

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT MANJIMUP,
WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2006**

SESSION ONE

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 9.09 am**McKAY, MR VERNON LESLIE****Chief Executive Officer, Shire of Manjimup, examined:****CONNOR, MR JOHN MAXWELL****Chief Bush Fire Control Officer, Shire of Manjimup, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: 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: Do 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: Would you please state the capacity in which you appear before the committee this morning.

Mr McKay: I am here in my capacity as the chief executive officer of the Shire of Manjimup.

Mr Connor: I am here as an interested person, as well as in my capacity as chief bush fire control officer for Manjimup.

The CHAIRMAN: Vernon, would you mind giving the committee a brief overview of the local government area's emergency services? What are the high-risk emergencies in this area from bushfires to cyclones? What types of brigades and units operate within the local government area?

Mr McKay: I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to speak before it and welcome members to Manjimup. The Shire of Manjimup comprises an area of 7 028 square kilometres, which makes it a significant region in the south west of WA. The population of the Shire of Manjimup is just over 10 000 and it includes the four towns of Manjimup, Pemberton, Northcliffe and Walpole. Various settlements are located around those towns, including Palgarrup, Dean Mill, Quinninup and Windy Harbour. Only 15 per cent of the area is rateable and developed for farmland or urban centres. Therefore, 85 per cent of the area comprises forests, national parks or crown reserves, which presents us with certain problems. The high-risk area as a result of that is bushfire. We have had only one cyclone down here. You never know whether it will happen again, certainly with the way the climate is changing. Certainly bushfires are the biggest risk from an emergency point of view.

We have 28 volunteer brigades that service the area. Max Connor might be able to clarify this, but I think there is a town-based FESA unit that looks after the town. FESA units are located in Northcliffe, Walpole and Pemberton. Four town-based FESA units look after those urban areas. Currently, our 28 brigades comprise more than 1 000 members, not all of whom are active. Only a

small number of those members are active. I understand that we have six heavy-duty vehicles spread throughout the shire, mainly around the urban areas. There are four fast attack units and 60 slip-on units. They are all supplemented by private units owned by farmers and other property owners, and include other vehicles that have slip-on units attached.

Communications are based on five repeaters; that is, five different channels operate across our shire. There are some black spots in that service, but the coverage has improved significantly over the past couple of years. Some 150 assorted two-way radios link into that communication system. The Shire of Manjimup has provided mobile phones to the chief bushfire control officer and his two deputies, and others own a private mobile phone. Mobile phone coverage throughout the area is also an issue. It is probably less successful from a coverage point of view than is the two-way system.

As I have said, fire is most certainly our biggest risk. CALM would take the lead in a lot of that if the fire were located in the forest area. Our volunteers are called on regularly throughout the year to deal with fires that occur on farmland or adjacent forests. They also help CALM from time to time. I am not sure whether I have answered your query sufficiently.

The CHAIRMAN: You have given the committee a very good outline. I will ask some specific questions that have been asked of previous witnesses. Members will then ask various different questions. The coroner and the Auditor General have both expressed concern at the current fire control arrangements in Western Australia. Both have criticised the fact that local government, CALM and FESA could all be in control of a fire at the same time, particularly if the fire crosses different land tenures. It has been suggested that FESA be empowered to take control of a fire from local governments or CALM when FESA considers this to be necessary. It is anticipated that that power would need to be used only two or three times a year. CALM and some local governments oppose FESA being given this power. The committee is interested to know whether you have a view on that issue.

Mr McKay: It is an interesting issue. As the managing agent for the vast majority of land, CALM is very skilled in handling wildfires. CALM maintains the property under its control very well. From our point of view, there would be a risk of volunteers not being prepared to work with FESA. Volunteers are a very important group to us. If we did not have any volunteers, it would be a huge disaster if nobody were available to put out the fires. I would be concerned about the bureaucracy if FESA became involved, and suggest that the volunteers would be reluctant to accept FESA being in control. On the other hand, it might be a little bit different if CALM was in control. It would depend on where the fire was located. CALM does a very good job managing its land. I would have thought CALM could continue to manage the fires that occur on its land.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Obviously some FESA officers are here today. FESA is located at CALM's regional office. What is the current relationship between the brigades, CALM and FESA?

