

ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH,
FRIDAY, 31 AUGUST 2001**

FIRST SESSION

Members

Mr McRae(Chairman)
Mr Day (Deputy Chairman)
Mr Bowler
Mr Masters
Mr Murray

Committee met at 9.10 am

The CHAIRMAN: Welcome everyone. This hearing of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly is now convened. The committee met for the first time in Midland earlier this month, and this sitting is a continuation of that hearing. We also intend to take evidence next week. The times and witness lists for those days will be posted later today or on Monday. We will continue today to hear from some of the witnesses who attended the previous hearing. We will also take evidence from new witnesses. I thank witnesses for taking time to contribute to the work of this committee today. I ask that the first witnesses to be called.

JONES, MR GREGORY ALLEN,
Brigade Captain, Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade,
examined:

WARNOCK, MR MICHAEL JOHN,
Fire Control Officer, Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade,
examined:

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Jones and Mr Warnock, I asked you both at the previous meeting of this committee whether you had completed details of witness forms and understood the guidelines for presentation of evidence to a Legislative Assembly committee. I remind you of those terms. Do you need to clarify anything about the guidelines or the obligations placed on you?

Mr G. Jones: No.

Mr M. Warnock: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We intend to proceed this morning from where we left the previous sitting of the committee. I think we left it at the point at which you had detailed a series of events leading up to the fire. In the time that we have today, we should start dealing with particulars of your crew's experience at the fire, when you had arrived at the scene. Is that a reasonable place to start?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. I think we do need to pick up from where we left off. At the last session, we indicated that we would need to present a further submission. That submission is available this morning; we have only just been able to produce it. I submit a copy of volume 3 of our amended submission. There is one copy for each member and a file copy.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Do you wish it to be incorporated in the transcript?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. That is the only outline we have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you wish to make any amendments to it?

Mr G. Jones: I have a further submission, outlined in volume 4, which I would like to submit. It is a confidential document. The author of volume 4 told me that the contents could be made public if the identity of the author is kept strictly confidential.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that the document you have written to us about?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: We will respond to you on that matter, so you might wish to hold off presenting it to us until you get our response in writing.

Mr G. Jones: Okay. That is fine.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the sorts of protection that we will offer to the witness and to that material.

Mr G. Jones: Yes. The author does not have a problem with the material being public.

The CHAIRMAN: I understand that.

Mr G. Jones: It is just that, at this stage, his identity needs to be confidential.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay.

Mr G. Jones: He is happy for us to present that item.

The CHAIRMAN: That will be fine. Thank you very much. Would you like to continue with your submission? Will you be talking about volume 3, or are we still discussing volume 2?

Mr G. Jones: Members will obviously need time to read and absorb volume 3, so it is unlikely that we will deal with it today. Volume 4, which we intend to provide to the committee, is linked with volume 3.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay.

Mr G. Jones: Unfortunately, I do not think we will be able to go through parts of that.

The CHAIRMAN: We will consider those points after hearing your submission today and will make an assessment about the extent to which we will need to have you back.

Mr G. Jones: Sure. We think that the evidence is crucial.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr DAY: Are there any additional concerns in the submission you have just given to us that are over and above what you previously presented to us? If so, can you give a brief outline of those additional concerns?

Mr G. Jones: Volume 3 deals, in more detail, with the post-incident management of the fire. It gives a much broader view. Some things have come to light since the last committee hearing we attended about why people were heeding the limits and other related matters. We have uncovered more information that will be of use to the committee. Some of that is contained in volume 3. It is important that you read that and I am sure you will probably want to ask us some questions later.

Mr DAY: Are you suggesting that aspects of the post-incident management were not done properly in some way?

Mr G. Jones: A lot of things have not been done correctly. It is not just a matter of correctly; more importantly, it concerns what has been done in any way to deceive. That is outlined in that submission.

Mr DAY: Do you consider that there has been active deception by some party or parties following the fire?

Mr G. Jones: Certain individuals from some authorities have acted in a manner that can only be described as deceptive. Evidence of that is contained in volumes 3 and 4.

Mr DAY: Can you give an outline of your particular concerns about where you believe there has been deception?

Mr G. Jones: Particularly in the management of health-related issues - the welfare of firefighters and others. We have quite a bit of evidence to not only make claims, but also support those claims.

Mr DAY: Do you believe the outcome has been negative health effects on individuals, or that people are ill or have less than optimal health as a result of those actions?

Mr G. Jones: In this instance, people were exposed to high levels of toxic chemicals without any protection. It is our belief that you cannot store that volume of toxic chemicals, then superheat them in a furnace and put human beings into that environment and expect that no health issues will arise. So far people have looked at the short-term effects. Our concern is for long-term outcomes such as chronic health effects. It may not be for many years, but that is what will stem from this exposure, and this incident.

Mr DAY: Are you aware of any evidence that people suffer from ill-health at the moment?

Mr G. Jones: Yes; I am personally aware of some.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you referring to your son?

Mr G. Jones: For one; but there are others. We have been networking with people, and we are aware that a number of people already have health issues. We should not overlook this, just because there has not been a health issue straightaway; things will develop. It stands to reason they will develop, because we know the types of chemicals to which people have been exposed and the levels of that exposure.

Mr DAY: Can you outline some of those ill-health effects based on the evidence you have?

Mr G. Jones: I can speak only of my son.

Mr DAY: I am not asking you to speak about or identify any individual. Can you give the committee some examples of what you think is happening as a result of this deception, as you describe it?

Mr G. Jones: The deception is another matter; it is different from the health issues. People have purposely withheld information and given misinformation. They have attempted to downplay the situation to reduce their liability.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the material that you will present to support that contained in volumes 3 and 4 of your evidence or is it within the earlier material?

Mr G. Jones: Some of the statements are in volume 3. The evidence in volume 4 will corroborate that fully.

The CHAIRMAN: I ask because the committee has not had a chance to look at what you gave us this morning. I am interested in pursuing what Mr Day is trying to understand, and what you are presenting to us. However, we might need to take a couple of days to digest what you have presented and to get back to you if we need to pursue it further.

Mr G. Jones: We would liked to have submitted this earlier, but it was a timing issue. We were unable to confirm our ability to present that to you.

Mr DAY: Can you give any examples of what you consider are the negative health impacts at the moment?

Mr G. Jones: Some of the issues are that the people have not been properly assessed; there has been no standard assessment of the people who have been exposed; some people have not even been informed about their potential exposure, and a cut-off date of 30 May was imposed, since which nobody has been allowed to go for a medical. All this has been done to reduce the number of people who may feel that they have some sort of claim to get medical attention and to be properly looked after.

The CHAIRMAN: Are monitoring and assessment being managed by the Department of Health or directed through the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia?

Mr G. Jones: It is directed through FESA. The problem is that even FESA's own health contractor has not been properly briefed on the chemicals involved, the protocols of testing, how that testing should be done or even what chemicals to look for. The medical professionals have had

a problem trying to understand the complexities of this incident, what they should look for, and how they should test people. Some people have had very thorough testing, while the experience of others, basically, has been, "Can you read this and are you breathing properly?" It has been very low key.

