

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Fourth Report - "Inquiry Into Western Australia's Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements"

MR A.P. O'GORMAN (Joondalup) [10.18 am]: I present for tabling the fourth report of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee entitled "Inquiry Into Western Australia's Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements".

[See papers 2690 and 2691.]

Mr A.P. O'GORMAN: I am pleased to present to the Assembly the fourth report of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee in the thirty-seventh Parliament. This report finalises the committee's inquiry into Western Australia's natural disaster relief arrangements, which commenced on 3 May 2006. The inquiry was referred to the committee by this house as a result of a motion moved by the member for Esperance. I believe it is also very important to acknowledge at the very outset the quality of the work and accessibility of the key government departments involved in recovery in Western Australia. Notably, they are the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the Department of Agriculture and Food, the Department for Community Development, Main Roads Western Australia and WA Police, which plays a very active role in disaster recovery management. In addition, I want to acknowledge the many staff in local authorities and volunteers in the broader community who put in countless unpaid hours in a demonstration of pro-social behaviour, altruism and selflessness. We see this right throughout our state on a daily basis. Volunteers get in and really support their community and support people who are victims of some sort of mishap. As described in this report, the committee observed and recorded many instances of the strength of community spirit and perseverance in the aftermath of natural disasters. This was a noble feature of many witnesses' reports, supporting the view that the resilience of Western Australians is most apparent in times of crisis. This strength of social capital in regional areas was apparent right throughout the inquiry, both in the submissions and hearings; that is, the capacity of people to work together, share common values and support each other at a community level.

However, some regional areas reported deficiencies in their resource capacity. This deficiency anecdotally exists both with respect to the financial capacity of some local authorities and the available pool of skills that is needed to provide an adequate response whilst maintaining existing services. While the report contains some criticism of bureaucratic processes, it is not an intentional attack on any individual or group but rather a reflection of the problems that exist in those requisite bureaucratic processes when dealing with events that will often require a more immediate and flexible approach on the ground. The committee strongly believes that this report represents the opinion of the broader array of stakeholders relevant to the inquiry, many of whom made written submissions or testified at the metropolitan and regional hearings conducted during the course of the inquiry.

In reviewing the adequacy of current relief arrangements, the committee noted that funding arrangements under WANDRA are constrained by the stipulation that "assistance is not provided as compensation for damage or losses sustained or as a disincentive to self-help by way of commercial insurance and/or other appropriate strategies". It became clear to the committee that these limitations may not be understood by the general public when considered in the context of the media announcements of planned relief measures. Consequently, there are higher public expectations of those relief arrangements than the guidelines will allow. Given the state, federal and local government context of WANDRA, the philosophical focus on assisting the affected community towards the management of its own recovery, and the aforementioned constraints in the guidelines, the committee came to the view that WANDRA largely achieved its objectives as described in this report. However, of concern to the committee is the lack of flexibility in the funding arrangements, as alluded to earlier, not least that relating to the reimbursement of costs incurred in the reconstruction of roads and public assets, resulting in varying degrees of financial dislocation to some shire councils and the resultant deferment of planned public works.

Another thing that we discovered was not in the terms of reference of the report but it came out very strongly when we visited Esperance in January this year as a result of the flood event that happened down there. I am referring to the reporting of the event by the media. The media gave the impression that Esperance was a complete and utter wipe-out and that it was just about wiped off the face of the earth. *The West Australian* has a lot to answer for. It showed a particular caravan park. We learnt of this not through a hearing but through a briefing session with the tourism operators in Esperance. There was one tree overturned in this particular caravan park. The photographer from *The West* continually asked permission to come on the grounds and photograph that one tree in the caravan park. That photo appeared continuously and repeatedly in the media. The loss to that caravan park operator was phenomenal. The time of year that that event happened in Esperance was the peak period. The impression was given that the caravan park was wiped out as well as a lot of roads in

and around the Esperance area. In fact, Esperance was up and running and operating again within two days because there was plenty of warning and residents had taken plenty of action to make sure that their assets were preserved. The follow-up media campaign quoted the perfect storm, the perfect time for a holiday in Esperance. I point out to the media that when we have these disasters in our state, it helps to report truthfully and it also helps to report the good news. It was great news that Esperance was able to put itself back on the map within two days. It took a concerted advertising campaign by the people of Esperance, the local council and the tourism council to get people to return to the Esperance holiday area, otherwise the town of Esperance would have had a lot more financial and economic problems. That was one of the things that came to us from talking to those people in Esperance.

