do you have a view on this?

[12.20 pm]

Mr Jones: My view from fire and rescue is that it is already under way. We have been told basically who our managers will be for the different areas from FESA operations. We have already been told that it is happening and it is already in from 1 July last year, but they have not named names and put people in those positions as yet that I am aware of.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Were the volunteers informed or asked?

Mr Jones: I was informed through the bush fire advisory group, which is the local council, but nothing from FESA at all.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Was it put to the volunteers?

Mr Jones: No.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Has this had any detrimental or complimentary effect on the unit?

Mr Jones: I think it has. There is a lot of uncertainty. We do not know who we will end up with. My main concern is that whoever we get, and if he is going to be responsible for our training to make sure that we do our job correctly, that that person is appropriately trained as well. We do not want people coming out of university with all these degrees telling us what to do on a fire ground if they have not been there themselves. That is very important.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Mr Woods, do you have a comment to make?

Mr Woods: I would have to agree with Kevin.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Mr Flatt?

Mr Flatt: Yes, I would support the same as well. I would also want to have a greater understanding of why FESA wants to have control of all the brigades and why the shires want to relinquish that as well, which has not come forth.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: What you are saying is that in essence there has been a bit of a communications void in relation to changes that are proposed?

Mr Flatt: One of the reasons that I joined the fire brigade many years ago was to support my neighbours in Coolup. That was under the umbrella of the shire at the time. I still believe in that. I am there for call-up and to help these guys within the shire. If we are going to come under this great big organisation of FESA, how will that impact upon us as small brigades in these communities? I would have to ask that question.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Does this impede you in any way with attracting new volunteers?

Mr Flatt: I think it possibly could, yes.

Mr Jones: I cannot answer those general inquiries, because I do not know myself.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Generally speaking, though, is there a problem in attracting new volunteers?

Mr Woods: Absolutely; it is a big problem.

Mr Flatt: There always is.

Mr Jones: It is a big problem. Ten years ago I had 25 members in Pinjarra. I am scratching to get nine now and that increases the workload on the current nine that I have.

Mrs J. HUGHES: How many call-outs would you get?

Mr Jones: I think we have done about 85 so far this year, remembering that we cover the area right through to the Albany Highway in vehicle rescue.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Nine members taking care of any incidents?

Mr Jones: Nine members, yes. As you know, we have had some quite big fires in and around this area, and it is a lot of hours for a small group of people.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Also, the impact that you mentioned as one of the key issues for yourself was the amount of hazardous material coming through town.

Mr Jones: Absolutely.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Which would require additional training in relation to BA and so on.

Mr Jones: Yes, absolutely. We have the freeway and the train coming down, all that sort of stuff, and they are getting bigger and bigger machines to transport the products. If you look at the lime trucks that pass through town, there are over 100 tonnes in one of those trucks. One mishap and you could be there for days.

Mr S.R. HILL: Gentlemen, what sort of interaction do you have with CALM, for example?

Mr Leach: Very minimal. Not a lot at all.

Mr Flatt: I am ex-Dwellingup so I know that the people there do a fantastic job from the bush side of it, when they do their firefighting and that, but over the years I have seen their numbers reduce as in gang trucks or fire trucks over summer. They have put in part-time fire fighters. I have concerns about that, because I believe that in time if that continues the volunteers will be asked to cover more of the state forest firefighting.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: What about your support from FESA and local government? Can you comment on that?

Mr Flatt: What do you mean?

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: You talk about CALM and the very limited relationship. What about in relation to FESA locally? Do you get a lot of support?

Mr Flatt: Only from the training side of things when they conduct training.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Are you satisfied with it? Can it be improved?

Mr Flatt: Training involves record keeping and as far as I am concerned it is an absolute shambles. Being the training officer this year I was exposed to obtaining records of past firefighters and current data. Some of the record keeping was five years out of date. To me that was extremely poor. That was from the south west.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The committee has received numerous submissions requesting that the state government be bound by the same fire prevention legislation as private landowners. For instance, where private property owners are compelled to install firebreaks, the state government would be compelled to do the same on crown land. Currently the state government is exempt from having to install firebreaks on crown land. Would you like to comment on that?

Mr Flatt: There should be one rule for all.

Mr Jones: If it is a prevention for a private landowner, it should be a prevention for everybody. We are the people who go out and fight the fires, not them.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Currently the legislation empowers three bodies - FESA, local government and CALM - to have control of a fire at any given time. Control of the fire is dependent on land tenure. The Auditor General and the coroner have both criticised this arrangement, claiming that one body must be made accountable and responsible for the control of the fire during a multi-agency incident.