Mr MASTERS: I am uncomfortable with the committee asking questions of our witnesses without having read volumes 3 and 4. These two gentlemen have come along with a presentation on volumes 1 and 2. We should encourage them in the time available to make that presentation and, if necessary, invite them back next week to comment on volumes 3 and 4 after we have read them.

The CHAIRMAN: That is how we will proceed.

Mr DAY: If there are examples of negative health impacts could you give the committee some examples of that sometime in your presentation?

Mr G. Jones: We have outlined a lot of that in volumes 3 and 4 of our submission. I would prefer to wait until the committee has read the submission.

The CHAIRMAN: We will now return to the material you provided to the committee some time ago. As I have indicated earlier, the committee will assess the material you have provided today, together with some additional material that you will provide after today. When can we expect that?

Mr G. Jones: You can have that after this session.

The CHAIRMAN: We will get back to you and work out if and when there will be a need to call you back.

Mr G. Jones: Previously we intended to talk about the situation leading up to the fire, but we did overlap. We will try to recap a little without repeating what we talked about earlier. When we spoke on volume 1 we referred to the initial 000 call. We spoke about our instructions. We were called by pager to attend at the bridge on Military Road.

Mr MASTERS: What time was that?

Mr G. Jones: We were called at 4.14 pm. Our crew assembled and travelled to the site, and became operational just before five o'clock, which was six hours after the fire had started. We also gave evidence that we had confirmed the status of the fire. We were told it was a factory fire - not a chemical fire. The route that the crew travelled to the fire is on page 8 of our submission. I also refer the committee to maps Nos 1022 and 1023, which came from FESA. Map 1023 shows the site and the direction of the wind according to FESA. Map 1022 shows the route that our crews took to the fire. They entered off Robertson Street, into Clayton Street, down Military Road past the scene of the fire and through the plume of smoke. From the bridge at Military Road they met with District Manager Webster. They travelled along Military Road, Bushmead Road and back along Stirling Crescent to an area near the Helena River that is directly opposite the brickworks, which was in the path of the plume. While our crews were there their vehicles appeared to be the only vehicles with towing equipment. It was necessary for them to provide assistance to tow other vehicles out of the Helena River, as people were bogged in the mud. Apart from the firefighting duties, our people were -

Mr MASTERS: Who was bogged in the mud?

Mr G. Jones: There were other fighting units -

Mr MASTERS: Voluntary fire brigades -

Mr G. Jones: Yes. Glen Forrest was there and there was a fire and rescue voluntary unit there as well; it may have been Guildford.

Mr MASTERS: Are you not sure who they were?

Mr G. Jones: No, but they were required to tow the vehicles out of the mud and, therefore, our people became immersed in the Helena River activity. Around five o'clock, the Mundaring chief bushfire control officer called 6IP, which is the Fire and Emergency Services Authority communication -

Mr BOWLER: Was that at 5.00 a.m?

Mr G. Jones: Yes, at 5.00 am. I was monitoring the radio at home so I heard this transmission. He advised FESA communication centre that he was taking charge of the Stoneville department attack units one and two. He was working on a sector and was on channel 98, which is the operating channel. Shortly after that, I discovered at home, from the footage that I spoke about earlier, that the fire was a chemical fire. I immediately tried to contact the Mundaring chief bushfire control officer and our crew by mobile telephone because the radio I have in my unit at home does not have channel 98, the fire and rescue channel. I left to go to work early and I drove down Greenmount Hill towards the fire as I was still trying to contact those crews.

The CHAIRMAN: Would channel 98 normally be available to a volunteer bushfire brigade?

Mr G. Jones: I believe it is open to us now, but at the time of the fire it was not an operating channel and not all our radios were tuned into that channel. Channel 98 has normally been a fire and rescue channel. We operate on a series of other channels in the bushfire service, but now they are coming closer together. However, we could not use that channel at that time.

Mr MASTERS: If you had wanted to contact FESA, you would have had to phone their control centre number and then they would have had to either patch you in or pass on a message?

Mr G. Jones: I could relay through 6IP, through FESA comcentre on channel 25, or I could call by mobile phone. Both our vehicles are equipped with mobile phones as a safety backup. I had the number of the Mundaring chief bushfire control officer, so I tried direct communication because it was a major event and I did not want to clog up people's time and -

Mr BOWLER: And you got through straight away?

Mr G. Jones: No, I did not.

Mr BOWLER: You could not get through on the mobile phone?

Mr G. Jones: There are a number of radio black spots, particularly on Greenmount Hill, and they may have been working in an area where there was a radio black spot, as happens with mobile phones; they have the same problems.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you then revert to channel 25 to contact the FESA comcentre?

Mr G. Jones: No, I was driving to work in my company vehicle, which does not have a bushfire radio. My Land Rover at home has one. Therefore, I did not have access to the radio once I left for work.

Mr BOWLER: At that stage were you working at Fremantle?

Mr G. Jones: That is correct, so it was my normal route to go past the Bellevue site on my way to work.

I would now like to talk about what I saw with regard to the smoke plume. I always pay particular attention to the smoke because we are trained, as bushfire fighters, to evaluate these things. The shape, the size and so on of the smoke gives us an indication of what is happening. As it was a chemical fire, I was particularly concerned about the smoke - where it was heading and who might be within its path. I thought we might have had a whiteboard like we had at Nedlands, so that I could draw the shape of the plume, but I may have to do that at a later date. However, I did observe the smoke plume from three points: once I was descending Greenmount Hill, another time when I was on Roe Highway directly opposite the waste control site, and the third time from the Great Eastern Highway bypass back along Stirling Road. This gave me a good cross-section view of the

fire and the shape of the plume. The smoke plume had a certain amount of emission going straight up through the convection process. Another layer of smoke was coming along the outside of that, and was levelling out at a lower height than the main plume. The wind at the time was very light and easterly, and the smoke was blowing away from Roe Highway towards the coast. As the smoke was cooling, it was quickly descending, and in cross-section the plume looked like a hammerhead because as it went up, it went back towards the hills a little and then rolled away. The taper of the smoke went straight down over the Helena River area, and then above the ground for probably 50 or 60 metres.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you describe it as a concentrated cloud or a dispersed one?

Mr G. Jones: It was very bluish-grey smoke. The fire could still be seen burning when I went past Bellevue. There was a lot of orange, yellow, and purple flame, which is a typical indication of a chemical or flammable fire. However, it spread quite quickly to either side of the flanks of the fire area.

Mr BOWLER: Did it get any closer than 50 metres to the ground?

Mr G. Jones: No, it was from that level down to the ground. It was actually at ground level.

Mr BOWLER: Therefore, past the Helena River it had dropped down to the ground.

Mr G. Jones: Even at the Helena River the smoke was dropping down. The smoke was widespread.

Mr MASTERS: We have received a submission from one of the government authorities saying that there were two smoke plumes. One was the smoke from the chemical fire itself which, because of the higher temperature, was able to punch through the inversion if there was one, go much higher and then come down in the manner that you are talking about. The second plume was the one derived from the bushfires that your crew had been asked to put out. Was there any evidence of the two plumes or what is your reaction to that claim?