I would also like to thank my fellow committee members for their individual and collective contributions over the course of the inquiry - the members for Geraldton, Kingsley and Carine. Later the member for Esperance came on the committee. I beg your pardon; he is the member for Roe. I think I called him the member for Esperance earlier. I apologise. I also thank the principal research officer, Mr Brian Gordon, and Ms Dawn Dickinson for her assistance in this inquiry and her coordination of our travel. Jovita Hogan came to the inquiry later. She has been an invaluable asset to us to finalise this report. To all of those people, I say thank you very much.

One of the other things that we have noticed since we started this inquiry is that the federal government has come on board and overtaken some of the recommendations of the committee. It has put things in place that the committee recommended. That is a good outcome for this inquiry. We are now waiting on the follow-up from the state government.

MS K. HODSON-THOMAS (Carine) [10.26 am]: I also rise to speak to the tabled report of the Standing Committee on Community Development and Justice. I take this opportunity to also commend the member for Roe for raising this matter in Parliament on 3 May in a motion that he moved for, and on behalf of, his electorate. He is a valued parliamentary colleague and a strong advocate for his electorate of Roe. He afforded the committee an opportunity to inquire into this matter with a view to delivering better outcomes for communities faced with natural disaster events. I continue to take pleasure in the work we do as a committee. We work together inquiring into all manner of circumstances without any political bias to further the interests in general of Western Australians.

There are 19 findings and 14 recommendations in the report. I wish to add my high regard for the contribution our volunteers make during these events, along with the local authorities and government agencies in addressing the recovery process. One of the most significant issues raised during our inquiry was the difficulty that smaller shires face when a disaster affects their community. Working within tight budgetary constraints because of their small rate base impacts significantly when a disaster occurs. Funds that were earmarked for specific capital works and new projects are put on hold so they can restore public assets and roads. This has a very negative impact on the local community. Recommendation 1 deals with this particular issue. The issue of accessibility to the Western Australian Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements and the bureaucratic hold-ups became evident during our deliberations. The chairman has already alluded to this in his remarks today. It is not directed at any particular agency. When these situations occur, all government agencies go out of their way to provide assistance as quickly as possible. As I said, whilst agencies make the information available, it is nevertheless apparent that access to information is not sought until the event actually occurs. Fundamental to the success of any recovery process is the ability for communities to access the information promptly and that financial reimbursement is put in place equally promptly.

The Esperance "perfect storm" is an example of how the shire, the local community, volunteers and government agencies all rallied to restore Esperance town and its surrounds. I commend all those who were involved in the recovery and restoration. This was demonstrated to us when a number of the committee members went to view the Esperance township firsthand after the event. The work and goodwill of the community was highly visible.

I will highlight a matter that the chairman has already touched on that caused concern for the community and the committee, which was the role of the media during and post the storm. It is imperative that the media cover the events of the storm, but there is also a need for them to base their coverage on factual information that is not sensationalised. During our visit we heard - the chairman has alluded to this - that a photographer was hell-bent on taking a photograph of a fallen tree, possibly to sensationalise the events to get a better "hit" in the press. I do not know his motivation. To exaggerate the extent of the damage to the town site is hardly responsible reporting. Esperance certainly relies heavily on tourism. The storm occurred during the peak tourism period of the summer holidays. The endeavours of people from Esperance to get a follow-up story in the media fell on deaf ears. That has obviously had an adverse impact on local business operators. I know that for a fact. I endeavoured to get a follow-up story in the press to say that although the storm had caused damage, the local recovery process was swift and business was back to normal. My efforts also fell on deaf ears. That is a terrible shortcoming of news reporting. Frankly, I find it distasteful that members of the media do not comprehend the damage that can be

done to a local economy. The local regional tourism office, Australia's Golden Outback, and the state government allocated \$25 000 each - that is, a total of \$50 000 in funding - for advertising in *The West Australian* to let people know that Esperance was back and open for business. However, that could have been assisted by a responsible media taking up the fact that the community had rallied and worked tirelessly to see that everything was up and operational. I could talk at length about the media's role in this, and I am sure that I will get other opportunities to do that in the future. With those few comments, I recommend that all members take time to read the report.

