

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT GERALDTON
THURSDAY, 1 JUNE 2006**

SESSION FIVE

Members

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

Hearing commenced at 3.05 pm

GILLEN, MR KELLY JOHN

Regional Manager, Department of Conservation and Land Management, examined:

DESMOND, MR ANTHONY JAMES

Regional Leader, Nature Conservation, Department of Conservation and Land Management, examined:

Mr M.J. COWPER: Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming here. My name is Murray Cowper. I am the MLA for the seat of Murray and I am the Deputy Chair of this committee. There are five members of the committee. Two of them are not here and they extend their apologies. They are Shane Hill, the local member for Geraldton, who has been somewhat busy this week, and, of course, Tony O’Gorman, who has had to open an international emergency forum in his electorate, so he is not here today.

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 contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

The Witnesses: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding the giving of evidence before parliamentary committees?

The Witnesses: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Will you please state the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

Mr Gillen: I am the regional manager for CALM’s mid-west region.

Mr Desmond: I am the regional leader for nature conservation for the mid-west region.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Will you give us a brief overview of the operations of your office, the areas that come within your dominion, and the staff and their distribution?

Mr Gillen: I have a map here. Would that be of help?

Mr M.J. COWPER: It may well be of help to the committee. That would be great. Thank you.

Mr Gillen: It basically shows the spatial distribution. The mid-west region extends from Lancelin in the south to 150 kilometres north of Carnarvon, and then inland to the Great Northern Highway. It is a fairly large area. It covers quite a diverse area of country. It includes the northern agricultural region; that is, the area from Geraldton south. It includes the Shark Bay World Heritage area and a large proportion of pastoral country. It includes both the Murchison and Gascoyne catchments of the pastoral lands. All in all, it is a very diverse piece of country from a management point of view, because we are dealing with the landscapes associated with the agricultural zone in the south, we are working with the semi-arid coastal areas of Shark Bay, and we are dealing with the semi-arid pastoral lands of the Gascoyne and Murchison catchments.

[3.10 pm]

They are quite different land forms, vegetation and climatic features. It is a bit variable across the region but about 80 staff are covering that region. The regional office is based in Geraldton and it also functions effectively as a district office. A group of staff work out of Geraldton in a defined geographic area, which internally is called the Geraldton district. We have a work centre at Cervantes and a district office at Jurien Bay, which supports a district structure and includes a district manager. We have a district office in Denham out of which a district manager and team work. We also have a work centre in Carnarvon with two staff who primarily look after the Gascoyne catchment of the pastoral lands. The work we do is probably similar to the work done in the other places that the committee has heard about. We manage a fairly large terrestrial conservation estate of a few million hectares of nature reserves through the agricultural zone. We are responsible for the management of a relatively newly acquired conservation estate in the pastoral lands that is roughly three million hectares. We manage also the Shark Bay Marine Park and marine reserves and the Jurien Bay Marine Park, which are significant marine parks. We have a very mixed skill base in the region because we look after marine and terrestrial areas that are both coastal and agricultural, as well as the pastoral arid lands.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Very good. Does CALM have a firefighting capacity within that distribution of resources?

Mr Gillen: Yes, it does. All those staff are available for firefighting duties, but those duties will vary from a range of skill sets and experience from front-line firefighting people to support staff who would support a major fire effort. Shall I expand a bit on our fire operations?

Mr M.J. COWPER: Just on the high-risk emergencies that would impact on CALM's operations.