Mr Connor: Between the brigades and CALM, we have a very good working relationship. That is necessary because we work together so often on fire matters. We cannot have a fire within the Shire of Manjimup without involving both agencies. I will clarify that CALM may deal with large wildfires on its land that we may not have much involvement with, other than as a support role to CALM. However, if a fire occurs on private property within the shire, CALM is almost always involved in some form or another. CALM has the power to take control of a fire. We have developed a fair bit of trust with CALM over the years, and it does not always exercise that power at this stage. If it is happy with our activities regarding managing and suppressing a fire, it will support us but not enact its power of control.

We have not had as much involvement with FESA, purely because most of FESA's representation is based in Bunbury. Some of their support staff travel out from there. The appointment of an officer back to the Manjimup area is relatively new, particularly as far as volunteer bushfire control

goes. There were some FESA staff here many years ago, but that branch was then closed and FESA moved away. While the FESA staff were here, there was a lot of involvement with FESA and we made very good use of that. That is going back pre-FESA to the bushfire board days. We get more involved with FESA when fighting a large-scale fire. However, when fighting fires such as the one we fought yesterday whereby the fire was controlled within less than an hour - hopefully that is usually the case when we need to get a fire under control - our relationship with FESA is largely just a matter of telephoning FESA and informing it of what we are doing and where we are at.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Max, local knowledge is obviously important. Where would the majority of the intellectual capital lie at the moment? Has CALM got more local knowledge than the brigades? How important is local knowledge to the proper running of the brigade and maintaining control of any major event?

Mr Connor: Local knowledge is very important. It is one of the points I made in some of my notes. Any involvement with or changes to FESA should be along the lines of FESA providing a support role to local government, which best knows its area. In his opening remarks, the CEO has painted a picture that this shire is quite different from an outer urban fringe area. I do not believe it is possible to set rules and regulations that apply across the whole of the state without considering the differences within the shires.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Are the fires experienced in this shire different from those experienced by the grassland shires, such as Kojonup and Cranbrook?

Mr Connor: Certainly. Cranbrook has some involvement with CALM, but not to the extent that we do. That is evident when a fire occurs in that shire that involves CALM and the volunteer bushfire brigade of Cranbrook shire because there are limited areas in which they can interact. As I have said, whenever most fires occur, we interact and talk with CALM personnel.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Vern, earlier you mentioned CALM and FESA regarding bureaucracy and the interface between them and the volunteers. Can you explain that a little bit more? They are both basically government departments as such. Is there more onus on paperwork or things like that?

Mr McKay: This is my personal view. The people from CALM are based here. They live in the community and the volunteers know them. The FESA people are based in Bunbury and can take two or three hours to get to a fire. A fire that is not a major wildfire is under control before we even get a FESA person down here. I say that with due respect to Mark, who is here today and who is based here - I am not in any way trying to denigrate his role. The CALM people live in our community beside our volunteers. There is a better acceptance of and understanding between the local volunteers and the CALM personnel, as well as personal friendships and relationships. Alternatively, because FESA individuals are based in Bunbury, there is some reluctance among the volunteers to accept FESA's role. The volunteers can put out a fire before members of FESA even arrive.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you believe that the issue has a lot to do with FESA's response time?

Mr McKay: It could be an issue unless FESA staff the area with paid people, which is not going to happen. The response time will always be an issue.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Mr McKay, you said you had about 1 000 volunteers in the brigades. How many of those are farmers, how many are town folk and how many are former CALM employees or foresters, as they were known?

