

**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 FOUR**

**Members**

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

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**Hearing commenced at 1.36 pm****HALL, MR GORDON MAXWELL****Project Director, Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA, 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, and did you understand the notes attached to it?

**Mr Hall:** Yes.

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

**Mr Hall:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** We have received a submission from FESA. Would you like to add anything to that submission, or to elaborate on any points?

**Mr Hall:** I am currently the project director for FESA. However, at the time of the flood events earlier this year I was the regional director for the Midwest-Gascoyne region of FESA. As the regional director, my role is to ensure that the regional staff prepare the community and respond in a timely and effective manner to threats and impacts to the community in accordance with the Emergency Management Act 2005, and in particular State Emergency Management Committee policy statement No 7. That statement sets out what needs to happen in the response role. A further function of the regional director is to ensure that appropriate recovery arrangements are in place. This requires regional and other FESA staff to advise local governments on a range of matters, including disaster relief funding. I will expand a bit on recovery. Before the Emergency Management Act 2005, FESA, under the State Emergency Management Committee policy statement No 7, had to ensure that recovery arrangements were in place in the area that had been affected. That required facilitating some of the committees, and helping local government, and others, to get rolling. We would then pull out and the local community would take over. However, the Emergency Management Act 2005 has changed that a bit. Under that act, local governments now have to manage the recovery of their affected communities. I will now cover some of the things that happened earlier this year, because that may bring out a bit to do with WANDRA and that sort of thing.

**The CHAIRMAN:** That was our first question, so you have pre-empted us!

**Mr Hall:** On 14 January, I drove to Geraldton from Perth to facilitate a stakeholders meeting as there was a high risk of a flood occurring on 15 January in the Shire of Greenough. The stakeholders meeting pulled in the police, Main Roads, the Water and Rivers Commission and the Bureau of Meteorology - all the main stakeholders that could be involved in a flood. Two other stakeholders meetings were held before I declared an emergency event on the morning of 15 January. Those stakeholders meetings included the CEO and engineers from the Shire of Greenough. The flood occurred in the town of Walkaway and that particular area on the afternoon of Sunday, 15 January. On 16 January, late in the afternoon as we were looking at the whole situation, the FESA CEO, Bob Mitchell, and I discussed the event and the fact that the WA natural disaster relief arrangements should now apply. Discussions then took place with James Butterworth from FESA, the acting executive director of the emergency management services division of FESA, on this matter so that we could move it forward. There is a bit of history here!

The next day, Nick Barker, the manager national disaster relief reform, and I met at the shire of Greenough to discuss with the shire any arrangements required for their shire, such as for the town of Walkaway, and the convict bridge that had been damaged etc. Dr Gallop had resigned as Premier the day before this disaster, so on this day the Acting Premier, Eric Ripper, MLA, and the then Minister for Emergency Services, Michelle Roberts, MLA, flew to Geraldton to make the announcement in relation to disaster relief, and the "Eligible Disaster Proclamation Notification" document was released. Nick Barker was there to advise the shire and the Acting Premier if required. Nick was able to get only two or three minutes with the shire CEO as he had a number of other meetings and council business to attend to, and the Acting Premier was there, too, and a lot was going on at the time. By the way, the shire engineer was on holidays. The shire was not ready to focus on those issues. However, it was keen to establish linkages with FESA for the natural disaster relief arrangements. At that stage we requested estimates of costs etc, and we then left, and they liaised with us from then on. On 20 January a letter was sent - I will give you a copy - to all local governments in the state advising them of the WA natural disaster relief arrangements. The letter outlined the process to follow, the contact phone numbers, and the web address that people could go to for information.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you send that letter to every local government in the state?

