

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT MULLEWA,
FRIDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 2006**

SESSION ONE

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)

Mr S.R. Hill

Ms K. Hodson-Thomas

Mrs J. Hughes

Hearing commenced at 9.29 am

PERRY, MR WILLIAM THOMAS
Chief Executive Officer,
Shire of Greenough, examined:

HARTMAN, MR TOM
Chief Executive Officer,
Shire of Mullewa, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Welcome. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: I do not think you gave us a submission. Would you like to make some opening comments about the inquiry?

Mr Hartman: I have not really been involved in natural disasters to a great extent. I was in Meekatharra at the beginning of the year when all those floods happened up there. The council made application for some road damage funding through Main Roads, which I think is part of the natural disaster relief arrangements. However, I did not have much to do with that as far as the procedure goes for getting the funding and spending the money or whatever. If I appear vague about any of the questions I might get asked, that is probably the reason.

The CHAIRMAN: That is fine. It is one of those areas in which, unless people are right in the middle of it, they do not know too much about it. Bill, do you want to make an opening comment?

Mr Perry: Most of my involvement with natural disasters has been in relation to flooding rather than lack of water. Floods have occurred in the Greenough River. When I first came here in 1988, the Greenough River flooded. In about March 1998 there was another flood that did considerable damage. The flood we had in this current year caused a lot of damage to bridges and that sort of thing, but the flooding was not local; it was in the catchment area, several hundred kays from Geraldton itself. There was very little local flooding. The flooding was not from local rain but from the catchment area itself. Damage was done to a number of roads and bridges. The bridge at the Greenough hamlet was severely damaged to the point at which it is in the process of being replaced. My experience has been in flooding. I was at Wickepin many years ago when Cyclone Alby went through. There was a fair amount of damage there from fire. It was not a drought situation. I have been in local governments that have experienced bad seasons but nothing as dry as what this season has been.

The CHAIRMAN: Can we have a bit of background about your shires and some of the natural disaster issues you have been involved in? Shane Hill obviously knows your council area very

well, but the rest of us do not. It would be handy to have that on the transcript, so could you please give us a bit of an outline of your local government areas.

Mr Perry: The Shire of Greenough covers an area of about 1 730 square kilometres. It was first established in the early 1800s - about 1830, 1839 or thereabouts. The original Greenough Roads Board district was set up in about the late 1940s. Over the years a number of boundary changes have been made to that former Roads Board District. The more recent one was the amalgamation of what were the Shire of Geraldton and the Roads Board Districts of Geraldton and Greenough. They were amalgamated in the early 1950s. They changed the names of all local governments in 1961 when they became shires.

The Greenough River has flooded over a number of years. Primarily, in some cases, local rain has caused some of the flooding but in most cases, the extensive flooding has been inland around the Cue area and even further north, east of Cue, which is part of the catchment area. The fortunate thing about that is that we generally get probably a week or 10 days' notice that the river is flowing down because of the time it takes to travel that distance. We are certainly aware that it is coming. Greenough itself is a fairly wealthy shire. It generally has very safe seasons. I guess that is probably the main factor. I have been with the shire for 18 years, initially as shire clerk, and in 1995 they changed the Local Government Act and shire clerks became CEOs.

The CHAIRMAN: You have a good history of the place.

Mr Perry: I have a very good background with the local government.

The CHAIRMAN: Tom, can you give us some background about Mullewa?

Mr Hartman: I started here at the end of March this year. Unfortunately, it is the worst season in history. Mullewa is an agricultural area that covers about a 50-kilometre radius. I am not quite sure of the number of square kilometres it occupies. Some of the land is marginal. The town has a mixed population. This is the home of a number of indigenous people. There is a bit of pressure on the council at the moment with, first, the poor season and, secondly, some social issues that we are trying to work through. I do not know that there have been too many natural disasters here. A fairly active bush fire brigade is set up throughout the shire. I have attended some bushfire control officer meetings and was fairly impressed with the communication that has been set up. Obviously, a lot of that relates back to one particular family in town with a number of brothers, sons and whatever, who are all part of the volunteer organisation. The town is struggling a little bit to find volunteers. A meeting with the CEO of FESA is due in December to discuss various issues and some of the perceived problems that towns like Mullewa have with volunteers. It has a fairly well resourced fire brigade for both bushfires and structural fires, so there are no real dramas about the equipment etc. I think the biggest problem is finding numbers on the ground. As I say, I have no knowledge of a natural disaster that has happened in Mullewa for a while. That is about the strength of it.

