

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**AGENCY REVIEW HEARING —  
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND WILDLIFE**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2016**

**SESSION TWO**

**Members**

**Ms M.M. Quirk (Chair)  
Dr A.D. Buti (Deputy Chair)  
Mr C.D. Hatton  
Ms L. Mettam  
Mr M.P. Murray**

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**Hearing commenced at 11.18 am**

**Mr JAMES SHARP**

**Director General, Department of Parks and Wildlife, examined:**

**Mr PETER DANS**

**Director, Regional and Fire Management Services, Department of Parks and Wildlife, examined:**

**Mr PAUL BRENNAN**

**Manager, Fire Management Services Branch, Department of Parks and Wildlife, examined:**

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, everyone. On behalf of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your interest and appearance before us today. The functions of the committee include reviewing departments within its portfolio responsibilities, and from time to time the committee will conduct agency reviews. The purpose of today's hearing is to discuss preparations for the 2016–17 fire season. I am Margaret Quirk, the chair of the committee. On my right is Dr Tony Buti, the member for Armadale; and on my left is Libby Mettam, the member for Vasse; Mr Mick Murray, the member for Collie–Preston; and Mr Chris Hatton, the member for Balcatta. The committee is one of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament. This hearing is a formal procedure and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed today, I need you to answer the following questions; so if you could actually articulate that, rather than just nod. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

**The Witnesses:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Before we ask our specific questions, would you like to make a statement to commence?

**Mr Sharp:** We have no specific comments to make, apart from that we have prepared ourselves for the coming fire season and we would be interested to explain that as necessary.

**The CHAIR:** All right. What is your prognosis given the conditions we have had this year in terms of rainfall and so on?

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**Mr Sharp:** Every year, a prognosis is given, and there is a range of factors in there. I do not think we have ever been in a situation where it has been said that there is a year ahead of us that will not present significant threats. I mean, we could make statements. It is obvious that we have had a recent short and wet winter, which has increased the undergrowth, so that presents a challenge for the year ahead. I think every year is incredibly challenging. I do not know whether Mr Dans or Mr Brennan would have any comment beyond that.

**Mr Dans:** The latest information that has been provided to us by the Bureau of Meteorology indicates that the chance of exceeding the median summer rainfall is above 50 per cent and the chance of exceeding the median summer maximum temperatures is about 35 per cent. That ties in with the initial advice that the bureau has provided us that it will be a wetter and perhaps cooler summer—marginally. I am not talking large degrees. But the indicators are about as positive as they could be from a climate perspective.

**The CHAIR:** Is it not also said that the fire season might be later—in the sort of February–March period?

**Mr Dans:** I believe that is the function of those sorts of areas that I just described there, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Your staff are involved in both mitigation and response to incidents that occur on DPaW land, and possibly escape. Are you making the use this year of any contracted personnel in the response department? In the Waroona incident I understand that you used some contractors called Working on Fire.

**Mr Sharp:** We have a whole range of contracts in place at the beginning of a season in relation to a range of equipment, aircraft, bulldozers and heavy earthmoving equipment, and I think we might have others on standby as well. Peter?

**Mr Dans:** Yes, we do have earthmoving suppliers around the state on call.

**The CHAIR:** I am not so concerned with earthmoving equipment. It is more with people who are involved in fire response; for example, protection of assets.

**Mr Dans:** We have engaged Working on Fire on a case-by-case basis. We do not have any standing common use agreement or contract to utilise their services.

**The CHAIR:** Then why is that necessary?

**Mr Dans:** Why is it necessary?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Dans:** We were fully committed during the Waroona fire. We had deployed crews—personnel—to Waroona from the Kimberley and from the Pilbara, and at the time we had a couple of fires, and I think there might have been some burns that still had some activity in them in and around the Collie area, and we did not have a suppression resource, so they were engaged to be there on standby to respond if any of those past fires or burns basically stood up and started to run, because, if we had not, there would have been no Parks and Wildlife forces available to deal with them.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** My first question comes along the line about bums on seats. How many full-time employees do you have that are available now to be in the firefighting crews and how many contractors or short-term people do you have?