Mr McKay: Most of the volunteers are farmers. I would guess that 95 per cent are farmers. Mr Connor will correct me if I am wrong. Some volunteers are CALM employees as well. Although they are farmers, they also own property and work with CALM, although that would be only a small number. Very few volunteers live in urban areas in the towns.

The CHAIRMAN: Regarding the volunteers and FESA if things were to change, would FESA be viewed as Big Brother coming in over the top of other organisations, or is it a case that its control would remain as it is currently and that FESA would become a back-up or support organisation but with a stronger supporting role?

Mr McKay: My understanding is that FESA generally gives advice. If a major fire occurs, FESA has the right to take over the firefighting operation, and it may do that. Volunteers are very good at taking control of fires. Max has been in his role for well over 20 years and he has two very competent deputies. There are some very experienced volunteers who have fought more fires than either you or I will see in a lifetime. If FESA takes a back seat and gets involved only if a major fire occurs that affects a whole range of agencies - whether it is on private land or whether the towns and forests are under threat. It is best if the volunteers control it, as happens now.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would you be comfortable with FESA taking control if a fire had to be fought on many fronts?

Mr McKay: Circumstances will arise whereby a lead agency will be needed. That could be CALM or FESA if a huge fire is affecting a range of areas.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would you be comfortable with that?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: During these hearings the committee has heard from a number of local authorities about concerns regarding the training of volunteers. Are the volunteers taking up training, or is it not being taken up as it should be?

Mr McKay: We have a very good training program. The deputy chief bushfire control officer is a very competent training officer. We make certain that most of our volunteers have been given appropriate training before they are allowed out into the field. Volunteers are difficult to get. We certainly have volunteers who are prepared to come to fight a wild fire because they can see the imminent threat; however, it is difficult to get volunteers involved in preventive measures such as prescribed burning. The numbers of volunteers we have in that respect tend to fall off. Although they are given good training and many of them are keen to take up that opportunity, a number of others are in similar situations to me. I am one of those 1 000 people who has never had any firefighting training and has never been to a fire, yet I am a member of my local brigade.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Since the introduction of the emergency services levy, has the council increased its funding to bushfire management or has it remained at the same level? Given that previously the ratepayers were paying for those services through their rates and are currently paying for them through their rates and through the ESL, we would expect more money to be spent on bushfire management. How has the ESL impacted on the shire and has the ESL been good for the council?

Mr McKay: I cannot give the committee exact figures, but the shire certainly is not spending any less of ratepayers money on fire control measures than it was prior to the introduction of the ESL. The ESL has put money back into the brigades so that they can be better equipped, including major equipment. We were spending between \$130 000 and \$140 000 a year on fire control before the introduction of the ESL, and we are still doing that.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How much of that is taken up in administration costs? Are the ratepayers still getting the same level of funding for equipment for the brigades as they were before, or are they getting more?

Mr McKay: They may be getting a little bit more. Lotterywest was always kind to us and met half the cost of some of the equipment, although that does not occur now under ESL. Money for equipment and to help them with their operations continues to be given to the brigades. However,

the costs to the shire have not diminished. We have two rangers who spend more than half of their time on fire control measures and an administration officer spends at least half her time on that also. It is taking more time than previously to administer the 28 brigades under the ESL to make sure that all their budgets are in, to acquit their budgets, to itemise the details of what equipment is available and to pay bills on their behalf.

The CHAIRMAN: Do all the bushfire brigade volunteers now have personal protective equipment that is supplied through the ESL? Also, have all slip-on units up to the heavy-duty units either been replaced or are scheduled to be replaced?