Mr S.R. HILL: Bill, we have gone through flooding recently. Prior to that, obviously we have talked about the support offered to local authorities in the community after a natural disaster. Can you give us an insight into how you dealt with that, such as the paperwork involved or liaison with federal and state agencies? Was it frustrating or was it an easy process?

Mr Perry: The amount of paperwork that is required to be completed to justify claims has always been frustrating. Generally, we have got around them. There are frustrations with the time involved from when the repair work is done to when the funding comes through. That can be a problem. Generally, it has not been too bad.

Mr S.R. HILL: FESA is the lead agency when it comes to working through these issues. Were you happy with FESA's role?

Mr Perry: With the recent flood, things went through fairly well. Checks and balances must be carried out. That was done reasonably well.

The CHAIRMAN: With regard to the assistance provided to local government through the Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements, can you comment on the amount of the assistance you received to restore or replace those public assets? You talked about the bridge. You just said that it was reasonably quick, so that is okay.

Mr Perry: Yes, some of it. The bridge still has not been repaired. During the disaster itself, the support from FESA, the Water Corporation, government departments and the police was outstanding. To provide checks and balances and to establish where the flood water was at various times, FESA organised an aircraft to fly the route of the river so that we were all aware at any given time just where the danger was and what the water movement was. With regard to the coordination between FESA, police, local government and the Water Corporation, pretty much all of them were involved. They cooperated and worked very well together. Regular briefings were held, part of which were held over the weekend. Meetings were held probably every two or three hours during the most dangerous part of the flood. Generally, that was very well supported and coordination was exceptionally good.

With regard to the funding, there is concern about the bridge at the Greenough hamlet, which was washed out. There was a delay of probably two or three months before it was determined exactly what would happen with the bridge, whether it was going to be replaced, demolished and a new bridge constructed or whether the bridge itself would be reinstated. It must be realised that it is referred to commonly as the convict bridge, which has heritage value. It is probably one of the oldest existing, used bridges in Western Australia

The CHAIRMAN: Is that the bridge on Brand Highway?

Mr Perry: No. It is not on Brand Highway; it is just off Brand Highway. It is on the ocean side just opposite the hamlet.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that a council infrastructure rather than a Main Roads responsibility?

Mr Perry: It is a council infrastructure, but bear in mind Main Roads WA is responsible for all bridges in excess of, I think, three metres. I give credit to Shane for his efforts in chasing up funding on that. An enormous amount of contact was made between us, government departments and other politicians. Initially, through Shane's efforts, Michelle Roberts, the Minister for Police and Emergency Services at the time, actually came up here and made decisions on the spot that this would happen and, in fairness, it did.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of not just that budget but other things, the council must still fund 25 per cent under the 75-25 natural disaster relief arrangement.

Mr Perry: They must still fund 25 per cent. It is not as though we have piles of money sitting aside to pay for those sorts of things. Unfortunately, it creates hardships. It is an issue that must be addressed and we have in fact addressed it.

The CHAIRMAN: How does that affect the council area? Do you put other projects off? Does it slow things down in general?

Mr Perry: Work on the flooding damage itself did slow down because of the amount of time we had to take a number of our staff off the construction programs, particularly in relation to road construction, to repair the damage done by the flooding; therefore, those jobs have not been done. The money that would have been spent on them was used to reinstate those roads.

Mr S.R. HILL: Getting back to the historic buildings, obviously during natural disasters such as flooding, cyclones etc, as I have found with Maleys Bridge, it is very difficult to get money for historic funding. Should some sort of program be set aside under the guidelines specifically for historic buildings or infrastructure to be replaced?