**Mr Hall:** Yes, 142, plus the other two, whichever way we count it. I thought it went to only certain ones.

On 17 March, the Murchison river flood operation, which resulted in temporary levee banks being constructed in Kalbarri on 13 to 15 March, went on as another operation to follow up. On 28 March, representing FESA, the district manager, Robert Te, the acting regional director, Max Barker, and I, as the acting director for the north of the state, attended a meeting in Northampton with the shire CEO and his deputy. During this meeting the shire raised the concerns of the proprietor of the Black Rock Cafe in Kalbarri in relation to payment for 600 meals for shire workers, volunteers and community members who assisted during the preparatory phase for the flood impact in that town. FESA advised the shire - that was me - that this account would be paid out of the operational costs as soon as it was forwarded to the regional office in Geraldton. That happened, and the account was subsequently paid. The shire also raised the fact that it had incurred costs for machinery and labour to clean up the levee banks that had been built by the volunteers and the community to protect vital infrastructure in Kalbarri. FESA asked for an estimate of these costs. The shire estimated that the cost was around \$8 000. I advised the shire that this account could be paid as part of the operational costs. The deputy CEO was advised to liaise direct with Mr Te in the Geraldton regional office regarding those costs. The shire was subsequently paid the full amount of \$5 752.53. Those amounts go back through Treasury and end up being part of the submissions that come from us.

On 4 April, there was a media statement from the then Minister for Emergency Services, John D'Orazio, MLA, relating to disaster relief. A copy of that letter is attached to FESA's submission.

The Department of Planning and Infrastructure requested funding to re-dredge the mouth of the Murchison River. It had been dredged in December 2005 and was now silted up again due to the flooding of the Murchison River. We assessed this situation and we approved that funding under WANDRA. I think it was around \$500 000, but I do not know the exact figure.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The funding that you gave out under WANDRA, was that not just for feeding the volunteers and not just for the local council, but also was for dredging and cleaning up?

**Mr Hall:** I would like to confirm this. There are two streams of money here, and it gets a bit complex. To run an operation, we have one bucket that is a direct debit on Treasury - a direct refunding. Those costs to run the operation we submit to Treasury and get that money back. What happens with the national disaster relief arrangements is that when a lot of those costs hit the magic trigger points, they go into that bucket, and we can get some refunding of that. Therefore, from our

point of view operationally, in that response phase, we cover those costs, and it is then up to other people to decide, if they have gone past those trigger points, whether they will then include that in their natural disaster relief applications. With the DPI one, we put that straight under WANDRA, because that was not a direct operational situation. We ruled that was a direct impact of the disaster - of the emergency.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Did the convict bridge come under WANDRA?

**Mr Hall:** My understanding is that it definitely did not come out of our operational one. The Shire of Greenough liaised directly with the people who handle the natural disaster relief arrangements, so I cannot answer exactly what happened with that bridge. As you know, a lot of people got involved with that. I do not know in the end where all the funding came from. As I think you are probably already fully aware, the NDRA and the WANDRA are directly related to impacts and business continuity and that sort of thing. Direct impacts are covered, but not consequential impacts. I believe that was a direct impact. However, the determination on that bridge would have been made by others.

There were a number of other persons as time went on who contacted either FESA's regional office in Geraldton, or some of the local governments, about how they could make a claim for any relief. They were referred to Graham Capper, the WANDRA administrator, who works for FESA, or to the FESA web site, for further information on those matters.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** Obviously that was part of the process at that time. We have just had some of the station people come in. They say they were busy trying to get their lives back together. Did someone from FESA contact those station people directly?

**Mr Hall:** In relation to the relief arrangements, no.

The next part of my statement is interesting. Bear in mind that FESA's role during an emergency is a response role, so FESA is concentrating on any rescue of life, protection of life and limb, and then assets after that. Therefore, the relief arrangements, which normally come within the recovery phase of an emergency, were not something that we were directly involved with. It is interesting that you say that, because, as I have said, the letter went out. There was also other information in the press statements. I will stop at that. Am I allowed to make another statement?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes.

**Mr Hall:** It was interesting to listen to these people here today. What I have written here - this is my personal opinion from what I have seen - is that during times of emergency and the recovery phase that follows, local governments appear to have very little understanding of the disaster relief arrangements. They may have gone for five or eight years when they have not had a disaster, and all of a sudden something happens. That may also be the case for some of the station people. They are very busy trying to get themselves out of trouble in relation to the disaster. They probably do not recall exactly what happened five or eight years ago, because staff change and processes change. From what I have seen this year, there is very little understanding of the disaster relief arrangements. It is my personal belief that local governments need to become better aware of the disaster relief arrangements, requirements and processes. The other interesting thing is that where I think a lot of them struggle is that they do not have a simple method to identify and capture the costs that could become relevant - this is all linked together - to disaster relief.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is this local government, or pastoralists?