Mr G. Jones: At the time I drove past, which was probably around 6.30 am, most of the bushfires were extinguished. Therefore, the only plume that I saw of any bulk would have been from the chemical fire. The plume of smoke was emanating from that site; it was not coming from anywhere else. Regarding the cold inversion layer, I think the smoke I saw was also coming from the fire and it was peeling out at two levels, like a mushroom cloud. It was at that time that I became even more concerned for the safety of our crews because they were working in the area downwind of the chemical fire. Having seen the smoke, I certainly was quite alarmed at what I saw. At that stage I had established contact with one of the Stoneville crews and -

The CHAIRMAN: How was that done?

Mr G. Jones: I did that by mobile phone and advised that crew that if they did not already know it, they were smack bang in the middle of a chemical fire and that they should evacuate the area as soon as possible. I asked that crew to contact the other crew by radio and get them out as well, because I had been trying to contact both of them. They told me that they had almost finished their task and that they had been told they were to be relieved and pulled out of the area. After that, the Stoneville crews -

The CHAIRMAN: Where were they when you contacted them?

Mr G. Jones: They were in the Helena River area.

The CHAIRMAN: Did they stay there during the night?

Mr G. Jones: From about five o'clock in the morning they were at the Military Road bridge. They were in that vicinity until about 7.00 am, after which they went to a hydrant to replenish their water. While they were there they washed the vehicle down, which we normally do, but they did that

mainly because of the mud that they had been immersed in, and they hosed mud from their protective clothes and boots.

Mr BOWLER: You mentioned that they were to be relieved. Did another volunteer or permanent brigade take their place?

Mr G. Jones: No, I do not think so. The task that they had been employed to do had been done. I am aware that voluntary bushfire service personnel were on that site sometime later to inspect the site and to look for any flare-ups or whatever, but their job was mostly done. After they had cleaned their vehicles and their clothing, they went back to our station and returned to work or whatever they had to do.

I would like to talk about the level of protective clothing they were wearing. They were wearing the standard issue flame-resistant overalls or the two-piece level 1 garments which are purely for bushfire fighting and not for structural or hazardous firefighting. They are not proper gas-tight suits. They do not have breathing apparatus or any other protective equipment, other than the standard issue, which are gloves, goggles, helmets and safety boots.

The CHAIRMAN: Would breathing apparatus normally be carried at all?

Mr G. Jones: No, we are not equipped to do that. That is normally a fire and rescue function. We do not have breathing apparatus or anything. We are not properly trained, however -

The CHAIRMAN: Not trained for what?

Mr G. Jones: We are not fully trained in the use of breathing apparatus or for combating structural fires, other than the training that we get in the modules presented to us in which there is a structural element. This is because we are the first line of defence in our area and it may be that we will be called to structural fires such as a house fire. In that event, we would be supported by a fire and rescue unit.

At brigade level, we provide hazardous material training for our crews. That Hazmat training teaches people how to deal with a hazardous incident. The basic rule of thumb is that they do not participate in such an incident. We train our crews to stay upwind and not to enter the area, even if a victim is present. They are to try to gain as much information as they can at a safe distance and to recognise if there is any Hazmat information, such as dangerous goods placarding and a class or a UN number to identify the chemicals involved. However, they are to immediately contact 6IP and FESA comcentre, advise the nature of the incident and pass on any details they have. Their next task is to evacuate the area and to keep people away. We train our people to stay away from chemical incidents; we do not train them to participate. We also practise this drill, and every year we have a pre-season training exercise. One of the drills is usually exactly that type of scenario, in which we come across a rolled-over tanker or a shed full of chemicals or something that we might come across as a bushfire brigade. We believe that we are exercising a duty of care to our members in showing them how not to deal with incidents involving hazardous materials. As we said before, had we known this was a chemical fire, we would have withdrawn our services. We have included some statements in our submission from the team leader and one of the crew members.

Mr DAY: At what time did the brigade members discover that it was a chemical fire?

Mr G. Jones: After they completed their work and had gone home.

Mr CHAIRMAN: When you phoned them?

Mr G. Jones: When I explained to them -

Mr BOWLER: Did they suspect before then?

Mr G. Jones: They had smelt strange odours in the area. Whoever was in command should have realised that he was placing people directly downwind in the path of the flames. They knew these people were not the appropriate people to fight the fire. I am sure that FESA in its report will have

the answer to the question of how that happened. We had what we call a post-incident analysis, or a wash-up, about two months after the fire at the Darlington Fire Station.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Who is “we”?

Mr G. Jones: The brigades involved in the Bellevue fire.

Mr CHAIRMAN: All the brigades?

Mr G. Jones: The brigades from Mt Helena -

Mr MASTERS: Only the voluntary brigades?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. A lot of PIAs were done, but in small groups rather than one big one.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Does “PIA” mean “post-incident assessment”?

Mr G. Jones: No, it means “post-incident analysis”. We call them wash-ups - that is a bushfire term. They are for gathering and giving information. It was conducted by the Mundaring chief bushfire control officer, Bruce Telfer, and the FESA representative Trevor Wigg. Mr Wigg informed us that he had been appointed by FESA along with Phil Cribb. Trevor’s role was to investigate what had happened and report to FESA with his findings and recommendations. Mr Cribb’s expertise was in fire investigation. He is very active in arson investigations, and he is good at forensics and other methods of examining how fires start. Mr Wigg concentrated more on operational procedures. At one time he was in charge of the communications centre and has a very good understanding of how that centre runs. He was also a senior officer in the hazardous materials, or HAZMAT, side of FESA’s operations. He was probably one of the most qualified people it had in both areas. He was in Geraldton at the time the fire broke out and was in no way connected with combating it. Mr Wigg was appointed to the task of finding out that information. When he opened the post-incident analysis, he said that he already had 53 recommendations with many more to come.

The purpose of the wash-up was to find out more information. We then asked whether we could have an honest and open inquiry. We said that we did not want anyone’s head on the table. We simply wanted some answers about why things went wrong, and wanted the problems fixed so that it would not happen again.

Mr CHAIRMAN: If concern had been raised in April about having a PIA when people were openly saying that things went wrong, there was obviously some discussion among people in the intervening two months.

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

Mr CHAIRMAN: That appeared to be a developing thought among a number of people. Would it be fair to say that there were a number of systemic problems?

Mr G. Jones: There was a lot of unhappiness about the way PIAs had been conducted.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Prior to this?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

Mr BOWLER: Why were you asking for an honest and open inquiry? Are you saying that the previous inquiries were not open and honest?

Mr G. Jones: A good example would be the Glen Forrest fire that occurred on the New Year’s Eve millennium in the year 2000.

Mr CHAIRMAN: I was going to ask which millennium!

Mr G. Jones: The last one. We had a wash-up a couple of months later at which we were presented with a typewritten report that had been prepared for the minister. The outcome occurred before the inquiry. We protested about that. Six months later we had a wash-up. We put our heart

and soul into trying to sort it out. We were promised a response in two weeks, but 12 months later we still did not have one. We received the response only after the Bellevue fire, before this PIA, and it was exactly the same as the first report. It was verbatim. Everything that was in that initial report was also in the final report.

