

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT BUNBURY
TUESDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2006**

SESSION FIVE

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)

Mr S.R. Hill

Ms K. Hodson-Thomas

Mrs J. Hughes

Hearing commenced at 2.00 pm**CARR, MR PAUL BRADLEY****District Manager, Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia, examined:**

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Welcome. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect the 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?

Mr Carr: Yes, I have.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Did you understand the notes attached to it?

Mr Carr: Yes, I did.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Carr: Yes, I did.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Can you provide us with an overview of the role played by FESA staff in the provision of the natural disaster relief arrangements to this community?

Mr Carr: Our paid staff are at the district level, which is where I operate. When we get down to the local level, we have volunteers. During an incident that warrants natural disaster relief arrangements, the paid staff sit on the recovery management committee, and we provide advice to local government on those arrangements. We provide it during meetings and also at one-stop shops, which we put on for the public. The practice in the south west is to bring down from Perth one of the experts who deals with the disaster relief arrangements on a more regular basis than we do, to provide that more detailed and timely advice. Quite often we find that we are asked questions by members of the public that we do not have the capacity to answer because of our limited knowledge of those arrangements. Therefore, we find it best to bring someone down from Perth who can not only answer those questions, but also take those questions back with him and hopefully provide answers at a later date.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: I am aware that the administration of the Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements relies on a number of different state government agencies. How closely do those agencies work together at a district or regional level, particularly following the natural disaster that occurred in this area?

Mr Carr: In the south west, they work very, very closely together. We have the district emergency management committee, which is a network of region-based government agencies and some representatives from the local government area. We meet regularly, and we have established a very good working relationship with them. During the Bunbury tornado, which is the one that I was extensively involved in from a recovery management perspective, we worked very closely with those agencies involved with local government, the Department for Community Development, the police and local volunteers. We found that our ability to work prior to the event through networking certainly aided in our knowledge of that agency and who to call should there be a problem.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is there an opportunity for local FESA staff to liaise with local government and/or other state government agency staff following the proclamation of a natural disaster to coordinate the implementation of the Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements?

Mr Carr: There certainly is. It is the responsibility of the hazard management agency to ensure that the recovery process starts post-impact. The state emergency service, which was the hazard management agency for the tornado, certainly ensured that that recovery process started. As a matter of principle, we at the district level sit on that committee so that we can ensure that the HMA is fulfilling its statutory obligations. It also provides us with a good insight into feeding information back into our prevention and preparedness strategies.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: One of the things that we have been able to identify is that often people, particularly local governments, are not aware of the assistance that is available through WANDRA. I know it is your role to disseminate that information in the community. It is clear from some of the brief hearings that we have held so far that although that information is available, many people do not know what is available until a natural disaster happens. We are trying to ascertain how we can do that better so that the people on the ground, particularly local governments, will know what is available to them.

Mr Carr: I certainly do not think enough educational material is available in a simplistic form to provide to local governments and the community. That is one of the reasons that we opt to bring someone down from Perth after the event. If it can be provided, it would certainly be of benefit. However, in saying that, I also believe that a substantial amount of other information is provided prior to any disaster. Perhaps too much information is being provided, which may complicate the issue.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It should be selective information.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Or simplified.

Mr Carr: Definitely simplified information.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Based on your experience of the natural disaster that occurred here, did many local businesses seek assistance following the disaster? Are you aware of the type of assistance they sought?

Mr Carr: I believe that two businesses opted for the four per cent subsidy loan. I am unaware whether they managed to obtain that, but they certainly indicated their intent to go down that path.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Obviously quite a few businesses were hit. I think some 100 businesses were hit.

Mr Carr: Seventy-seven in total.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Two businesses applied for the four per cent subsidy loan. Other businesses that were sole traders or partnerships were not in a position to access those sorts of funds, even though it was at a reduced rate. Does FESA have a view on the recovery phase for those types of businesses and how they might manage to get back on their feet if they are not able to access any loans? A \$1 500 grant is available to primary producers for financial assistance or counselling on where to go next. That is not available to local businesses. Does FESA have a view on those issues?

Mr Carr: I know that a number of issues were raised during the recovery phase of the tornado. A number of businesses would have liked additional funding or some assistance from the government. I do not believe it fell within the guidelines of the disaster relief arrangements, but I understand that the individual from Perth who was dealing with that tried to explore other options and provided some guidance to them.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you know whether that extra bit of guidance assisted them?

Mr Carr: No, I do not know. We did not have direct contact with a lot of the businesses after the event.