MRS J. HUGHES (Kingsley) [10.32 am]: I will say a few words on this report. Firstly, I thank the principal research officer, Brian Gordon, for a wonderful job. I also thank Dawn Dickinson and Jovita Hogan. Without those people we would not have been able to produce this report.

Ms K. Hodson-Thomas: I also forgot to thank Brian, Dawn and Jovita. My apologies.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes. I also thank the chairman, the member for Joondalup, and my fellow committee members. We work exceptionally well together. It is a great pleasure because the committee achieves great work.

This inquiry followed from our previous report on the Fire and Emergency Services Authority; that was an amazing inquiry. We travelled a lot throughout the state and spoke to many volunteers. This natural disaster relief inquiry was a wonderful extension of the previous work. We spoke to lots of communities. One of the main issues raised was the burden placed on smaller local governments during any disaster as they need to pull all their resources together to get work done. That is a huge impost on them not only financially, but also in manpower resources in order to assess the type of damage incurred in order to secure the different types of funding needed. Time is often taken in order for those local governments to recoup losses and to be reimbursed. Even larger local governments find it difficult. The very small ones are finding it extremely hard.

Another impact we noticed a great deal, especially in the great southern and the wheatbelt, was that on farmers. That is especially true with flooding, which, unfortunately, is an event that is occurring much more frequently these days. Recovery after a flood is extremely slow. Huge tracts of land are covered with water for several months - sometimes up to 12 months. That puts a great deal of pressure on farmers and rural lifestyles. The destruction of fencing, especially boundary fencing, was also a huge issue for farmers. It creates a huge cost and a huge burden on farmers to try to repair fencing almost immediately so that stock can be contained and not wander onto public roadways and environmental areas. Many farms often have a boundary with crown land, forests and so forth. As such, there is a real problem with boundary fences. I hope that the recommendations and the findings of the report will be taken very seriously because it is a very serious issue.

Farmers also have to face the problem of burying livestock that has been killed through fire or flood. Farmers need to get to the livestock quickly. In addition, they have to repair fences, get rid of stock and put their farms in order. All of this takes time. These farmers still have the burden of filling out bureaucratic paperwork in order to access Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements funding, which is a huge impost on farmers who have the priority of putting their lives and farms back together. It is something that the committee feels very strongly about, and it hopes that the recommendations on that issue will be taken on board through this report.

I will briefly touch on the story that is recorded at page 52 of the report; namely, "Leanne's story". I encourage everybody to read it. It puts into context how farmers and rural communities feel when they are put in these types of positions. She records that she was looking forward to full rainwater tanks so that she could have a nice bath. When she realised that there was more water than she could possibly deal with, she was in despair because her farm was completely underwater. Her wheat crop was either underwater or washed away. She wondered how much the losses would affect her income and lifestyle. Wheat plants were found six feet up trees at the high water mark. It was an incredible story. It put everything into perspective.

Farmers often have many assets and good asset management practices. Over years of productive farming they put away finances to upgrade their farms to keep them viable and to keep up with progressive farming initiatives. When farmers apply for Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangement - WANDRA - funding they have to first trawl the banks. Once they have trawled the banks but are unable to receive funds, they are then allowed to access WANDRA funding. Of course, if they have a small balance in their bank account to ensure that farming assets are kept up and the farm is kept productive, their applications are prejudiced. That is another issue that needs to be very carefully looked at so that farmers can stay on their feet instead of being drowned, not only from the flooding, but by the bureaucratic mire that stops them moving ahead. Farmers are an integral part of our community and they need to be supported.

Businesses in towns are also extremely affected after an event. They are often the lifeblood of a lot of farmers through produce, food, farming supplies and so forth. The situation of business people should be looked at very closely, which is another of the committee's findings. I believe this matter has been looked at by the federal

government. We are very pleased to see that that has happened. Nevertheless, there is still a need for some reflection.

Disasters are also becoming more commonplace. Cyclonic activity is increasing and it is also increasing in intensity. These intensities are affecting the mid-west and the wheatbelt very profoundly. Due to climate change and those sorts of issues, the Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements need to be well and truly in place so that these disasters can be addressed closely and quickly. We also need to ensure that bushfires are addressed very quickly and that dead stock are dealt with expediently so that farmers can get on with their practices.