Mr Connor: More money has been provided to the bushfire brigades, but it is being spent more on operational aspects rather than on equipment. That is an issue I had marked here to look at. The shire had a pretty good five-year strategy plan in place before the introduction of the ESL. Now, through the ESL funding, we are about 12 months behind where the shire would otherwise have been on major equipment replacement. That is a bone of contention for us because of a couple of matters. It goes back to the findings of coronial inquiries and their outcomes and to decisions made by FESA. One particular issue is that the slip-on units would not be supported, funded and maintained. That is the basis of our firefighting equipment. A fire occurred yesterday that required a lot of slip-on units, but only one FESA-funded appliance was in attendance. Had the FESA-funded appliance been the only appliance in attendance at the fire, we certainly would not have rounded up the fire in the time that we did. Instead, we were able to rely on the slip-on units, some of which had been funded through the shire previously. However, the bulk of the slip-on units are privately-owned equipment. Because it is privately-owned equipment, the ESL does not make any allowance for the running, operation or cost of those units.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned the coroner's report and said that the slip-on units have not been supported as a result of the coroner's report - is that correct?

Mr Connor: They are not supported. That recommendation came from the coroner's report, which came about through the death of a firefighter north of Perth. The coroner had grave reservations about the safety of slip-on units and as a result, FESA has decided it cannot support them. It was virtually going to sideline slip-on units, but it very quickly came to the same conclusion that we within the shire arrived at; that is, if slip-on units were excluded from fire fighting, the shire would not have many other firefighting appliances. FESA did something that I think - this is a personal opinion, not a shire opinion - it has been doing more of recently. FESA has placed the onus back on to the local government to decide whether to use a slip-on unit and under what terms it is used. In other words, FESA is looking at isolating itself from any liability should something go wrong if those units continue to be used.

Mr S.R. HILL: Following on from the ESL funding, you indicated that all the applications come from the groups to the shire, which applies through the grants system. Is there any advantage in a brigade applying directly for ESL funding through FESA instead of applying through the shire?

Mr McKay: It does need to be coordinated through a central group so that the shire has some control of what is going out there. Some brigades are very strong and well organised, whereas others might have just six or eight members. The smaller brigades miss out on certain things. The bigger and better organised brigades will have a significantly better chance of getting equipment. The shire has a bushfire advisory committee that comprises some 17 members. Of those 17 members, 11 members are volunteer brigade members. They examine the equipment requests and make recommendations to the council. They also look at the budgets before they are submitted to FESA to fund.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Going back to the slip-on units, the coroner said that the slip-on unit had to be permanently attached to the chassis of the vehicle, which makes it totally impractical. If it helps,

other shires have mentioned that it was a silly and impractical idea. Can a slip-on unit be safely secured to the back of a one-tonne ute?

Mr Connor: Members must refer to the vehicle in question that was subject to the inquiry. That vehicle was in a completely different category from the slip-on units that are used on the one-tonne vehicle. I believe that this unit weighed more than three tonnes, whereas the slip-on units that are generally used in a light four-wheel drive vehicle must be less than one tonne, otherwise the vehicle would be overloaded. Generally we are talking about a slip-on unit that weighs 800 kilograms. I believe it is possible to adequately secure a slip-on unit to that type of vehicle. Issues were involved with that unfortunate accident that contributed to the accident. Normally that would not be the case in everyday slip-on use.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Can I paint you a picture? You may be aware that the FESA legislation is due for review. The 1997 act contains a five-year review clause. It is well and truly past that time now. The government will review that legislation and at the same time it will review the Fire Brigades Act and the Bushfire Act. The government is proposing to roll them into one emergency unit. Given the coroner's report on Tenterden and other incidents, the coroner has recommended that there should be one fire organisation. If FESA were that single organisation, under the act it would have the power to delegate the containment of a fire in Kojonup to the bushfire brigade and it may delegate responsibility for containing a fire in Albany to CALM. Likewise, if a fire occurred on or near CALM land in Manjimup, it could also delegate responsibility for containing that fire. Would that work, bearing in mind that the coroner is recommending to the government that there must be one organisation? On the other hand, should the current system stay roughly as it is? A lot of people have said if it 'aint broke, don't fix it. I know it is a difficult question but I would like to hear your views.