Mr DAY: When you said that you expected a response, did you express concern that things were not done properly?

Mr G. Jones: We wanted the truth about the Glen Forrest fire. Many things went wrong which people did not want made public. A clean report was presented, not the truth of the matter. That has undermined our confidence in PIAs which are done behind closed doors where firefighters are not represented. Given that experience, we did not expect much to come out of this PIA.

The CHAIRMAN: Why do you believe they are important? You obviously take a great deal of interest in them because you use wash-up meetings to reflect on the procedures that need to be amended to ensure that people are safe and that you operate effectively. Are they the two objectives?

Mr G. Jones: They are two of the primary objects. We look at the positives and the negatives. We look at what went right or wrong, why it went right or wrong and what we must do so that it does not happen again.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Mr Jones, were there other incidents before the Glen Forrest fire that caused concern about that wash-up or PIA process?

Mr G. Jones: A number of similar things happened which undermined our confidence in getting the right response.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Do you have any examples?

Mr G. Jones: The Glen Forrest fire is the most obvious. It is usually the larger fires that cause concern. The smaller ones tend to be more straightforward. This one is a classic example of what we are talking about.

Mr DAY: Are you also of the view that many things went right with dealing with that fire ?

Mr G. Jones: No, a lot of things went wrong.

Mr DAY: As a resident of the area, and an observer, I thought at the time that a lot of good work was done, and that buildings and homes were saved, including those of a lot of your members.

Mr G. Jones: We are not undermining the good work that was done. However, people do not know of the things that went wrong. People have only seen the glossy side, not the other side.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Are you suggesting that larger and more complex fires require greater levels of coordination and sophistication, as there is a higher level of risk and breakdown in the process?

Mr G. Jones: Yes, particularly when multiple agencies are involved, such as FESA, the bushfire brigades, the State Emergency Service, the Police Service, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, St John Ambulance and so on. Many people try to coordinate the best way to deal with the situation. It is no easy task by anyone's standards and there should be a safe and effective way of dealing with it. Often procedures are not followed, and other things that should occur do not occur. PIAs should be used to expose these risks so that we can improve the procedures and ensure that we do not face them again. It is fortunate that people have not suffered; there were no fatalities. However, that does not mean the risk was not there. Because of that, we were sceptical about the outcome of the wash-up that we attended. We spoke to both the chief fire control officer and Mr Wigg. Mr Wigg appeared to be very open and direct and shared with us his knowledge at that time. That is why we were well-informed at the end of that meeting and knew exactly what had happened.

Mr DAY: What do you regard as the lack of effective response and the provision of information in PIAs, and have you raised these concerns with either the Shire of Mundaring or the bushfire advisory committee, or otherwise raised it with FESA?

Mr M. Warnock: We can look at particular incidents when talking about the PIA problems. At Glen Forrest, 17 hydrants were capped. That matter was raised before the fire and has been fixed only in the past few weeks. That matter was brought up at the PIA, and nothing was ever done.

Mr MASTERS: What does “capped” mean?

Mr M. Warnock: The hydrants had been leaking, or something like that. A special tool is used to open them because there is no general access. That problem was brought out in the PIA, but it was never made public. The brigade has pursued that since the Glen Forrest fire, but it has only just been fixed.

Mr DAY: Why has it taken so long?

Mr M. Warnock: The bottom line is money. We assumed that as an advisory committee to council, which has met three or four times, motions and things like that must be recorded in the books. We got information from the council that money was allocated and had not been spent. Evacuation at Glen Forrest was a problem which, again, was not made public. We have problems dealing with people being fireguards, who stay and look after a place and then tell people to leave. There was a big problem with that and, again, that problem has not been resolved.

Mr DAY: That is a difficult and contentious issue.

Mr M. Warnock: It still goes on. These aspects of the PIAs were raised, but were not made public. The brigades are constantly finding these problems. As Greg said, the PIAs do not achieve exactly what we want them to achieve.

Mr CHAIRMAN: When you said that the people on fireguard duty gave orders for evacuation, did you mean that people were reluctant to leave their homes?

Mr M. Warnock: Most definitely.

Mr MASTERS: We are going off on a tangent. I urge caution. I believe that only the police can order evacuation. I also believe the law states that property owners are not obliged to leave their properties.

Mr M. Warnock: With regard to Mr Davis questioning why we were reluctant to take these PIAs and whether there were problems in them, I was just illustrating that two problems occurred which still have not been resolved. That is why we find that PIAs are not the best for us, and that is why we asked for this one at Darlington to be open and honest.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Absolutely. That is why we were interested in hearing it. It creates a link to the PIA for Bellevue. We are certainly interested in the related concerns there. It might be worth going specifically to the Bellevue PIA now.

Mr G. Jones: I believe that Mr Wigg did the job that the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA asked him to do, which was to examine and report. I believe that his report had some 105 recommendations at the end. It was quite a telling report - in fact, it was probably too telling - and it was shelved.

Mr CHAIRMAN: So it went from 53 to -

Mr G. Jones: 105.

Mr BOWLER: You say it has been shelved?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

Mr BOWLER: How do you know that?

Mr G. Jones: I had received information that that was not to be used.

Mr MASTERS: So Mr Wigg never presented a formal report to FESA, of which you are aware?

Mr G. Jones: He did, but FESA decided not to use it.

Mr MASTERS: However, the report was submitted, so if the committee requested a copy from FESA, presumably it would be in a position -

Mr G. Jones: I urge the committee to seek the original, unedited copy from Mr Wigg, and perhaps ask Mr Wigg himself to answer those questions. Nobody I could imagine would have more information about what happened at Bellevue than Mr Wigg.

Mr MASTERS: When you say "unedited", your belief is that there were 105 recommendations in his original report.

Mr G. Jones: That is correct.

Mr MASTERS: FESA then prepared its own version of that report. Are you aware of how many recommendations were in that report?

Mr G. Jones: All I know is that another person was appointed to write another report. I do not know the contents of that report. However, I urge the committee to seek a copy of Mr Wigg's original report with those recommendations. We think some questions need answering in this response. We still do not understand why we were called to a major chemical fire five hours after the fire had started. We still do not know why that occurred.

Mr CHAIRMAN: These are issues that you raised in your submission to the committee?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

Mr CHAIRMAN: It is not necessary to go through each of those.

Mr G. Jones: Okay. I want to talk a little about -

Mr BOWLER: Excuse me. Earlier, did you not say that you were called out because some other bushfires had started in the area and you were called out just to control them?

Mr G. Jones: We were told that it was a factory fire that had escaped into the bush and we were required for mopping up.

Mr MASTERS: Mopping up the bush, not the factory?

Mr G. Jones: No - which meant that the main fire had gone and we were just in there to clean up.

Mr BOWLER: Did your crews do that?

Mr G. Jones: Yes, but the issue is where they were dispatched to.

Mr BOWLER: Yes, but eventually, if not then, someone still had to do that in the plume - it had to be done.