**Mr Sharp:** We will give you a breakdown on the staffing arrangements.

**Mr Dans:** We have a benchmark model for our conservation employees, which are the people that man the trucks, if you like, in the three forest regions. That is an area of land from about Lancelin down to Denmark and sort of south west, roughly a line between those two points. The benchmark is 288, of which about 90 are seasonal contracts, and the remainder, 198 or thereabouts—a shade under 200—are permanent. That is the model that we have.

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**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** In the last five years, has there been a reduction in numbers or has it been up, as far as the permanents?

**Mr Dans:** It has increased. The department received some funding through the 2012–13 budget process, which was the aftermath of the Perth hills and the Margaret River fires. So, there was quite a bit of funding to fire management across both ourselves and DFES in that budget process. That allowed us, I think, to increase our conservation employee workforce by 26, and we have maintained that. We have rigorously held to that benchmark of 288 since that time.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** Okay. Probably it has been done to death, I suppose you would say, but in some areas there were criticisms of the Lane Poole fire, or where it started out in there, about the slowness of the response from your department. I know it has been done in other areas, but I think it has to be done again here. In hindsight—I make it very clear, in hindsight—what would you have done differently?

**Mr Dans:** I think that the suggestion that our response was slow is probably unfair. The fire was noted at 6.30 am through the satellite monitoring process through Landgate, or NAFI. There is a range of products out there and they do not all pick up the same hotspots, I might add. It was noted by one of our staff at about 6.30 am on that particular day, I think 7 January. He contacted the district duty officer at Mundaring. We had crews mobilised to the fire well before 8.00 am and we had aircraft being mobilised to the fire by about 8.30 am. So we had trucks and staff and then aircraft by about 8.30 am. A hotspot does not show up on a satellite until it reaches a critical sort of size. There was lightning activity in the evening of 6 January, I think it was, which is believed to have started the fire. Our response probably could not have been much quicker than what it was, and the weight of the initial response—the number of aircraft and the number of trucks and personnel that we deployed—was entirely appropriate.

**The CHAIR:** There is sometimes criticism in terms of the major incident escalating—an escape from, say, a DPaW area—that maybe it is not categorised up to a level 3 soon enough and other people brought on board. How do you address that criticism?

**Mr Dans:** Look, I think it was timely. It was escalating to a level 3. My understanding —

**The CHAIR:** I am talking generally.

**Mr Sharp:** In principle?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Sharp:** I think that that is managed. I mean, there is a range of protocols and processes which are gone through by those who are managing the incident and if it meets certain criteria, then it escalates. It is pretty well automatic, although there is some element of judgement in there about whether it moves from a 1 to a 2 and then it is notified that it is progressing towards a 3. The standard —

**Mr Dans:** There is a common doctrine across with Parks and Wildlife, local government and DFES and the trigger points of when an incident escalates from 1 to 2 and 2 to 3.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have someone at, say, Cockburn in the state incident control centre when a large incident is happening?

**Mr Dans:** We do.

**The CHAIR:** Right. You have talked about some predictive technology. I think Aurora is one of them that Landgate operates in that centre. Say, you are typing the information at eight o'clock in the morning and the alert is going at seven o'clock that night, what is the process for that information to actually get to people on the ground?

**Mr Dans:** We manage an incident from a district office in the first instance.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

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[11.30 am]

**Mr Dans:** And then as it escalates, we might need to—when it gets to level 3, we would have staff in Cockburn. We do not sort of use predictive technology on its own. We have been using forest fire behaviour tables for several decades and models have been developed by our own in-house fire scientists and the CSIRO in the late 1990s—Vesta predictive tables. So, we are more reliant on those tried and true fire behaviour tables. We have started exploring predictive models and Aurora is not the only one; there is a whole range of others that CSIRO and other agencies have developed. But as was described by the representatives from DFES, the information, depending on the scale of the predictive work that is done, would be generated by the planning section and used in the development of the strategies and tactics for suppressing the incident. If it is a district fire, it is a direct link. They are working probably off the same desk or in an adjacent office and it is a matter of walking in and handing the predictions to the appropriate people to ensure —

**The CHAIR:** Right. So you would not just rely on the technology?

**Mr Dans:** No.

**The CHAIR:** So you would be having to verify it through your other —

**Mr Dans:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** So that all takes time.

**Mr Dans:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** How many level 3 incident controllers have you currently got on deck?