Mr McKay: My view is that the current system works well here. We may be an exception to the rule because our volunteer system is very well structured and organised, but I do not think so. If it is not broken on our end, I do not see why it should be changed.

Mr Connor: Paul, I would support FESA being given the overall top-tier position provided it interacted with the parties that are closest to the fire. It is a pretty involved area. Taking control of a fire in Kojonup is different from taking control of a fire in Albany. It would be difficult for FESA to set up an umbrella organisation whereby it could cover all the areas. FESA does not have the expertise, and I cannot see it getting the expertise at this stage, so it must make use of whatever expertise resides in the local area. I can see the benefits of having one point, if you like, at the top of the triangle that infiltrates its information through to the bottom. However, it would have to be a very structured organisation that did not diminish any of the roles played at the local government level, whether it is CALM, fire and rescue or whatever. Care must be taken that the legislation is not drafted in such a way that it is meant to encompass all fire agencies but does not fit any one of them very well. We see operating procedure from FESA SOPs that do not have any relevance to volunteer bushfire fighting activities. For example, they talk about the standard of uniform dress that applies to paid fire fighters in the Perth metropolitan area. That sort of thing needs to be separated. FESA would like to put it all under the one banner, but realistically I do not believe it can work and FESA must accommodate the local issues when giving those types of directions.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Is there a fear among the volunteers that perhaps the organisation has become a little processed driven and top-heavy with administration as opposed to getting down to the business of fighting fires?

Mr Connor: Yes, that has happened and it will probably continue to go that way because that tends to be the trend in the development of bureaucracy. The further away it moves from the fire face, the harder it is to remain focused on the actual fire issues because so much more is involved in maintaining records and simple bureaucracy. Therefore, there is a natural separation. People

within CALM who work on the ground to fight fires would probably say the same about their superiors who are at the head of CALM. They would say that their superiors do not fully understand what is happening at the local level. I do not know whether it is possible to avoid some of that perception from happening.

The CHAIRMAN: I will move on to some of the other questions that we have asked other local government agencies. FESA suggested that it be empowered to request the development for fire management plans from land owners when the land is either 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 where CALM land abuts private land or where a eucalypt plantation is located near a housing development. Do you want to comment on this proposal?

Mr McKay: I would support the requirement to have in place fire management plans - the more of them the better. If the council is approving a major development from a town planning aspect, the council in many cases requires a fire management plan, particularly if remnant bushland is involved. I do not see that as being an issue.

Mr S.R. HILL: Currently if a council has received a development application for a showroom, FESA indicates what fire mechanisms should be in place. Should the decision to put that condition on the development go back to the local authority?

Mr McKay: I was thinking more of rural-type developments.

Mr S.R. HILL: If there were an application before the council for a showroom or a car yard in the town centre, would the shire be happy to put those conditions on the developer?

Mr P.D. OMODEI: They do now.

Mr McKay: We do to some extent, but it is accordance with the building code of Australia. There are certain restrictions on different sized buildings and different fire requirements need to be included in various designs. We do that now but quite often we refer that to FESA for comment, which will add conditions. I do not see why that should change because it works okay.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: It has been recommended that the new legislation bind the Crown. In other words, if the local government imposed a firebreak regime in a certain area, CALM should too. CALM has said that that is not practical because there are thousands of kilometres of forest for which it is responsible. In the absence of a firebreak application, should fire management plans be applied to CALM so that at least there is some equity in the scenario? We will have an interesting scenario whereby one government department is proposing that the Crown be bound and another department not being happy about it.

Mr McKay: I have heard opinions that cast doubt on whether the local government is bound. Some parts of the act require that it is and others do not. As the enforcing body, we are put in a dilemma. We expect private landowners to do the right thing and meet certain requirements relating to firebreaks, whereas at the same time local governments might not do that. Having said that, we have a very good program. We have put firebreaks in place in our major reserves and we conduct regular burning of other reserves every five or 10 years. I am sure that most other local governments do that also. I can see CALM's dilemma. It controls 85 per cent of the land in this shire; therefore, it would have to put in place fire control measures. Personally I think CALM's current prescribed burning practices, its risk minimisation and the way in which it looks after the assets and property of the urban areas is done very well. It gets behind in its program from time to time for different reasons.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Max, what do you think about binding the Crown?