Mr Gillen: The area that constitutes the northern agricultural zone, which extends from Kalbarri down to Lancelin and inland to basically the clearing line, is primarily an agricultural zone. It is also a fairly fire-prone area, particularly the coastal zone from Kalbarri south. The inland area for up to 20 or 30 kilometres is very prone to fire because of the bands of lightning during the summer storms. There is a high frequency of fire in those areas. It is a natural system that has always been there. The type of vegetation that grows in those areas reflects the natural system; it tends to regenerate quickly after fire, but it is highly susceptible to lightning strikes. The fire frequency in some places can be quite regular even under a natural system. The area between Lancelin and Dongara in particular is a fire management hot spot for CALM. That area extends inland to The Midlands Road, so it may be a bit further than 20 or 30 kilometres, because there are some large areas of reserve inland. However, the coastal strip, particularly in that zone west of Brand Highway, is definitely the hot spot for our operations. We would normally experience up to 20 or 30 wild fires a year through that zone on private lands and lands that we manage.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Can many brigades in that area be called upon?

Mr Gillen: Yes. Each local authority, particularly through the agricultural zone, has its own bush fire brigade organisation. We work very closely with the bush fire brigade organisation. Committee members would have experienced similar arrangements between CALM and bush fire brigades in other parts of the state. Our resources and operations are very comparable with the south coast. We have staff who attend the different bush fire brigade meetings as a regular part of their duties. We attend the regional fire organisation meetings and we have a very close working relationship with FESA in this region. We rely on the brigade system for support because, as I said, we might have about 80 staff, but of those the front-line force is still relatively small. We have access to three trucks and 14 light units at the moment across our region. We will be getting a fourth truck soon in Geraldton, which will improve our capacity. In relative terms we are still pretty thin on the ground and so we rely considerably on brigade support in wildfire situations, but we work on a mutual aid arrangement in the central west so that we are available to support local authorities and private

individuals when they need help. It is a reciprocal arrangement; we expect and get support for wildfire situations when they occur.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I recall a particular fire two years ago between Lancelin and Cervantes that ran for a fair while.

Mr Gillen: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is a pretty remote area and there are not many roads. How does CALM balance the issue of the heath lands and the environmental aspect of its operations with the firebreaks? Does CALM have a problem with preserving those sorts of sensitive areas out the back there? There is a lot of swamp out there.

Mr Gillen: It is quite a mixed environment. The coastal sands support the coastal heaths and inland are sands similar to the Swan coastal plain. The banksia woodlands are also pretty fire prone. It is a challenge to deal with the different categories of land. In addition, the mix of that land includes coastal reserves that CALM manages that extend all the way up the coast, apart from the commonwealth bombing range. Those areas are, as I say, quite prone to fire. From our point of view, the fire frequency in the past 10 years has been almost too frequent. That has probably been a feature of the climatic cycle we have been through; the frequency of lightning has been much higher. However, we work from a set of strategic firebreaks that are in place throughout those lands. We have management plans for a number of the key reserves in those areas, and we undertake prescribed burning in different parts of those areas in conjunction with the brigades. We have an operation to address fires in those areas, but we have to deal with the frequent occurrence of fire in much of that land.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are the brigades that you rely on basically volunteer brigades?

Mr Gillen: Yes, they are totally volunteer brigades.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Totally volunteer?

Mr Gillen: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: How many brigades do you interact with? Is it many?

Mr Gillen: I would like to defer to Anthony.

Mr Desmond: It varies. I am not sure on what basis, but I suppose particularly in that area we would regularly have to be dealing with in the vicinity of 20.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Twenty brigades?

Mr Desmond: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Minimum?

Mr Gillen: Minimum, yes. There are many more brigades across that whole agricultural landscape but we do not necessarily have a lot of interaction with them the further inland we go.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is the prescribed burning done by CALM staff or by the brigades?

Mr Gillen: It can be done by both actually. We have a prescribed burning program that our staff are committed to, but we also have situations when we do the prescription. We set out how and when the burn is to be conducted and under what conditions. Sometimes the brigades themselves will take on that job because they have a very vested interest in it. The prescribed land might adjoin some of the brigade's properties or it might have some other values that it would like to see protected. Over the past decade or so we have tried to coordinate a more strategic approach to fires. We are looking at trying to do more strategic things to the landscape that will provide more benefits for everybody by preventing major fire runs and those sorts of things. Often the brigades will conduct a burn as part of that overall picture.