Mr Perry: There is a need for that. Greenough probably has more historic buildings than most other local governments. There are about 13 buildings in the hamlet that are actively used. We

have formed a partnership with the Natural Trust. Progressively the buildings are being reinstated. The object is to have them set up as living buildings rather than buildings that people simply walk through and look at. To do that we need water and power. Scheme water has been provided to the hamlet. That was organised through the previous government when Kevin Minson was the local member. There was no power or water available to any of those and, likewise, there is no sewerage connection. They need those sorts of facilities. That will happen. We have spent, with the National Trust, probably in excess of \$2.5 million refurbishing and reinstating those historic buildings. There is a long-term plan for that. Much of the funding has come from the commonwealth government through the mid-west-Gascoyne ACC program we have been running.

Mr S.R. HILL: Getting back to the issue of building, would local government support some sort of program or funding being set aside for a natural disaster so that, if the town hall roof blew off for example, reconstruction could be done sooner rather than later. That is a concern with Malays Bridge.

Mr Perry: There is definitely a need for funds to be made available in that area. There has been a fair amount of cost shifting from both commonwealth and state government to local government. Local government does not have the resources to pay for those one-off events. It would be a huge advantage to have some funds available whether it be a heritage reserve fund or whatever to assist with repairing those sorts of buildings. There are a lot of private homes of heritage value around the district. Anything to be done falls with the owner of the property. There are some long-term low interest loans available but they have to be serviced and repayments made on them. That in itself is probably not an answer in many cases.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the low interest loan you are talking about the four per cent interest loan?

Mr Perry: It is four per cent through the heritage reserve fund.

The CHAIRMAN: It is not from natural disaster relief arrangement.

Mr Perry: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Was any private property damaged in those floods?

Mr Perry: There was, yes, although the recent flooding was contained basically to the actual river course. A number of properties are quite close to the river and, within the flood area of the river itself, a number of properties were flooded.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the council do anything to assist those people? Do they need a licence to demolish or rebuild? Is any assistance given to those people in light of that?

Mr Perry: No. The area of Walkaway is probably one of the lower areas around. Whenever the Greenough River floods, the Walkaway townsite goes under water. Current government funding provided through flood relief has enabled a flood bank to be established there which, to a degree, will assist in any future flooding. The only problem with it is that the railway acts as a bank. A limited number of culverts exist under the rail line, and they can take pressure when there is an average rainfall, but when there is flooding the water cannot get through the culverts quickly enough because the railway acts as a bank and water builds up. When it goes, it washes out the rail line itself and floods the Walkaway town site.

Mr S.R. HILL: Obviously after flooding early this year, the issue was raised of levee banks and who took responsibility for them. Do you want to put on record the shire's concerns or issues regarding the levee banks that were put in, I think, during the 1960s?

Mr Perry: The levee banks have been a problem the whole time I have been here. They were established in 1964 by the then Public Works Department. They were put in on private land so no-one really has ownership of them, I guess. Because they are on private land, farmers on whose land they exist have allowed the banks to be grazed with sheep and whatnot over the years. With wind erosion and stock movement over the years, they have got lower and, in some cases, almost non-

existent. Studies have been done by the Water Corporation on the value of those banks. There is belief by the council and a lot of local residents that they were put in for the benefit of Main Roads to protect Brand Highway, because in the event of flooding that does go under water. The local Main Roads district engineer does not agree that they save Brand Highway. If they were not there, flooding would be spread over a greater area rather than being confined. Because it is confined, when the banks break, a large volume of water flows out very quickly and Main Roads believes that could more potentially damage the highway than it would if the banks were not there and the water spread more gradually. However, there is no doubt that the banks save the Walkaway town site. The case against the banks is that they are established on the east side of the river. The higher they are built up, of course, the greater the volume of water that floods back to the western side. A number of small hobby farms of 10 and 20 acres are down there, and in some cases the houses are subject to flooding. Council has adopted planning approval regulations to ensure that people who build in that flood-prone area build their foundation pad anything from a metre upwards above the natural ground level, so that at least the house is protected in the event of a flood.

Council has refused to accept responsibility for the actual ownership of the levee banks. Some years ago, the state government offered council a one-off payment of about \$250 000 on the basis that council accept responsibility for them. Given the likelihood of litigation down the track from flooding, the council believed it was too big a risk and declined to take that \$250 000. We maintained that the water from the then PWD was a government responsibility and we did not want to go down that path. The reports have come back. There is still debate about whether the banks should be reinstated and made good to the state they were in before or whether they should be left alone to dissipate. That has not been decided. Under no circumstances will council accept responsibility for their maintenance or continuation. Main Roads do not want to know about them. Main Roads' attitude is that they are not necessary for Brand Highway.