[2.10 pm]

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: The restoration of public assets under WANDRA is to pre-emergency standards only, and betterment is not provided for. In your experience, has this proved to be a problem, and are there instances in which improvement works might be justified to mitigate the effects of a similar disaster in the future?

Mr Carr: My experience so far is that the question has been raised on numerous occasions. I do not believe they have been successful in getting those additional betterment works done. I would ask why it was damaged in the first place, and perhaps some consideration should be given to whether it should be built in that location again or whether some form of betterment should be provided to prevent it from occurring again.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You may or may not be able to answer this, but in terms of your own perceptions, what level of preparedness do members of the local community generally have for natural disasters; for example, insurance arrangements?

Mr Carr: We find that people prepare their homes physically for a natural disaster, whether it be a flood or fire, but they do not provide adequate financial protection. We quite often hear stories about people who did not have insurance or did not have adequate insurance. The people involved in these stories go on to find out that they did not read their insurance policy. When we consider the maze of insurance and legal talk in the policy, it is not surprising that people read only the first page. It is not until they make a claim that they find out that they are not covered for what they thought they were covered for. A classic case is fences.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Continuing with the risk management theme, I am aware that planning for natural disaster mitigation is promoted at both a commonwealth level and a state level. Are you aware whether the local community has, since the natural disaster, put in place any strategy to mitigate the effects of future natural disasters?

Mr Carr: Yes. The City of Bunbury has put in place a number of strategies to assist the community in that area. Interestingly, we were in the process of working through that prior to the tornado. The tornado provided the impetus for other agencies to come on board to help promote that. A lot of interest was shown after the event for the FESA storm-safe, preparedness strategy. People were quite vigilant in getting the available material so that they could help prevent any future damage from that point.

Mrs J. HUGHES: In your experience of the natural disaster that affected this district, are there currently exclusions under WANDRA that would have been helpful had they been included?

Mr Carr: The fencing issue would have been helpful. As I have mentioned, a lot of people found that their fencing was damaged but it was not covered under their insurance policy. That caused a fair bit of grief to those individuals, because they had pets and they wanted to secure the property. Fencing is quite an expensive option, and several people did not have insurance coverage for it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are there any others?

Mr Carr: No, none that I am aware of.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It has now been some months since the natural disaster was proclaimed, and there has been time for WANDRA to run its course. From your vantage point of experiencing things on the ground, do you have an opinion on how successful or adequate the assistance measures have been to the local community?

Mr Carr: I think the success depends on the process. The more arduous the process, the less successful it will be. Quite often we find that people who have just been through a traumatic experience try to make an insurance claim through their insurance company and they come to grief when they find that items are not covered. They have this perception that anything that is provided by the government when we put a process in front of them will be just as arduous as the insurance

claim. We may find that not many will progress down that path because they do not want to go through the grief again.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Are there any other matters that you would like to put forward?

Mr Carr: In dealing with local governments, we would like to provide some simplistic information to them - something that will be useful to them as well as to the public. If we can go down that path, that would make my job a lot easier in providing that information and preparing the community and local government so that they do not have to go through some of the grief that they may perceive they will go through.

Mrs J. HUGHES: During the recovery phase, obviously the recovery committee was in place for about eight weeks. Were you involved during the entire eight weeks, or did you assist in setting it up and then left the committee to it? How did that process work?

Mr Carr: We were involved for the entire duration of the recovery management committee. As I indicated earlier, we provided a lot of advice. The benefit to the organisation of being part of that committee is that we can feed the information that comes from the committee through government agencies, private industry and members of the public back into our organisation to streamline procedures for future events. It is also a way that we can show state government support for the local government, especially as we were the HMA for the event.

Mrs J. HUGHES: FESA manages WANDRA.

Mr Carr: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do all the reports come from a district level, or do they bypass you and go straight to the top?

Mr Carr: The reports -

Mrs J. HUGHES: The reports on the claims, what needs to be done and the works. Do they come through you first and then go to head office, or do they go straight from local government to head office?

Mr Carr: They go straight from local government to head office.

Mrs J. HUGHES: As a district manager, you are not necessarily aware of the claims that are lodged.

Mr Carr: Generally not, no. That is one of the reasons that we sit for the duration of the committee to try to pick up on a lot of that information.

Mrs J. HUGHES: To keep you informed.

Mr Carr: Correct.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: 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 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 of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct. Thank you very much for your time today.

Hearing concluded at 2.17 pm