[3.20 pm]

Mrs J. HUGHES: When the brigades come in to put out fires, what is the command structure? Do they come under your command?

Mr Gillen: The control structure is such that if they are coming in to fight a fire that we are managing and have taken responsibility for, we would have control over the fire ground. With regard to the command of those people, we would normally try to get a FESA representative to the fire as soon as we can, because FESA provides that key liaison role, and that then provides the interface between us and the brigade people so that they do not feel as though they are being directed by us; it is going through the FESA arrangements. That reflects the fact that in some parts of the landscape we interact more closely with some brigades than we do with others. If we are thrust into a situation in which we are working with a group that would not normally work with us and that might have some concerns about that, the role that FESA plays would basically enable that to work much more effectively and efficiently.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So the responsibility for fighting the fire would lie with -

Mr Gillen: It would still lie with CALM. The control function takes the responsibility. The command just directs the troops.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Currently, the Bush Fires Act compels local government to order private landowners to install firebreaks. However, this provision does not apply to state government-owned land. Should the act bind the Crown so that the state government is bound by the same provisions as private landowners?

Mr Gillen: I am aware of the department's position on this, and I am fairly comfortable with that position. At the moment we address issues such as firebreaks, and other work that is associated with protecting land from fire, on a priority basis, against a risk analysis, if you like. That enables us to direct our resources where we believe they can be used most effectively. My view is that the system we work under at the moment is a good one, because it allows us to direct the resources to where we think they can best be utilised and achieve the best outcome. Some of our reserves, for instance, are relatively small, so even the creation of firebreaks around a relatively small block of land has a lot of implications for us from a management point of view. It actually promotes weed invasion. It can also raise other issues that affect some of the values that we are trying to manage. Therefore, on some occasions we would argue against the need for a firebreak, because we could actually deal with the problem in a slightly different way - the fire issue, for instance. I am quite comfortable with the way we are doing things at the moment. When we have a difference of opinion, we go out and work through that, whether it be with FESA or the local landowner. I think most of the time we can actually deal with that through commonsense; that is, by working through the issues and coming up with the best solution. Flexibility and discretion are good things to have.

Mrs J. HUGHES: We had a hearing with the Conservation Council a couple of weeks back. It was talking about having different zones for different types of land, and having management plans for the different types of zones; for instance, grassland, mountain, forest, or whatever. In other words, rather than have a set way of doing things, different types of terrain need different firefighting plans that suit the particular terrain rather than a plan that may apply to a whole district, as you have here. Do you have any comment on that?

Mr Gillen: I will say a few words, and Anthony may also have something to say. At the moment, we have a regional plan, which is basically a strategic approach to fires. If we take all the lands of interest across the agricultural component of our region, we can see that our master plan for fire has looked at what we can do strategically to make sure that we can stop big runs of fire affecting too much country and in what areas we can do a relatively small amount of additional work to value-add to the strategic work to give us the best community and biodiversity outcomes - which is basically what we are there to do. We have a series of plans for the lands that we manage. We have management plans in place for some of the key reserves. Those management plans provide a blueprint for a 10-year period of management. Those plans include an approach to fire management

that contains a prescription for how we will address fire suppression operations, as well as prescribed burning and other things that we need to do to protect our assets and our community values.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are you basically already doing that, in a sense?

Mr Gillen: Yes, we are doing that on some areas that are covered by management plans. We do not have plans for all the areas we manage. It is a pretty big task. However, we have some other mechanisms that we can use in the absence of a management plan.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are these overarching strategies?

Mr Gillen: It is something that actually comes down to a particular area, at a much finer scale. If we do not have a management plan, we can use a provision of the act that enables us to prepare what we call interim management guidelines. It is a lighter form of plan, if you like. Those guidelines provide guidance and a framework to undertake fire management and fire suppression on lands. When we do not have that in place, we actually have a mechanism that we work through called a necessary operations checklist. That enables us to do work on reserves when we do not have a management plan. The act requires us to have a management plan. However, we have the capacity to work through the necessary operations process, which then becomes a default management plan. In those instances we have prescribed actions for fire suppression and fire management operations.