Mr Connor: The power to bind the Crown is pretty important and would be a helpful lever for the prevention of fire. CALM need not throw up its hands in horror and think it will be the only organisation that will be subject to it. Other organisations are pretty tardy to deal with and have some fairly horrendous hazards within their areas. I would not have thought that it would have been a big issue for CALM. I would like to see the development of an independent joint fire-management policy between local government, CALM and FESA. That would result in an overall statewide fire management plan that would probably be more cohesive and applicable across the shire rather than having a plan here and another plan there. It would develop more uniformity. If that were implemented and an agreement for the management plan was reached, as it would have to be, the binding of the Crown would work around that. I do not think it would be a big stick for CALM.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: A concern that has been expressed is the increase in the bureaucracy and the way the world is going regarding public liability. The committee's hearings have highlighted that there is a real concern about losing volunteers. How does that relate to the liability issues of individuals and the way in which the Department of Environment's clearing regulations have impacted on individuals? For example, there is concern about a farmer who is prosecuted for breaking a branch on a track and yet when a fire occurs, CALM can knock down as many trees as it likes with its bulldozers. The community considers that type of scenario as inequitable. How much of that is impacting on the psyche of the volunteer who decides that if all that nonsense is going to occur, he is out of there? Is there any validity in that argument?

Mr Connor: As far as many volunteers are concerned, the bureaucracy is certainly onerous. Our volunteers are firefighters through necessity to safeguard their interests, such as their property. Once the fire is under control, they are quite happy to go back to what they were doing. They are not in the same position as people who work from nine to five for five days a week and who, from what I can see from being involved with DOAC and the FESA authority in Bunbury, seem to have more time for training issues, practical exercises and so forth. Many of our volunteers simply put out a fire when necessary. Generally they embrace a reasonable level of training. I think I am safe in saying that the Manjimup shire certainly was and still is ahead of training within the lower south west. We have encouraged training wherever we can. Volunteers recognise that training to a certain level is very advantageous for their safety and for the safety of their fellow firefighters. However, there reaches a point whereby the training keeps on going. I will use a poor example: if a volunteer firefighter is asked to do training on the use of a ladder, he might ask why he needs to do that because he is unlikely to be on a ladder in his everyday firefighting role. It gets to a level at which the training begins to taper off. There will always be some people who will continue with further training. This shire has put in place measures that new fire control officers that are appointed by the shire will have to obtain a higher level of training than did some of the fire control officers who have been control officers for the past 10 years or so. Initially we required fire control officers to have a certain amount of training when they were appointed, which created quite a storm when we introduced it many years ago. Some fire control officers got grumpy about it and said if their prior experience was not good enough, they would walk away from it. As part of the bushfire advisory committee, we could see a need arising whereby we needed to have officers with sound training who could demonstrate that they had the ability to manage manpower in a fire situation.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It has been suggested that the legislation will enable individual local governments to enter into an agreement with FESA whereby all the bushfire brigade responsibilities could potentially be transferred to FESA. If a local government did not want to be part of it, it could opt to not transfer. I would like to hear your views on the transferring of bush brigades to FESA.

Mr McKay: My view is that it would be appropriate. However, I do not think the volunteers would accept it because they are working with the local government. Certainly it could be left as an

option. Some local governments and councils might want to do that. Our volunteers in Manjimup would not support it.

The CHAIRMAN: Vern, your overview did not mention anything about SES units or any other emergency units. Does the shire have any other types of units?