**Mr Hall:** Local government, and let us say others. Even some government departments do not do that. In the end, a couple of months down the track when they come to us and we move them to the other people, the feedback is that they really do not know what to claim, because they now cannot find the costs of what they need to claim, because it was not captured. I am not saying that is their fault. I am saying that in the whole process there probably is not enough understanding out there to let people know how to do that at the time, because it could be a number of years since they had to

do it. A lot of local governments have not had to do it for many years, if ever. All of a sudden something happens, and they do not know the process. They may also have big issues in their own local government areas, and they are working flat out on that. Therefore, by the time things have settled down, people's memories have faded.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are there any simple methods or systems that could be used to capture the cost of the things they are doing to help them recover from a natural disaster, or even respond to it in the first place?

**Mr Hall:** Within FESA, we capture our costs for the different operations, so we can come up with the dollar values for what it has cost us. However, the impact on local governments and private people, and on their equipment and assets, is a whole different issue. Some of the local governments do not really know their costs until much later, because they do not have the resources at the time to track that through. Their systems are not set up for that. By the time things settle back down to some sort of normality and they try to get the information that these forms require them to submit, it is rather challenging for them. I added that comment from what I have seen over the past six or eight months. I saw it happen at Exmouth many years ago, and even with the Carnarvon floods. Carnarvon is fairly clean every time it floods, so it is much easier to capture those costs. Once we move into some of the other areas where it gets quite intermingled, it becomes much more difficult for the community, local government and others to capture the costs so that they can apply for relief.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You have picked this up. I assume you have fed that back through the FESA hierarchy. Is FESA working with local governments on this matter? During the Albany floods, the Albany council faced the same problem. However, the council has now changed its accounting systems so that it can assist in capturing the costs.

**Mr Hall:** To my knowledge FESA is not doing anything to assist at this stage. It is still working out the processes for the relief arrangements.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is that not something that FESA should be doing as the emergency management organisation of this state?

**Mr Hall:** I cannot disagree with you. However, we are moving into policy here. I am not trying to avoid your question. I am just saying that we are moving in a policy area, and I do not have the authority to comment on that.

**The CHAIRMAN:** But we can make comment on that in our report. Do you want to continue with your statement?

**Mr Hall:** That is it. That is fairly short and sharp. I just wanted to give you an idea of what has happened this year in this area. I am sure you will have some other questions.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You have covered a lot of the questions that we had thought about. I have some questions about your response in Greenough and Lake Grace. I get the impression from the comments of the people who were here earlier that there was not much of a response from government agencies to their claim for the actual event, or in fact afterwards at the clean-up and recovery stage. Can you give us some insight into whether there was a response?

**Mr Hall:** It is interesting. I listened to them, too. At the end of the day, it is those people's perception. I wish we had time to sit down with them and work it through so that we can find out what happened or did not happen. When we went to deal with the Greenough River, the people from the Water and Rivers Commission who advise us on that never saw any flooding issues up river, so we were never advised of that. We had a disagreement between the government agency - the Water and Rivers Commission - and the representative from local government, and the police officers, about whether the river was going to flood. In the end we put them up in a plane twice so that we could show them what was happening, because we had a big gap between the data that they had been giving us and what people's perception actually was. On the Sunday morning when they

walked back into the office, I could see from the looks on their faces that they knew it was going to flood. What happened upstream, I honestly do not know, because we did not hear of any issue out there about people wanting help, or about any flooding. As I have said, I will be speaking to some people to try to find out more about this matter, because we do not want to fail any of those areas. We want to ensure that the community can have confidence in us because we are doing our job. A lot of work was done in the Murchison. That went on for two or three weeks. We had people phone all the stations every day. We were using special satellite pictures from the Japanese satellite, because there is no monitoring on that river except at the entrance to the Kalbarri Gorge. We were using the satellite pictures and doing the calculations and trying to work out every 12 hours the pace of the river, which was quite unusual.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In using the satellite, did you hook up with the Department of Land Information?

**Mr Hall:** It was providing the information to us. From a technical point of view, the Bureau of Meteorology did all the calculations and the overlays for us, from the DLI information. My manager here, Robert Te, could then look at it and let me know what was actually happening. Phone calls were made to most of the stations. Those stations that were coming into a risk situation would have been phoned once or twice a day. The stations actually provided a lot of river height and flow information, and that has now gone into the historic records of the Department of Water, because it has never had that data before.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** What happens in the circumstance in which communication is lost? You are saying that FESA contacted various stations and outstations in small and remote communities. Do any alarm bells start to ring after 24 hours when they have not managed to make contact with a homestead?