Mr Desmond: Kelly has probably covered the agricultural zone pretty well. Outside the agricultural zone, the issue of different vegetation types becomes even more important. For instance, on one of the stations, Mooloongool, which we have purchased and now manage, there is a large area of spinifex. It gets lightning strikes on it quite regularly and burns almost every year to some degree. However, it does not have major impacts, because it is contained within lower fuel areas, so it never runs outside that area. Therefore, to go in and use a lot of resources to attack something like that and try to keep the fire to a minimal size makes no sense. We do that; it is something that we do naturally. We know that some things will burn more frequently, some of them will have hotter fires, and some of them will have more effect on the assets that we are trying to look after, or that are nearby or in them, so we adjust our management according to what we have.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: We have some generic questions about the fire management plan. You have probably covered this question in part, but I will pose it to you so that it is on the record. FESA has suggested that it be empowered to request the development of fire management plans from landowners when the land is CALM-managed land, plantation land or land used for pastoral or grazing purposes. The fire management plan would be requested only if FESA considered this to be necessary to mitigate the risk of fire to life and property; for instance, in areas of high risk, such as where CALM abuts private land or where a eucalypt plantation is located near a housing development. Do you have a comment on this proposal?

Mr Gillen: That is very consistent with the way the department operates anyway. We have a requirement under the act to prepare management plans for parks and reserves. I have just mentioned that there are some other mechanisms that allow us to deal with management planning in the absence of a formal management plan. Formal management plans take up to three years or longer to prepare, because they are statutory processes, and a lot of consultation is associated with them. We do not necessarily have them across all the areas that we would like, but we have these other mechanisms to address those requirements.

[3.30 pm]

Mr M.J. COWPER: It has been suggested that legislation enabled individual local governments to enter into an agreement with FESA whereby all bush fire brigades' responsibilities could potentially be transferred to FESA. If a local government did not want to be part of such an agreement, the

transfer would not occur. Would you like to comment on that particular issue? Put it this way, you rely on the brigades. If a particular local government of Coorow or Dongara, for example, did not want to transfer the power, it would create a disjointed situation among those various brigades that are relied upon to manage a fire.

Mr Gillen: Are we talking about the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, as opposed to the local authority, taking on the responsibility for the brigade organisation?

Mr M.J. COWPER: Yes.

Mr Gillen: I can see some benefits of that from the point of view of standards and consistency in the overall management approach to fire. For example, it would provide consistency in the use of the systems that we currently promote, such as the ICS system. That would create consistency in the way the services work together on a fire. There are definitely some benefits from that point of view.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Let me take you one step further. The coroner and Auditor General have also expressed concern at the control of fire management, especially when CALM and FESA could be in control of the fire at the same time if it crosses land tenures and so forth; and local government could also be part of it. It has been suggested that control and all fire management responsibilities be given to FESA.

Mr Gillen: The current arrangements that we work with, such as Westplan, particularly for complex fires, work pretty well. Often it requires getting together immediately when a situation develops and assessing the scenario we are faced with and then deciding what is the best management and control structure for the particular scenario. In some cases the decision is made that CALM is best placed to manage it. Sometimes a CALM asset might be affected, in which case it is best placed to manage that scenario. We would take control of the management of the situation and FESA would support us in that role. However, there are situations when FESA would take control of the situation. Primarily that would be because private land was affected or because it involved local authority values and issues rather than ours. The Tenterden fire is a good example. CALM obviously had interests there, but in the context of where the fire started and the area that it was affecting, it was very much an issue for FESA and the local authority. It was obvious that they would take responsibility for that situation. The present system allows us to make those judgments rather than follow a system that is totally prescribed, which might not necessarily be appropriate. There are certainly areas of the state where the skills and experience of CALM are primary. For instance, in the forest areas, the department's skill, resource base and experience outweighs what can be provided by the brigade system. I am sure that the fire management skills within FESA would not match CALM's skills and capacity to manage a big fire in a forest. It is good to have a system that allows decisions to be made based upon a particular scenario. It does not force a department or service down a pathway that it might not consider to be the best.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you not like the umbrella scheme?