Mr G. Jones: I will get to that in a minute, Mr Bowler, because I do not believe it was necessary to combat the fire in that area. It could have been let burn - it was doing no harm - until it was in an area in which it was safe to combat it.

Mr BOWLER: Is it your opinion that it should not have been done then?

Mr G. Jones: Exactly.

Mr MASTERS: The FESA submission, which we will deal with later on, actually says that in some situations in which hazardous materials are burning, those materials are allowed to burn and the fire is just contained around the edges, rather than put people into a dangerous situation.

Mr G. Jones: Yes, you are right, Mr Masters. I want to talk about evacuation. There is a minimum standard. I have here a copy of a book called *Dangerous Goods - Initial Emergency*

Response Guide. The latest version is 1999. Unfortunately, this is a 1996 copy. However, there are very few changes in it, and nothing of what I am about to say differs from the later version.

Mr MASTERS: By whom is it published?

Mr G. Jones: It is the Australian and New Zealand standard.

Mr DAY: For evacuation of homes?

Mr G. Jones: No. This is actually used in the transport industry. Any dangerous goods licensed vehicle is required to carry an emergency response guide for the particular chemical it is transporting. If, say, that chemical was kerosene, the guide would have all the information to do with kerosene - how to combat a fire, how far to evacuate people if it was burning and all that. That is necessary under the licence requirements of any vehicle carrying dangerous goods. I mention this because it shows that there is a standard.

In the event that a vehicle does not carry those particular sheets for those particular chemicals, each vehicle is required to carry a copy of this book, in the driver's door. There is a little pocket, highly identified, and that is where emergency services, such as fire brigades, go to get the information on what chemicals are on board and how to combat them. This can also be applied to storage of chemicals, not just to road transport. I know of its use through my work as a transport manager.

When looking at chemicals, a lot of people have concentrated on dry-cleaning fluid. Therefore, if I were to look up dry-cleaning fluid in this book, it tells me that it is guide 37. Guide 37 says that evacuation for a fire is 800 metres in all directions. That is for a large fire, or a large container, including road or rail tankers. A road tanker might carry 25 000 litres. We are talking in this case about 400 000 litres. That is 16 times more than what is specified in this book. Some of the other chemicals, like organic oxides and so on, will go up to 1 500 metres - one and a half kilometres in any direction. However, I understand that people were evacuated only about 200 metres from the fire. It was necessary for us to defend vacant land 200 to 300 metres from the seat of the fire, and downwind of the fire. The first area we would evacuate is downwind. Therefore, if we had to evacuate 800 metres, we would go 800 metres downwind and evacuate everyone from there, and then proceed to evacuate everyone to that level. I am not sure what authorities were involved - I do not know whether public health was advising. However, we have standards, and this is the bible; yet people were evacuated only 200 metres up to the stockyards.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Would you normally expect that those regulations would require the incident manager, coordinator or controller to make those decisions?

Mr G. Jones: The HEAT team was also activated.

Mr CHAIRMAN: The HEAT team is from -

Mr G. Jones: That is the hazardous emergency response team. We also had the Hazmat people on site. Enough skilled and experienced people were there to know this information. At any tanker rollover they attend, the first thing they do is grab this book to find out what is in the tanker.

Mr DAY: To clarify that - are you saying that a much wider area should have been evacuated, downwind of the fire in particular?

Mr G. Jones: Initially, the downwind evacuation is the first step in the process, then we start evacuating around the area.

Mr DAY: There are no homes for quite some distance downwind of where the fire was until one reaches Hazelmere, which would be one and a half kilometres away at least, would it not?

Mr G. Jones: There were some residents in that area.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Downwind?

Mr G. Jones: Downwind.

Mr DAY: How close?

Mr G. Jones: Within the same streets, virtually. In that Bellevue area, there are still homes and people dispersed in that area.

Mr DAY: But some of those who were close to the fire were evacuated, were they not?

Mr G. Jones: Some were and some were not. However, the main issue we have is that firefighters were put in that zone, without any regard for their safety.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Let us pick up that conversation. We have had other evidence put to us. To your knowledge, there was some evacuation of residents. Did that come via the PIA? Was that discussed at the wash-up, or did that come to you via the crew members?

Mr G. Jones: I think there was some mention of people in their pyjamas standing next to firefighters in the street.

Mr CHAIRMAN: That was discussed at the PIA?

Mr G. Jones: It was mentioned at the PIA.

Mr CHAIRMAN: Therefore, there was discussion about the proximity of some residents watching the whole scene. In relation to your crew and those guidelines, was there a discussion at the PIA?

Mr G. Jones: We mainly listened to what the evidence was. The process of the PIA was that we first of all examined FESA's knowledge of the site prior to the fire. We tried to understand that. From the time the first call went out, we learned of the initial 000 call, calling it a chemical fire. From the transcripts that Mr Wigg had with him at that debriefing, we established time lines - in other words, at this time this unit was called, and this is what happened here - and we concentrated on learning from that PIA exactly what happened. At the end of it, we were all gobsmacked; we just could not believe it. Initially, we thought that some real errors had been made in how the whole thing worked. However, we found out other things. For example, the mobile communication unit that was on site was in the plume of the smoke, and it was moved. When it was moved, the generator was not hooked up correctly and battery power was lost, so there were no radios - they lost communications. However, instead of commandeering another vehicle and using the radio from that, mobile phones were used. With a lot of the things that happened there, it was just one thing after another. Normally our crews would have gone to that control unit and put in what is called a T-card, which is a time card. It logs the crew going in and out, and the unit plots where the crew is put. Instead, we were instructed to go to a bridge on Military Road, because a district manager had been assigned to look after the bushfire fighters. There appeared to be no coordination between the operations of the bushfire crews under that person and what was happening at the main fire. If the main incident controller had been aware that it was intended to put bushfire crews down near the fire, maybe things would have been different. Maybe we would have been told, or briefed, that it was a chemical fire. Then our people would have known what they were entering into and would have had the right to say, "Hang on, we're not going down there." None of that was put forward. As things emerged from this PIA and from what we discovered at that point, we were totally gobsmacked at the end of that session. We could not believe it was as bad as it was.

Mr CHAIRMAN: You could not believe that the fire or the failures -

Mr G. Jones: The management of the fire was so bad.

Mr CHAIRMAN: The system failures?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. That is why it is imperative that the committee see Mr Wigg's report, because he did the job he was asked to do. He investigated and reported, and he told FESA exactly what went wrong.

Mr BOWLER: Did you see the report?

Mr G. Jones: No, I have not.

Mr DAY: You have just been told about it?

Mr G. Jones: There is evidence in our volume 4 that will support everything we are saying. That is all I can comment on.

Mr DAY: Are you aware of this report?

Mr G. Jones: I am aware of the report but, unfortunately, that is in volume 4 of our submission.

Mr CHAIRMAN: I am aware of the time. We are scheduled to break at 10.30.

Mr MASTERS: I have some general questions, but I do not want to break Mr Jones' train of thought.

The CHAIRMAN: We will run through the sequence. However, I will leave the chair and hand over to the deputy for the next 45 minutes. I have a meeting that I could not get out of.