Both claim that anything less jeopardises the safety of the community of Western Australia. Do you have a view on that statement?

Mr Jones: From fire and rescue, I believe that what we currently have within this area, this patch, works well and has done for many years. Until they can show me otherwise, I would rather stick with what I have. At this stage it works well.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Mr Woods?

Mr Woods: The same.

Mr Leach: I would agree. There is always room for improvement, though.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Just on that point, they may have been commenting about it having happened somewhere else, but we know that recently there was a big fire here that ran down the scarp. I imagine both of you would have been involved in that event. As the person at the coalface, how do you think that operation went, given the circumstances?

Mr Leach: I think it was appalling, bordering on very dangerous. We had crews up in that area and CALM was not aware of it, even though we had done all the right things, put our T-cards in etc. I think one crew went home in the middle of the night because they just got sick of waiting for food. Yes, the last fire was very poorly handled.

Mr Woods: I was only listening to some of the communications on the radio, I did not actually attend the fire myself, but it seemed to be the general consensus that people were on the fire ground for eight, 10, 12 hours without so much as a drink of water.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Would you care to make some suggestions as to how we could improve on that incident? Was there a debrief, for instance?

Mr Leach: We had a wash-up on Monday night just with the local brigades. CALM was not involved. That wash-up will go to CALM further down the track.

Mr Woods: I think they were having a wash-up on Tuesday. The notes for the one on Monday night were going to the one on Tuesday, apparently.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Just for clarity, who was in control of the management of that fire?

Mr Woods: I believe it was CALM.

Mr Jones: That is the current ruling at the moment. Any fire within three kilometres of a state forest, CALM will take charge. How they take charge is probably questionable, I suppose.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do we know how many officers there are from CALM in your district?

Mr Jones: I think it is only two.

Mr Woods: Yes.

Mr Jones: In most cases they are only contactable by mobile phone.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you have good coverage?

Mr Jones: Shocking; absolutely shocking.

Mr Woods: No.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Outside the Dwellingup townsite there is not much?

Mr Jones: Zero.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: How much of the Shire of Murray is unallocated crown land? Is it 50 per cent?

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: You can see from the map on the wall. I know I am giving Hansard a nightmare, but there is a Shire of Murray map - an aerial photograph - on the wall and it shows the

entire shire. Virtually 50 per cent of the shire to the right is CALM-managed land, punctuated only by a few dams, the Alcoa refinery and minesite and also the township of Dwellingup. So near on 50 per cent would be state forest?

Mr Jones: Yes.

[12.30 pm]

Mr Flatt: Well done.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Currently Western Australia uses fire districts and emergency services levy category areas to define emergency service delivery areas. FESA has indicated that a system with two overlapping boundaries is slightly confusing. They are asking that we remove the two separate boundaries and instead establish one single boundary to be used for everything. If the committee were to support this recommendation, fire districts and emergency service levy boundaries would be dissolved and emergency service areas would be established. Do you have a view on that?

Mr Jones: That would be a step forward in the right direction from my perspective.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Any reasoning to that?

Mr Jones: It is easier to control and it reduces the need for arguments between the two neighbours.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: For a number of reasons FESA is proposing that it be re-established as the Department of Emergency Services. This will mean the removal of "Fire" from the corporate name. The argument is that this removal is appropriate because fire is just one of the many emergencies that volunteers attend to. There has been an objection to this proposal on the basis of loss of identity. I would just like to ask you all whether you think it is a move in the right direction or not. If you could all make a comment, that would be great.

Mr Jones: For a fire and rescue service, my personal view is that I think it is the wrong way to go. Yes, we lose a fair bit of identity. We all fight fires but we all do other things as well in our regions. I think if we were to come under the one umbrella, things would then therefore become confusing. Does it mean further down the road that we have got to learn how to fight large-scale wild bushfires or do those people have to come in and start learning how to handle hazardous materials and breathing apparatus etc etc. To me, if you combine it all into one, this is just going to be mass confusion and misunderstanding by a lot of people, remembering you have thousands and thousands of volunteers throughout the state of Western Australia.

Mr Flatt: Well done.

The CHAIRMAN: I think we have touched upon communications over the problem in the hills area. Who would have the best communications set up in the area in the main district?

Mr Jones: Probably CALM.

Mr Woods: I would say CALM at the moment.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Are you able to interact with CALM?