**Mr Hall:** What should be happening is they have a list of the homesteads, and they tick them off every one or two days when they think they could be under threat. If there is no communication, the incident manager of the day makes the decision about whether to send out a plane, or whatever. That is what normally happens. I am not sure what happened with the situation at Meekatharra. It is very interesting. We honestly do not know. All we know is that in the end we got a call to say could we get two people from Canberra out of an indigenous community because it was flooded and they did not want to sleep there, or something. We do not know the full story of what happened there. I intend to find out exactly what happened there.

**The CHAIRMAN:** From what I have picked up from what you have said today, Yuin and Tardie stations had a rainfall event. It was a rain bearing depression from cyclone Clare, and that dumped rain on them. It was not a river flooding. What you were responding to was the aftermath of that rainfall event, so you were looking at the river and saying it is going to flood, and you were making decisions based on that. However, you actually had no way of hooking into the rainfall event. Is there any way that you can hook into something like that?

**Mr Hall:** What usually happens is that the bureau will ring and say we may have a rainfall event; it looks as though 200 millimetres of rain will be dumped in a certain area. I would say that for this particular event that information did not come to FESA, because the moment that happens, action is taken on that. The rainfall events that caused the run-off on the Greenough River, and also the Murchison, were initially known by the bureau. Once the bureau saw those, it was able to track the information from there. I will be going back through the records to find out exactly what happened, and whether the bureau did advise us. I believe at this stage that the bureau did not advise us, but I would need to confirm that. The bureau with its equipment might not have seen it as a rainfall event at that stage. If that is the case, it needs that feedback as well so that it can improve its scientific data and models as time goes on.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You might not have heard this, but Jano raised the issue of the lack of communication between the people on the plane that flew along the river, and the people on the ground. I do not know whether that was your plane. Is that an issue that may arise?

**Mr Hall:** When we send planes out for searches and things like that, we have ground-to-air radios in the vehicles so that the people on the ground can talk to the people in the planes. I am not sure which plane she was talking about. If it was the plane that flew along the Greenough River to look at the water levels -

**The CHAIRMAN:** It was not. It was the search and rescue event.

**Mr Hall:** Okay. That was the one she talked about out at Meekatharra. I do not know why that occurred. I will find out if they have a ground-to-air radio at Meekatharra. I assume they have one there. There were some issues in the Meekatharra SES unit at the time. The management structure has now been changed, and they have a different manager. We expect that unit to go ahead again. Occasionally volunteer units have some internal issues. However, that should never be reflected on the ground. Anyway, we have resolved that matter.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** It has now been several months since an emergency was declared under WANDRA. Is everything now back on track? Has all the paperwork been completed and are all the costings in, or is that still ongoing?

**Mr Hall:** I cannot answer that, because I honestly do not know. Graham Capper is the person who is handling that. If you want to know, I will make sure that I find out exactly what progress is being made on that.

**Mr S.R. HILL:** That would be good.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You referred to a letter that you sent to local governments. Does FESA do any other things to get information out to disaster-declared areas and to farmers and pastoralists?

**Mr Hall:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** FESA is the keeper of WANDRA. However, that is probably also a policy issue.

**Mr Hall:** Most of the information that is required from our point of view ends up going out during the emergency, and it then goes out in letters and to the media. That is part of the reason for my statement.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would you like to make any closing comments, or is there anything that we have not have covered that you think should have been covered?

**Mr Hall:** No. I think I have covered all the areas. My personal opinion - this comes out from listening to other people as well - is that information needs to be put out. I look forward to seeing the report, because we need to listen to what is happening at the grassroots level. Those people are out there on their own at the time. Response is one thing. That usually comes and goes very quickly. However, the recovery side is a different thing altogether. Some communities take a long time to recover. It took Moora a long time to recover. There are people who have never gone back to Darwin after cyclone Tracy. Recovery is a big issue. Local governments and communities need that help wherever possible.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for coming here today. 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.

**Hearing concluded at 2.05 pm**

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