Mr G. Jones: I know the committee has read the submission. There were problems with the blood tests done at Swan District Hospital. The doctors were not briefed on the nature of the fire or what they should look for. They took blood tests only -

Mr DAY: When were they done?

Mr G. Jones: They were done on the following Saturday and Sunday.

Mr DAY: So, 24 to 48 hours after the fire?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. The doctors were not briefed about what was involved. We were advised by one of the doctors that they could test only for blood damage. They did not know what to test for; they could check only if anything was physically wrong with the blood.

Mr BOWLER: Do the doctors still have the samples? Could they be tested for what you want them tested for?

Mr G. Jones: I have no idea. I imagine samples would not be normally kept but would be destroyed, otherwise the hospital would have a build-up of samples. I do not imagine they would have been kept unless for a specific purpose.

Mr BOWLER: Do you think they should have looked for something specific?

Mr G. Jones: The public health department should have advised all the doctors in the region as to the quantities and types of chemicals that were believed to have been involved in the fire, and it should have put in place some sort of protocol so that the medical professionals could test to a common regime to enable detection at that early stage.

Mr MASTERS: If that fire had been fought in the way that we all in hindsight now understand it should have been fought, there would theoretically have been no exposure of any of the paid or volunteer firefighters and, therefore, no need for them to have a health check. The fire was not fought the way it should have gone, and your volunteer officers were exposed. Do you know whether the Health Department was ignorant of the hazardous material involved in the fire, or whether it was aware of those materials two days after the fire and, therefore, should have done more?

Mr G. Jones: People attended local general practitioners and so on for independent medical checks in the days and weeks following the fire.

Mr MASTERS: Why did they do that? Did someone suggest that they should do that or were they exhibiting symptoms that caused them to see a doctor?

Mr G. Jones: The doctors at Swan District suggested to the firefighters that if any further problems arose or they wanted a second opinion, they could consult their local GPs. It was published in the local Press that a number of the doctors had serious concerns about what had happened at Bellevue

and that they had not been properly briefed. They suggested that people should see their GPs if they had problems. That referred to not only firefighters, but also people in the community.

Mr MASTERS: Who publicly told people to see their GPs if they had concerns?

Mr G. Jones: It was a group of Swan Hills doctors.

Mr DAY: The Swan Hills Division of General Practitioners Ltd. The Department of Environmental Protection and the Health Department released an information pamphlet for people who felt they had some ill-effects.

Mr G. Jones: Is that the “frequently asked questions” sheet?

Mr DAY: Yes.

Mr G. Jones: I have some real problems with that leaflet. The DEP downplayed the situation. Much of the information in the leaflet was short focused and did not look at the long-term effects. One of the questions was “What do I do if I am pregnant?” It contained very little information. It did not present a balanced argument. It looked at only one side.

Mr MASTERS: I am looking at the time; I have some general questions I would like to ask.

Mr G. Jones: I want to address a couple of other points. Maybe they will have to come later. I want to talk about the list of questions we sent to the shire. Our brigade met four days after the fire and formulated its concerns.

Mr DAY: Was that the Shire of Mundaring or the City of Swan?

Mr G. Jones: The Shire of Mundaring. We gave it a list of questions about our health concerns. I also want to talk about the meeting of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of 27 February, which a toxicologist attended. I would also like to talk about another issue that came from that.

Mr DAY: Did you get a response from the Shire of Mundaring?

Mr G. Jones: No. We submitted the questions on 20 February, but we did not get a response. I met with the chief executive officer of the Mundaring shire on 27 April to raise our concerns. He did not have a copy of the written correspondence; it had been signed off and filed by the ranger services office. It was not until I spoke to the CEO and that correspondence was found that he started to respond.

Mr DAY: Is the shire still in the process of responding to the issues?

Mr G. Jones: The CEO of Mundaring shire did much to try to answer those questions, but he could answer only one. He referred the rest to FESA. We do not have enough time to go into those issues today.

Mr MASTERS: What were your questions to the shire primarily about? Were they about health or operation control lines?

Mr G. Jones: They are included in appendix 10/6.

Mr MASTERS: We will look at them.

Mr G. Jones: We asked 10 questions. The shire answered question 5. The other questions were referred to the chief executive officer of FESA.

Mr DAY: Are you still waiting for FESA to respond?

Mr G. Jones: We eventually received a response from FESA’s manager of health, safety and welfare. That response was totally unsatisfactory.

Mr MASTERS: Do we have a copy? I cannot see it.

Mr G. Jones: We wrote on 22 March.

Mr MASTERS: Which appendix are you referring to?

Mr G. Jones: Appendix 10/12. The correspondence is documented in 10/13, 10/14, 10/15, 10/16 and 10/17. Appendix 10/18 is the initial response from the CEO of FESA and 10/19 is the subsequent information from FESA. We regarded that response as being shy of real information.

Mr DAY: It is not as though your questions are being ignored -

Mr G. Jones: They were initially. They were ignored for many months. It was not until my meeting with the CEO of the Mundaring shire that things started to move in that direction. Our letters to FESA were also ignored. We were given some information, but other information was withheld.

Mr DAY: We will go through the information you have provided - the response from FESA. We will be speaking to FESA this afternoon.

Mr G. Jones: I have a concern about that. I notice that it is the acting director of planning, development and special risks who will attend this afternoon. I fail to see how, unless that person was acting at the time of the fire, he can answer questions about the issue, because he would not have been directly involved. He is not the right person to present evidence to this committee. The director of planning, development and special risks should be here today.

Mr MASTERS: It is a fair statement, but until we see whether Mr Cuneo attends by himself or with advisers, including some of the people you suggest, it is probably best not to dwell on it.

Mr G. Jones: The committee should speak to Mr Cuneo. If he is not here, he will be forewarned of the questions and have time to prepare his answers.

Mr DAY: Are you saying that we should be speaking to Mr Cuneo?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

Mr DAY: Which Mr Cuneo?

Mr BOWLER: Lindsay Cuneo?

Mr DAY: There are two.

Mr G. Jones: Kevin has been appointed director.

Mr DAY: We understand Lindsay will be attending. He will obviously speak on behalf of FESA, but if we feel we need to follow up, we will do so.

Mr G. Jones: I understand that Kevin Cuneo has been appointed director of planning, development and special risks. To my knowledge, he is the person to whom the committee should be talking; not the acting director.

Mr DAY: Can you briefly outline the issue relating to the meeting of FESA on 27 February?

Mr G. Jones: I do not believe we have the time to go into that. I have a lengthy response to that.

Mr DAY: What was the meeting?

Mr G. Jones: It was a meeting that was called at extremely short notice. We had four hours' notice in which to attend the meeting at FESA headquarters in the city. Very few of my brigade could attend. The meeting was addressed by Bill Forbes, the executive director of fire services. Toxicologist Dr Frank Daly from Royal Perth Hospital was there to answer questions. Some 300 people attended. They were mainly career firefighters. Very few were volunteers. I attended with my son. We do not have time to give this justice today. Quite a lot took place at that meeting about which I need to speak. It is very important we make that known to you.