Mr Jones: FESA can; we cannot.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: When you are out there on Dwellingup Road or Williams Road going out to Boddington way, and you have got yourself a car crash - I know there was one last year - how do you go with communications out the back there?

Mr Jones: We do not; we just battle on until we get back into town. There is nothing you can do if you have got no communication by mobile phone or two-way radio, you just send runners or use the public to go back to a phone box if you need other equipment.

Mr Flatt: It is time for a satellite phone, I think.

Mr Jones: Something - a skyhook maybe.

Mrs J. HUGHES: There has been some talk from previous hearings we have had about procedures, protocols and the bureaucracy that comes with a government agency or an authority like FESA that may take control of brigades. How do you feel as volunteers about that proposal? Do you have similar fears?

Mr Leach: I think we do. As volunteers we just like to go and put a fire out. That is what we like to do. Getting tied up with bureaucracy, I know I do not like. I do not like doing a lot of paper work etc.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Would it be safe to say that it is becoming more process driven?

Mr Woods: Yes.

Mr Leach: Yes.

Mr Jones: We are doing a lot of work for the state of Western Australia statistics. The amount of time we have to spend on fire reports and the political side of things is only to bolster their statistics that they put out to other people through it. I know it is good to have that, but why should it be forced on the volunteers who go out and fight fires and also do a 40-hour week to sit down and bolster the statistics for the state? We have paid firefighters and station officers and that sort of stuff, and I think it should be their role.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Just on that point, you are all volunteers. Do you have a problem with getting time away to fulfil your roles as volunteers?

Mr Woods: Yes.

Mr Leach: Yes.

Mr Flatt: It is getting harder all the time. I would just like to add one more bit to that. I was talking to one of our brigade members the other day who attended a fire in the hills, he took time off work, and it is the first time he has been paid by his company when he has had a fire, so in the past if he had time off he was not paid.

Mr Jones: As captain of this brigade here, and I have been a member for over 30 years, I have actually negotiated with the company that I work for, which is Alcoa, a big company, that for all my firefighters, on completion of being at a fire, that I fill out a form that they have been there for a certain amount of time and request that they return to work after a reasonable amount of rest period. My guys have never, ever yet lost one red cent, even guys on shiftwork, but it is getting harder. They do support volunteers, but it gets harder for them to operate as well and to drop people away. They are reducing numbers, like everybody else within the state of Western Australia. Just on that also, at the refinery at Wagerup, all the Alcoa people who went out fighting fires are actual being presented with a certificate of commendation for fighting the fires on Alcoa's property. It makes them feel good.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: So the recognition is not there, do you think?

Mr Jones: Not unless you have a real incident do you ever hear form anybody.

Mr Woods: It is certainly getting harder and harder all the time. To get the guys who are able to leave work and go to the fire, that is the hardest bit.

Mr Flatt: And some of them do not get paid.

Mr Woods: No. I mean, I am in a situation that if it is towards the end of the day, say about half past four or something, I can leave, but until then, I cannot leave. I run a workshop. It is very difficult.

Mr Jones: I have had to trade a day off today. I have had to take a single day's leave of 12 hours to attend this today.

Mr Woods: I have done the same.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Thank you all for doing that for us.

Mr Jones: It is a part of the cogs that keep our town operational. If we all decided that we were not going to be here today, I do not know the ramifications of that happening, but it is not keeping things moving, is it? It is not only fighting fires; it is all the stuff that goes with it.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Of course, there is the other issue in relation to family life; the families should be thanked as well.

Mr Jones: My wife is commonly known as “Mrs Firefighter”.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Just on that communications setup, do you have a network between the bush fire brigades, in particular, with people monitoring radios?

Mr Woods: Yes, we have a station radio operator for each brigade monitoring the radio 24/7. If they have to leave for any reason, most of the brigades have backup stations that will take on that role. Most of us have got radios in our cars and at home, so we monitor constantly 24/7.

[12.40 pm]

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you have any spotting facilities? I know that CALM has aircraft, but do you get any -

Mr Woods: Not here, no. CALM has its spotter planes; that is it.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Basically, if there was a fire, you would rely on residents to contact 000.

Mr Woods: Yes.

Mr Leach: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Is that the majority of your call-outs?

Mr Woods: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I want to thank you very much for coming down today. I am most impressed by the frankness. In essence, we wanted to hear from you about what was happening on the ground. Obviously, we have had submissions from the corporate sector, so it was important that we listened to what you had to say. Once again, we appreciate your time.

In closing, thank you for contributing to the committee’s inquiry. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced and the sense of 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, it will be deemed to be correct. Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 12.40 pm