Mr McKay: I apologise for that. An SES unit is based in Manjimup and one is based in Walpole. We do not have a lot to do with the SES unit in Manjimup. It is controlled mostly directly through FESA. About all we do with the SES unit is pay the bills, pass on the dollars and buy the equipment for it.

The CHAIRMAN: That leads to my next question that is similar to that asked by the member for Geraldton earlier. Currently under the ESL arrangements, local governments must complete an ESL submission on behalf of the SES unit. Is it necessary for local governments to perform this role, given that FESA ultimately decides how much of the ESL grant funding is allocated to the SES? Would it be more appropriate for the SES unit to deal directly with FESA?

Mr McKay: That is one role we would happily pass back to FESA. If there is an issue with the unit, which is only small - the SES unit in Manjimup comprises some 15 or 20 members - FESA will deal with it directly. We do not have any real control of it and we would not have a problem with that responsibility being passed back to FESA to control it directly.

The CHAIRMAN: I am not sure whether this next question applies to Manjimup. Under the current system FESA pays for the installation, removal and maintenance of fire hydrants and gazetted fire districts and local government pays for the cost of reinstating the pavement. Outside of the gazetted fire districts, local government pays for the lot. The committee notes that in other states the water body is responsible for the installation and maintenance of fire hydrants. Who should pay for what and why?

Mr McKay: It should come out of the ESL. The ESL pays for all other equipment. I do not know why a fire hydrant would not be funded from that.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: What about the Water Corporation?

Mr McKay: The Water Corporation provides the water, which is provided for free. That is its contribution. When talking about fire, I would have thought it was FESA's role to provide it and pay for it, and that it be funded from the ESL.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: What is the structure of the Local Emergency Management Advisory Committee and how does it operate?

Mr McKay: There are two local emergency management committees in our shire and a third is being formed. Manjimup and Pemberton have one. The Manjimup and Pemberton committees have not been particularly active of late. It is only since the new police sergeant began working in town in the past few months that we have reactivated the committee. The police sergeant has been chairing committee meetings. I understand that the new emergency management legislation requires that somebody from local government should do that, which is not an issue for us. The committee comprises the police, the bushfire brigades, the town brigade, the SES, the ambulance service, the local health service and the local airport. Access to the airport is very important during an emergency, particularly when fighting fires. The airport is where the water bombers are based. There are other representatives on the LEMAC groups. The Pemberton committee would have a similar structure. We are looking at combining the Pemberton and Manjimup committees into one LEMAC. The Pemberton and Manjimup committee would cover also the Northcliffe area. Walpole is considering forming a LEMAC group. Walpole is located some 120 kilometres from Manjimup and is closer to Denmark. Nornalup is right on the border of our shire, which is in Denmark. There are some similarities and community of interest between those two towns.

Because of its isolation, we think that we can support another LEMAC group in Walpole that would work in conjunction with the Denmark LEMAC.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Do you have an evacuation plan for Manjimup?

Mr McKay: Currently we do not have one. However, we recently received a \$60 000 grant from the Australian government to review and update the emergency management plans of the shire. Shortly we will appoint consultants to undertake that process. We will provide an updated and revised emergency management plan for across the district that will hopefully integrate with the adjoining shires.

Mrs J. HUGHES: With the reactivation of the LEMAC groups, has communication become an issue regarding being able to relate to all the different emergency management groups?

Mr McKay: I do not think it will be. We can coordinate that as a shire without getting the groups together from an administration point of view. However, I do not think that is an issue when there is an emergency. Mr Connor might be able to comment on that. The police can hook into our two-way radios and we have reasonable two-way communication. Mobile phone coverage is quite reasonable in the town areas.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are they all compatible?