Mr DAY: Are you dissatisfied with the information you were given or the way the issue was dealt with?

Mr G. Jones: The whole exercise was a railroad. The bottom line is that we did not have time to draw breath, let alone ask questions. I felt as though Mr Forbes were addressing a platoon. We

were told that Dr Daly would give a response. I had learnt just before that meeting that one of the main chemicals that had been discovered was tetrachloroethylene, which is a dry-cleaning spirit. I had printed a material safety data sheet and other information about that chemical from Chemwatch, which is an authority in chemicals. When Dr Daly presented his information, he gave only one side of the effects; he had downplayed it. It was not until later when I raised the issue that I managed to ask a question. I had some evidence and I quoted from that data sheet about how the chemical could cause death. I need more time to go into the detail.

Mr BOWLER: Did you include information on that meeting in submissions 3 or 4? Will you include it in submission 4?

Mr G. Jones: I have dealt with Dr Daly.

Mr MASTERS: What would Dr Daly have gained by downplaying the incident?

Mr G. Jones: I learnt after the meeting that Bill Forbes had paid him \$500 an hour to be there. That raised some questions. Dr Daly had been briefed before the meeting. My impression was that he was trying not to alarm people or was presenting a best case scenario. He certainly was not giving a best and worst case scenario.

Mr MASTERS: For \$500 an hour I would have played it for all it was worth and got six months' employment out of it.

Mr G. Jones: He might well have been doing that. Mr Forbes complained about how long Dr Daly had been there.

Mr DAY: If he was paid that much, it is a good rate. However, he would have had an obligation to provide professional advice and to act professionally. Is there any reason why he would not do that?

Mr G. Jones: I am not suggesting that he acted unprofessionally, I am saying that he gave only a best case scenario, not a best and worst case scenario. We were interested in listening to both scenarios. Other people also asked questions at that meeting, and it appeared that Dr Daly had given only a best case scenario.

Mr DAY: Are you suggesting that he was bought by the Fire and Emergency Services Authority?

Mr G. Jones: No, I am saying that I believe he was briefed not to alarm people and not to cause any more anxiety than people already felt. That might be the reason that he presented only the best case scenario. He certainly did not present any evidence about the worst case scenario.

Mr MASTERS: Even though you and other people in the audience questioned him about the worst case scenario, did he not present the worst case scenario?

Mr G. Jones: He still played it down. I think the committee members must read more of my submission to understand what I am saying.

Mr DAY: Are you suggesting that Dr Daly did not present all of the information that you believe should have been presented?

Mr G. Jones: He answered questions that we asked in a factual way, but he did not volunteer that information. For example, he volunteered the information that dry cleaners use tetrachloroethylene every day and they have no problems with it. However, when it is put into a cocktail and is super heated in the vicinity of people, it is a different scenario. Some 30 tonnes of lead and nickel cadmium batteries were stored among all the drums that were consumed by the fire, and people were exposed to that as well. Lead poisoning and so on is very serious. Mercury poisoning is the most serious.

Mr MASTERS: Those chemicals can be easily analysed in the body, air, water and soils.

Mr G. Jones: Dr Daly said that we all have lead in our bodies and that just because we were there, the lead in those people could not necessary be from -

Mr MASTERS: He is quite right. There is lead and mercury and every element known to the universe in our bodies and they are easily analysed.

Mr G. Jones: One of the profound thing he said was that if I did not have a problem by now, I would probably be all right. That is not something that we accepted.

Mr BOWLER: Why do you not accept that?

Mr G. Jones: Because people cannot be exposed to such a cocktail of hazardous materials.

Mr BOWLER: What evidence do you have to suggest otherwise?

Mr G. Jones: In the past, people were exposed to chemicals like agent orange, and to chemicals that caused gulf war syndrome and other problems. The committee members should ask those people whether they have been affected. This is exactly the same thing. We do not know the effects of this exposure because they have not emerged. There have been some short-term problems, but people are sitting on a time bomb.

Mr MASTERS: Are you aware of any analysis that was done of blood or human tissue for mercury, lead or cadmium?

Mr G. Jones: When I lived in Karratha, I lived in a housing development that took some time to construct. At the time, the local shire insisted that heptachlor still be used for the treatment of houses before the concrete pads were laid. At the time, my wife and the wife of my closest neighbour were pregnant; both children were born about a week apart. My youngest son and my neighbour's child were born with Down syndrome. When my son turned four, he was diagnosed with a particular type of leukaemia. Within a month, my neighbour's son was also diagnosed with the same type of leukaemia. That happened four years after that chemical had been used. The incidence of this type of leukaemia and Down syndrome is less likely to occur in normal people. The odds of that happening are extremely unlikely, yet it is a personal example that I know of. Four years after one of my sons was exposed to chemicals, he contracted leukaemia. I am aware of the outcome.

Mr MASTERS: You have my deepest sympathy about the circumstances affecting your son and your family; however, this committee is considering the Bellevue fire. Chemicals including lead, mercury, cadmium and nickel are easier to analyse than organic chemicals. Are you aware of whether any blood or tissue tests for those easily analysed elements have been carried out on any of the volunteers or anyone associated with fighting the fire?

Mr G. Jones: My other son, who attended the Bellevue fire, came out in bruises over his body. Those bruises were at diametrically opposite points on his limbs and behind his knees and so on. Those bruises disappeared in six days. The bruises were an indication that there was something wrong with his blood. That occurred just after the Bellevue fire, and the doctors cannot explain it.

Mr BOWLER: Did anyone else in the brigade have the same bruises ?

Mr G. Jones: No; people react differently.

Mr MASTERS: I am sorry to persevere with this line of questioning. Are you aware of any blood or tissue analyses that were carried out for some of the easily identifiable chemicals? If you do not know, please say that, and we will make further inquiries.

Mr G. Jones: I am not aware of any testing that was done, other than blood tests. All of that information is private between the individual and the doctors because of patient confidentiality. However, I am aware that of the 110 people who were tested, 15 tested above normal limits.

Mr MASTERS: For what?

Mr G. Jones: Whatever the levels that were set.

Mr MASTERS: What was analysed?

Mr G. Jones: I do not know the details. However, 15 out of 110 people tested above the usual rate for chemicals. I have evidence to support that in submission 4. That is an alarming figure.

Mr MASTERS: It may be, but we will need to examine your submission 4 before we get too concerned about it at this stage.

Mr DAY: We will speak to people from the Health Department this afternoon who will provide some information about that. Mr Jones is welcome to be here if he wishes. Is Dr Daly a toxicologist?

Mr G. Jones: He is a toxicologist at the Royal Perth Hospital. He was used as a consultant by FESA for the Bellevue incident.

Mr DAY: Are you saying that he did not present all of the information that you believe he should have presented?

Mr G. Jones: On the information I received from the computer download of the dry cleaning chemical, which is one of the main chemicals he spoke about, I believe that he presented only the good, low-impact side of it. He did not talk about the high impact of that chemical. In my view, he did not give a balanced presentation; it was weighted to one side.

Mr DAY: We will follow up that matter and investigate your evidence.