Another issue I want to raise is referred to in recommendation 8; that is, emergency assistance. An amount of \$100 for category 1 emergency assistance is paid to individuals, but there is a cap of \$700 per family. That is a very low amount and certainly needs to be addressed, and I hope it will be addressed very swiftly. Importantly, that emergency assistance is used to pay for replacement documents. We all know that it is not cheap to replace documents. People cannot access funding until they have documents. They need birth certificates and so forth, and it costs a minimum of \$70 or \$75 to replace those documents, which would leave people with \$25 for emergency clothing, food and medical supplies that may be of life importance, such as blood pressure tablets and so on. This is certainly a very inadequate amount of money and the amount paid to people who find themselves in such a position needs to be reviewed.

Finally, committee members and I were also impressed by the sheer capacity of the members of these communities to care for one another. It was inspiring to hear their stories and to acknowledge that they were the ones who stood up and battled through adversity. They understood that they had to pull up their sleeves and rebuild. We believe that WANDRA is working, but we also believe that WANDRA could work better. We hope that the findings and recommendations in the report will enhance WANDRA's current capacity to reach those people who are most affected by disasters and address the immediate crisis that confronts farmers, businesses and families throughout the state.

DR G.G. JACOBS (Roe) [10.42 am]: I will make a few comments on the committee report, although I was a late member of the committee and had nothing to do with this report. On behalf of the people of Esperance and, of course, the people of Lake Grace, who were hit with a major flood event almost 12 months to the day prior to that experienced in Esperance, I thank committee members for their efforts. It was I who suggested that perhaps the Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements and the response to disasters could have been better. I am very impressed with the report. Lake Grace, Esperance and other areas in my region seem to have been in the firing line over the past couple of years. The member for Cottesloe reminds me that all these disasters have happened in the past two years since I have been the member for Roe!

Mr P.B. Watson: Most unkind!

Dr G.G. JACOBS: If we could get these things to go a little further around the coast to Albany, I would be much happier!

Mr P.B. Watson: That is why we have the wind farm facing towards Esperance!

Dr G.G. JACOBS: My electorate seems to be taking the brunt of these disasters; if it is not the western part of my electorate in Lake Grace, it is the more eastern part in Esperance. I thank the committee for its work. Politics, investigation and listening to people work in very mysterious ways. One never quite knows the direct cause and effect and how they work to achieve change. Since this inquiry, many primary producers have been advantaged by the simpler and more flexible arrangements for accessing funds, at least initially. In the initial few weeks after the disasters, the main concern was about the high number of sheep deaths and how the dead stock would be dealt with. Through this process, it seems that change in the system was taking place. There was an immediate ability for primary producers to access \$5 000 under state application arrangements to help with the cost of the burial of many of the dead sheep. There were no strings attached to the \$5 000, which was administered by the Department of Agriculture and Food, and farmers did not have to fill in lots of forms; in fact, to apply for the \$5 000, primary producers were not required to have invoices. All they needed was an affidavit describing how many sheep they had lost.

I commend the committee and this inquiry process. It is already having an effect, as the chairman said when he referred to the changes to some of the federal arrangements. We often hear - I am not sure whether it is anecdotal or just a perception - that the process is just too hard and tortuous for primary producers and people affected by disasters and that none of the money ends up hitting the ground, as it were, to help farmers. One of the issues highlighted in the report, and one that was mentioned to the committee by many people, is that the \$1 500 to pay for consultancy fees was not seen to be of use. They thought it would be better for that money to be used for a fund to repair perimeter fencing on farms after disasters, so that primary producers could at least

continue their operations. If farmers who run stock do not have perimeter fences, they are out of business. Many suggestions were made about how that money could be better used.

I congratulate the committee for its work and for coming to Esperance and talking to people. As you would understand, Mr Acting Speaker (Mr M.J. Cowper), people in these situations want to be listened to. I am sure that all members hear from day to day and week to week that people do not expect us to fix everything to an ideal situation in every case, but they want us to listen. I thank the committee for coming down to Esperance very soon after the event and listening to people's concerns and to their stories about how it affected them. As I said yesterday during debate on the Taxi Amendment Bill, taxidriviers are the best people to talk to about how the Taxi Amendment Bill will affect them. The best way to determine how disaster relief arrangements will work best is to talk to people. I thank the committee for doing that and I commend the report to the house.