Mr S.R. HILL: Obviously, part of this inquiry stemmed from the Shire of Lake Grace's concerns with Main Roads and the support the shire was getting from the agencies. You said earlier that the support was well structured and put in place early enough and everyone was communicating well. Could anything have been improved on from the point of view of the two shires? Is there anything else we could improve on?

Mr Perry: I think the coordination of the emergency committee is probably getting better all the time. In 1988 the shire went down there and cut the mouth of the river, which lowered the overall level. I think in about 1994 when flooding occurred there again, the mouth of the river was cut. I do not believe that there is any need to do that; nature takes its own course. When the river gets to a certain height, there is a tendency for the water to break the bank of the river mouth. It flows out to sea as a natural occurrence. From that point of view it looks after itself.

Coordination was exceptional between all government departments, including FESA's emergency service helpers. The State Emergency Service filled sand bags to help contain the flooding to that particular area. The coordination of police, road closures, Main Roads and local government works really well. We have an active LEMC and we run mock exercises every year anyway. When they were put into practice they worked well.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of reconstruction afterwards, is the shire now back to normal so to speak, except for that bridge, or is it still in recovery phase?

Mr Perry: The reinstatement of the levee banks has not happened. I am not quite sure when and even if that will happen because of the mixed views on them. The convict bridge has not been repaired. A diversion has been built around it so that people living on the west side of the river can in fact commute to Geraldton or wherever they want to go. A bypass was built around it fairly quickly but I am not sure at what stage the bridge itself is up to. Funding is still being sorted out.

Mr S.R. HILL: Funding is there for the bridge; it is just a matter of getting the final heritage people to redesign the structure.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Is that committed to?

Mr S.R. HILL: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Has the community recovered or is it still suffering losses?

Mr Perry: The majority of community members have overcome it. They would not have suffered a lot of personal loss. Those who suffered damage to their property would have repaired it by now.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of the 75-25 per cent split, does the shire have all those funds back that it was entitled to receive?

Mr Perry: The funding of the bridge is available but until such time as the work is done, it will not be paid. As I mentioned earlier, Main Roads is responsible for the bridge. I would think payment of that will probably go through Main Roads.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of reconstruction of your other roads, you took your staff from some projects to work on other roads. Do you know the all-up cost of repairing the damage to the other roads?

Mr Perry: I cannot give you that figure off the top of my head. We have it available, but I do not have it at my fingertips.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you want to make a closing statement? Is there anything you think we should have covered that we have not?

Mr Perry: I was not quite sure what I was coming here for. I came back from leave on Monday and the document was given to me on Monday by the director of engineering saying that I had a meeting at Mullewa on Friday. I asked him what it was about and he said that he had no idea. I am a bit like Tom; I have come in with an open mind, not knowing what was expected of me or what the outcome would be.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you quite happy, Tom?

Mr Hartman: I cannot add any more. From what I have heard around the traps, given the restructuring within FESA and the appointment of the new CEO, there has been quite a major clean-out of different spots in FESA. Local government has been complaining for a number of years about the lack of communication etc. This goes back to the different sections such as bushfires, SES and the fire brigade and there was never any proper communication between any of them. I believe that will make a big difference to any sort of disaster in the future.

The CHAIRMAN: When Jo Harrison has been before our committee, she has given us the impression that she would be much more open to consultation and be in the communities a lot more.

Mr Perry: I support Tom's comments. We have a very active exchange with FESA through Rich Maslen, our chief fire control officer. It has improved and is improving much more quickly since Jo has taken over the reins.

Mr S.R. HILL: I sent you both a copy of our last report. We have just completed a report into emergency services. I hope you have that on your desk. Many of those issues you just talked about, Tom, were raised across the state so that has been addressed.

The CHAIRMAN: I thank you both for coming in here this morning and giving us the benefit of your experience. I know you are busy. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced in the sense that the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, we will deem it to be correct. Thanks very much for coming in.

Hearing concluded at 10.07 am