Mr G. Jones: There is evidence, because FESA had a videotape of that meeting. The committee members should view that videotape because that will confirm my assessment.

Mr MASTERS: Is that the 27 February meeting?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. FESA videotaped that meeting and would have a copy of that in its files.

Mr DAY: I suspect that Dr Daly will be keen to present his view of what he presented to you.

Mr G. Jones: I am not slighting Dr Daly -

Mr MASTERS: I have great concerns about the health of the firefighters who were downwind of the plume. However, I want to make sure that this committee accurately understands the issues. At what time did you see the footage of the fire on television?

Mr G. Jones: At 6.00 am Western Australian time.

Mr MASTERS: With modern technology, that footage may well have been shown in the eastern States half an hour beforehand. What evidence do you have that the footage was two or three hours old?

Mr G. Jones: My understanding is that Sunrise News goes to air three hours ahead.

Mr MASTERS: What time does it go air in the eastern States in their time ?

Mr G. Jones: Six o'clock in the morning.

Mr MASTERS: Daylight savings hours were in effect then. Are you saying that the footage must have been shown in the eastern States at 3.00 am?

Mr G. Jones: At least.

Mr MASTERS: I understand. In your submission and verbally earlier today, you talked about vehicles that were bogged in the Helena River. In your submission 1 you insinuated that there were chemicals in that mud and that your volunteers were covered in it and had to wash themselves. Although that section of the Helena River is downstream of the Bellevue site, it does not mean that any chemicals were in the mud. As much for my own piece of mind as for yours, I will tell you that

black mud can have the most rotten and putrid smell imaginable, yet there is nothing more in it than nutrients, including phosphorous and nitrogen.

Mr G. Jones: You might say that there is no evidence that there is not, but who says there is? There is some evidence that firewater escaped from the Bellevue site and carried the chemicals into the Helena River.

Mr MASTERS: That occurred later.

Mr BOWLER: Who told you that?

Mr G. Jones: I got that from some sources.

Mr BOWLER: We have a source that says the water did not reach the Helena River.

Mr G. Jones: I am aware that some individuals have made those statements.

Mr MASTERS: Who?

Mr G. Jones: Bryan Jenkins from the Department of Environmental Protection said that they had bunded the area and could not get in there; but that bunding came in many hours after the fire had started.

Mr DAY: You are of the view that contaminated water reached the Helena River?

Mr G. Jones: The information I have is that three million to 3.5 million litres of fire water was used on the fire. Some of that would have gone up as vapour from the fire, but the fire water was most heavily contaminated with chemicals. Some of that fire water escaped into the Helena River, and there is evidence -

Mr MASTERS: How do you know?

Mr G. Jones: Submission 4 will give you that information.

Mr DAY: Although the agencies responsible are saying clearly that they do not believe water reached the river, in your view it did?

Mr G. Jones: It did before they managed to get the bund up.

Mr MASTERS: I come back to the issue of the vehicles that were bogged in that mud, because I want to give some peace of mind to the people involved. Even if polluted water got into the Helena River, that would have only penetrated a short distance into what your evidence indicates was half a metre to a metre of black organic ooze. That ooze is still there, I presume? You are not aware of any earthmoving equipment that has been used -

Mr G. Jones: Since the winter rains, the whole area has been flooded right out, so it has made it impossible to get back into that area because it is under water.

Mr MASTERS: Based on what we have been told, it is extremely unlikely that any chemicals got into that black organic mud area and it is easy to go back there and get samples. On that basis, I want the members of your brigade to be aware of the fact that although it smelt and probably tasted terrible and was terrible material, it would have been natural organic chemicals that posed no risk to human life in that particular instance.

Mr G. Jones: I do not agree with that, because we have evidence in our submission 4 -

Mr MASTERS: But you have not given that to us yet.

Mr G. Jones: No, and I need to give you that evidence.

Mr MASTERS: All I am trying to say is that on the evidence that you have given to us so far, my experience, having been involved in environmental science in the past, is that there is nothing to worry about in that particular muddy environment; so I will wait for submission 4.

Mr G. Jones: Ian Zlatnik, one of our members, was in the Helena River at the time, with my son - they were both in the same crew - and he will testify that water was flowing through there, and as to the type of water that it was. I believe videotape footage is available that will show that.

Mr MASTERS: The fact that water is flowing through a creek does not automatically link that to the water that is being used to fight a fire some hundreds of metres away.

Mr G. Jones: No, but it might be conclusive evidence when there is footage of sludge coming out of a pipe running down into the Helena River and then scum on the Helena River going down to that area.

Mr MASTERS: I think you are drawing a long bow.

Mr DAY: If you provide some additional information, we will look at it.

Mr BOWLER: Mr Jones, twice at Midland, and again today, you mentioned your deep concern that your men were not advised that it was a chemical fire. However, under FESA standards there is no such thing as a chemical fire - or at least there has not been until now; I think it has admitted that it probably needs to have such a classification - it is either a chemical leak, a chemical spill or a fire.

Mr G. Jones: How can I answer that?

Mr BOWLER: Do you normally have chemical fires? Are you advised in your training that it is a chemical fire?

Mr G. Jones: I am a volunteer bush firefighter. I normally get involved in fighting bushfires. I do not normally go to industrial chemical fires in the metropolitan area.

Mr BOWLER: You used the terminology as though it was a standard thing.

Mr G. Jones: I would call it a Hazmat incident. There is a term for it, and that is the term that should have been relayed to us when we attempted to find out that information.

Mr BOWLER: A Hazmat leak or a Hazmat spill?

Mr G. Jones: A Hazmat incident.

Mr DAY: Are you are saying you should have been told it was a Hazmat incident?

Mr G. Jones: We should have been warned of any potential danger, no matter what it was. It could have been an overhanging powerline or some other potential hazard. FESA has a duty of care to us to explain what the hazard is, and that duty of care did not happen.

Mr MURRAY: Earlier you spoke about the radio links that you can hook up from a bushfire to, say, the fire brigade. Are all of those radio links compatible, or can they be made compatible?

Mr G. Jones: All the services are using the taped radio system, and they are all programmed to receive those same channels. The radio in my private vehicle is a brigade-owned radio. It is one of the earlier types and has only the bushfire channels programmed into it. It does not have all of the fire and rescue channels. It is not an operational radio. As captain and fire control officers, we each have a radio in our private vehicle so that we can monitor a situation or make comments on a bushfire incident. It is adequate for that purpose, but it is not adequate for the type of fire at Bellevue, nor was it part of the operation. I was just monitoring it at my home.

Mr MURRAY: So you use your mobile phone to keep in contact with different groups?

Mr G. Jones: I had to use it, yes.

Mr MURRAY: The use of mobile phones, as you have mentioned, was necessary because some of those links were not compatible?

Mr G. Jones: No. The problem was that the batteries in the mobile communication unit had gone flat, and instead of commandeering another vehicle and using its radio so that communications

could be maintained, someone made the decision to use mobile phones. However, the disadvantage is that people are not aware of what is going on around them. The conversations are personal and are not recorded. It is only for a safety backup that we have mobile phones.

Proceedings suspended from 10.52 to 11.10 am