Mr Gillen: I do not think so, because there is more to fire than just fire suppression. CALM is involved with fire management. As a land management agency, we have responsibilities as a land manager and land owner. From that point of view we have a responsibility to our neighbours. We have responsibilities also to the state for the conservation of biodiversity, which is in our mission statement. The management of vegetation, fauna and flora includes the ability to manage fire in the best possible way to uphold those values. Therefore, we need to be heavily involved in fire from a land management point of view. The value set and the skills that overlay the work that we do are pretty much owned by CALM in a sense, because the FESA skills are quite different. FESA provides for the protection of the community and its assets, and not necessarily for the biodiversity values that we manage. It would be very difficult for FESA to take on the full management of fire control and to manage the land under CALM's control while fulfilling the broader fire function. We are already doing it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If a large incident occurred - it may happen only once or twice a year or whatever - and a fire was raging, would that be an acceptable time for FESA to come in?

Mr Gillen: Again, it would really depend on the circumstances. If the fire was directly affecting or was actually burning CALM-managed land, we would be best placed to manage that scenario. Our people would know the area involved and would have worked on it. They would know the biodiversity values of the land and would have the motivation to make sure that the biodiversity values were considered as part of the mix of what needed to be thought about in the suppression operation. It is still horses for courses. If it was a big fire on unallocated crown land north of Lancelin, our first thought would be that FESA would take control of that and we would work with FESA because it is UCL. Under the current memorandum of understanding with the Department for Planning and Infrastructure, FESA retains responsibility for fire suppression on unallocated crown land. We would undoubtedly be there to support the fire suppression. That support might even lead to key people from CALM being involved in the management team, as well as providing people on the ground. Again, I think it is very much -

Mrs J. HUGHES: Status quo.

Mr Gillen: It very much depends upon the circumstances. The opportunity to make a decision about the best approach to take is a valuable model.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: If a fire occurred on CALM land that abuts private landholdings, would FESA take control or would CALM and FESA work in tandem?

Mr Gillen: A large part of the conservation estate abuts private land in some areas. If a large fire occurred that could burn for a couple of shifts and had the potential to affect private assets, CALM would attend and obviously the local brigade would attend also as a matter of course. The local brigades cannot be stopped most of the time because they are really keen to help. CALM would work with FESA on how to manage the fire. Most often we will set up a division or a sector of the fire that is on the interface with the private property that is manned by the local brigades. The members of FESA would then be responsible for protecting their asset. CALM's command structure would work through FESA so that the brigade system would receive its directions through FESA rather than through CALM. In that way, the FESA officers would not feel as though we had taken away the management role from them. FESA would be given a very clearly defined job to do that relied on the command structure that it is used to working with and is comfortable with.

[3.40 pm]

Mrs J. HUGHES: One of the things that the Auditor General and the coroner have talked about is the fact that, in a sense, there are two commands happening at the same time and whether that was a good way to handle a large incident.

Mr Gillen: It has worked well in the past and it continues to work well. At our most recent fire, the fire broke out along those lines; private property was protected by the brigade system. What it does is ensures a place for the brigades in fire suppression. It identifies, I think, that they have a key role. It is a recognition thing. It recognises their skills and the fact that they are an absolutely crucial part of the whole fire-suppression organisation. With those arrangements in place, the management team has to be in place and it has to ensure that the right arrangements are in place so that the communication works. That is always the key to these things. There must be good liaison between the hazard management authority and, say, the brigade system, which is supporting it. As long as there is good communication and a clear understanding of what the goals are - what you are out there to try to do - the key component of the controlling role, which is across hazard management authority and, in this case, say, the brigades, is to make sure that the strategies that are being employed are appropriate and suit the situation and the assets. Things can fall down if there is not good communication between two different groups working at a fire. If you lose sight of

clear goals and you lose sight of the clear standards that you are setting for the way work should be done, that is when you can have some problems.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: During these hearings we have heard about communication issues. Do you have any problems with the radio contact between the brigade, yourselves and FESA?