Mr Connor: No, they are not fully compatible at this stage. However, FESA has in mind some radio changes. I am not quite sure how they will work out, but we have communication lines. I would not mind saying a little more on that when Mr McKay has finished. Although LEMAC is a good structure, problems arise from a number of areas. One of those is overlapping boundaries and regions, not to mention the infrequency of the interaction of these agencies. LEMAC operations do not happen very often within a given area. Incident control, which can be taken down to lower level of LEMAC such as a volunteer bushfire brigade has with CALM and FESA works quite well and works with fire and rescue. When LEMAC is activated rarely, the wheels tend to fall off it a bit to the point at which agencies are involved that are not primarily involved with emergency issues. Although the police are involved to a large extent with emergency issues, they are not necessarily involved with LEMAC-type issues. An example of that concerns the new officer in charge of Manjimup last year at about the time we had a fairly serious fire to the north of the town. In a wash-up meeting afterwards he said that he did not have any information about the bushfire brigades or about who or what to contact. The information was in his office, but because it had not been dug out for a while, he did not know where to look for it. We have been in situation whereby the shire has provided compatible radios to the network on which we work with the police but when I inquired of the police just before Christmas whether these radios were operational, I was told it never had them. They had been fitted in the patrol cars but the cars had since been changed and the radios went with them. We had to start from scratch again. We get problems like that because the police might be involved with a fire only once a year and they have many other things to do.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Fires are not their priority.

Mr Connor: No. That is the problem with LEMAC. It is an organisation that requires a very big look into from a Western Australian perspective. That is particularly the case when considering the larger picture of emergency management that is in place in the eastern states. We can see the sorts of activities they are involved with in the initial stages of the emergency, the later stages and then the recovery. To my knowledge, that is very poorly covered here in Western Australia. From where I am looking at it, we have not touched on that aspect of it.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Who chairs the LEMAC?

Mr McKay: It is either the shire president or me. That is a requirement of the new emergency management legislation. It has been chaired by the police sergeant until now.

The CHAIRMAN: Vern and Max, do you have any other matters you wish to raise with the committee?

Mr McKay: Can I raise the issue of the 000 number? We have some problems with triple 0 when a fire occurs. We regularly receive 000 messages to attend fires in Mandurah. People confuse Manjimup with Mandurah. The operators are often confused about the role of the FESA town brigade and the volunteer brigades. There have been a number of instances whereby the town FESA brigade has been sent to a rural fire. The operators do not know the distinction between the different areas of responsibility, and it probably applies vice versa. There are some issues with 000 that I think are worth following through on.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Should St John Ambulance be rolled into the emergency services sector? Obviously there is a difference between the Manjimup St John and the smaller ones.

Mr McKay: The operators do not understand the distinction as to whether there is an issue with St John. I think St John is listed under 000 now.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I was referring to funding St John. Obviously Manjimup would have a number of incidents that requires St John to transfer patients to a regional hospital or to Perth. The Pemberton, Nannup and Northcliffe St John organisations are struggling.

Mr McKay: They are all volunteers down there.

Mr M.J. COWPER: By way of explanation regarding the 000 call, in a previous life I was an inspector of a police operation centre that received 000 calls. When a person rings 000, the operator asks whether the person wishes to be directed to either the fire, ambulance or police service. The police have an operations centre in Midland that takes all the calls throughout Western Australia and FESA has an operation centre in Murray Street that, by and large, employs operators from FESA to take the calls. However, an overflow of calls spills into other states. I understand that there have been instances whereby people have telephoned 000 and the call has been directed to another state. Often it has taken some time for the operator in the other state to grasp that the call was from Western Australia. The person who makes the call is usually not aware that he is talking to a Victorian operator. A number of instances have arisen whereby Mandurah, Manjimup and people in rural Western Australia have become almost oblivious to the people who live on the east coast. That is an issue for FESA. When I spoke to Bob Mitchell, I understood that FESA was looking at providing new facilities that will accommodate and facilitate a review of the triple 0 call. Calls to the ambulance service also overflow and sometimes the caller from WA can be speaking to someone in Queensland. That aspect must be reviewed.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for coming to the committee and providing us with your experience and knowledge in that area. 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 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.

Hearing concluded at 10.04 am