Mr Gillen: Inevitably at a fire there will be some communication problems; that is part and parcel of an emergency situation. We are working towards much better compatibility with the radio systems. We use VHF for command. FESA has been introducing that into the key positions within the bush fire brigade system over the past decade or so. That command structure is pretty good from a communications point of view. At the brigade level, many brigade members still tend to operate with the UHF system and some of our vehicles do have that. Most of the time the communication problems come from not having a clearly understood plan for how you use your communications. That is where discipline and training come in. The variability between different brigade groups around the agricultural zone, in particular, leads to those sorts of problems. In a complex and difficult fire scenario, when things are bound to go wrong, if people do not have the discipline and training to use the communication system that has been planned to be used in that incident, that is when things can go wrong, because if everyone jumps onto the same channel the system jams up. The way communications are normally set up is fairly similar to the way in which we set up a command structure. It is just a hierarchical system. One channel may deal with command from the control centre to a particular sector of the fire, and another mechanism from that sector to his men on the ground. If those things are followed, we end up with a fairly good system of communication. If the discipline is not there, particularly when things get a bit sticky, the communication will obviously fall away. I think we are improving. Communication is one of the biggest issues that comes out of just about every fire debrief. Progressively, we are trying to deal with that, and it is improving all the time. We still have a long way to go. I think consistency of gear across the brigades and ourselves with the VHF system has helped tremendously. The training that FESA is doing is improving the use of the radio system. We just need to continue with those programs, and make sure that they do happen and that they are supported.

Mr Desmond: Certainly our communication capacity in terms of having suitable towers to be able to work in all areas across the region, particularly the agricultural regions, has improved in the past five to 10 years.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: There is obviously still a need for greater improvement in terms of the towers?

Mr Desmond: To a degree, yes. There would be some areas that would be down; however, at the same time we also have the capacity to call on mobile towers and to set up a structure that does not require the permanent ones. That is just a matter of doing a communication plan in the place to say, "Well, some of this is in a bit of a grey area, where we don't get good communications; let's get the mobile tower up or let's take it right away from those set towers because they'll go flat and set up a system that can do it separately, or let's have this one in backup." You have got to have those plans in place. I think it has certainly improved.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The emergency services levy was introduced in 2001. Has it had any impact in this region?

Mr Gillen: Yes. There has definitely been an improvement in the quality and quantity of gear.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is the brigade's personal equipment much safer for the men on the ground?

Mr Desmond: Generally, I would say so. That is the real level of improvement we have seen. One area is the equipment that they are driving, but particularly it affects their personal safety.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I should say women as well.

Mr Gillen: Yes. Half our team are women. The improvement in personal protective gear, particularly in the past five years, has been really evident here. It has been a significant issue of concern for us.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Especially if they are working for you.

Mr Gillen: Yes, especially when they are working for us and come onto a fire ground. Although we have fairly strict provisions for our own staff, guys working next to them can be wearing shorts, terylene shirts and no hats.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Have the brigades actually lifted themselves with the introduction of those things?

Mr Gillen: I think so. Certainly I can identify a number of brigades in which the combination of training and new equipment has sharpened the brigade into a well-disciplined group. I can think of a number on the west coast, south of Dongara and inland that have really risen to reflect the investment that has been made in training and equipment.

Mr Desmond: It is a cultural shift, basically.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do CALM and the brigades train together at any stage?

Mr Desmond: Yes, quite regularly during a range of different activities, whether it be water-bombing usage or just basic training in the AIMS system, so that everybody is talking about the same thing. It is quite extensive.

Mr Gillen: We try to use some of the prescribed burning as a training ground for new people in the brigade system. For a while there, the demographics in the brigade system tended towards an older group of people whose fire experience came through land clearing in the agricultural zone. They had a lot of experience from big fires and how the bush burnt. As those people have retired, the cohort of younger guys, or the new generation, have not had much experience because there has been very little of that sort of work. Sometimes the prescribed burning can provide some training in that area as well.

[3.50 pm]

Mrs J. HUGHES: Some insight.

Mr Gillen: Yes, otherwise if your only experience with fire is suddenly rushing out of the truck to fight a bushfire, it is not a really good learning ground; it is quite hazardous.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Gentlemen, is there any particular issue that you would like to proffer to the committee?

Mr Gillen: Not an issue, just an observation. I just want to add to the comments we have just made about the improvements that have been made to the system over the past five to 10 years. They have been very noticeable. They mean that when we can work with people who have been well trained and are aware of their personal safety and how the management system works, we end up with a very effective firefighting force. If we can continue to encourage that to happen, we will ensure not only the value of the brigade system but also the safety, and probably also, to a certain degree, I expect, the satisfaction, of the people who work in that brigade system. It is one thing to work in a system in which there is no discipline and no real structure. It is a totally different thing to work in a system in which there is good discipline and good structure and people can really feel as though they have accomplished things in a very effective way. I think the pride in that sort of work comes about when we are working in an organisation like that. That is also how we will be able to ensure that we have brigade systems in the long term. It is quite a cultural shift from what was there in the past. In the past there probably was not such a focus on occupational health and safety, liability and whatever, and people could get away with a very much relaxed approach. The

situation today calls for, if not a professional, certainly a highly disciplined and well-trained approach.

Mrs J. HUGHES: That brings me to another question before we close. When you come onto land that abuts land that is owned by private landowners and so forth, often they have their own equipment, tankers and the like. In talking about occupational health and safety and liability and so forth, do you have a problem with a farmer whose property abuts your property coming out and working on, say, your side of the fence when he has his own slip-on tanker, and going off to fight the fire?

Mr Gillen: We would hope that that farmer is part of the local brigade system, and therefore the standards that have been established for the brigade are applied to him and he is abiding by those standards. There are some cases in which the person is not part of the brigade -

Mrs J. HUGHES: We have found that the farmers are more hesitant now to take it upon themselves to attend a fire, albeit they could probably respond to it quickly, due to exactly those liability issues and so forth.

Mr Gillen: We occasionally get a report from a neighbour who says, "There is a fire on that reserve; should I do anything?", and we always say, "Take the appropriate action straightaway; there is no need to wait for us". However, in those instances we are relying on the fact that they will be properly kitted out and will have adequate equipment, and that they have been trained to go in there.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I do not suppose you want to lose that quick response to that type of fire?

Mr Gillen: No, because it is a fine line between losing that local support and not wanting them to go out there because they are inadequately trained, have inadequate equipment or whatever. Again, at the moment it is a local authority issue to make sure that the brigades are well resourced and trained in association with FESA. That gets back to the point I made earlier that the more we can ensure the training is occurring, the more we will be able to address those issues.

Mr Desmond: One of the first things we do if we receive one of those calls is contact FESA and/or the local authority and inform them so that they can make sure that all the processes they need are also in place. That is so that the person is backed up by anything they need as well before we get there.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You would know which private properties your land abuts. Do you liaise with those owners at all and offer training?

Mr Desmond: It is not our role, really, to offer the training, but we certainly liaise with them. A standard part of land management is talking to your neighbours.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Can you direct them about joining the brigade or getting training? Do you take that on as part of your duties?

Mr Gillen: If it came up, I think we would. There are very few landowners who would not be part of the local brigade, really, when it comes down to it.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Are there any other issues that you would particularly like to raise?

Mr Gillen: No, I do not think so.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcript 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 a particular point, 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. Thank you for your time.

Mr Gillen: Thank you.

Mr Desmond: Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 3.56 pm