**Mr Sharp:** We have lost a couple through retirement.

**Mr Brennan:** We have got three or four on our system who can perform that role at level 3 and there is a number of others who are currently being assessed to become level 3.

**The CHAIR:** So that is throughout the state?

**Mr Brennan:** Yes, that is correct.

**The CHAIR:** So as much as you would want to control this incident, there would be many incidents where you have got to hand it over to DFES because it is not an incident control event that you can —

**Mr Sharp:** There is an agreed policy position in government that level 3 is under the control of DFES and the commissioner.

**The CHAIR:** I know. But what I am saying is it might be preferable, depending on the conditions or the circumstances where the DPaW person is the incident controller, but you do not have the flexibility because you have only got three statewide. Would that be an accurate assessment?

**Mr Sharp:** There are three and more are being assessed now.

**The CHAIR:** But I am just saying now, if a fire was to happen tomorrow, it would be a problem.

**Mr Sharp:** Tomorrow, yes, if there were more than three level 3 incidents concurrently that we were asked to take control of.

**The CHAIR:** How has that happened, that it is down to that number?

**Mr Dans:** We had the retirement of two level 3 controllers in the last six months.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Now, I think about three or four years ago there was actually a report done about succession planning and the fact that many of your firefighters were getting older or were retiring and the need to train people and have some corporate knowledge exchange. Has that not happened?

**Mr Sharp:** There is actually an extensive program looking at succession planning and Peter can outline that.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, that is a program looking at succession planning. You are not actually doing it?

**Mr Sharp:** No, it was implemented across our business—implementing succession planning, yes.

**The CHAIR:** And it is my understanding that an experienced firefighter, if they had someone new come on board, would need a couple of years to really train them to get them up to speed?

**Mr Sharp:** In terms of what the expectations are, it is not an academic exercise; it is academic plus experiential requirements for the position.

**The CHAIR:** All right. How many people out of the 290 or so firefighting personnel are expected to retire in the next a couple of years?

**Mr Sharp:** I do not have those figures in front of me.

**The CHAIR:** Is that something you could provide to the committee?

**Mr Sharp:** We have not actually ascertained people's retirement intentions so there is some element around that.

**The CHAIR:** Is that not part of succession planning?

**Mr Sharp:** Succession planning is training a cohort of people, which we are doing, and we are assessing them to meet that requirement.

**The CHAIR:** You would say, "Oh, look, Fred Nerk's 62. He is not going to be there forever." Would you not just be a bit proactive about it?

**Mr Sharp:** We are proactive, but we avoid ageism where we can, if we can.

**Mr Dans:** Madam Chair, if I may just clarify, the 288 figure I referred to —

**The CHAIR:** Includes the casuals.

**Mr Dans:** — was the frontline firefighters, the ones that are in the trucks. Incident management team staff and others is an additional figure. There is probably another 100 officers. They might be fire operations officers, planning officers, people in Paul Brennan's branch—our fire management services branch—scattered around the state. So, there are additional conservation employees outside of the south west forest regions. If you add those two numbers, we get up to about 420 staff who are involved in fire management. We have about another 500 across the department whose job descriptions are not exclusively related to fire—they may have some mention of fire management in their job descriptions—but they step up and fill roles in incident management teams and incident support roles, taking the total across the department to above 900. So, there is about 500 of those staff who step up and participate in incident management as required.

**Mr Sharp:** Could I clarify that some of the current level 3 officers fall into that category of other responsibilities, but have been trained up in that fire space. That is why we are currently going through an assessment process to get as many as possible to level 3.

**Mr C.D. HATTON:** The Ferguson report described resource management as being piecemeal and inefficient with two separate systems operating between DFES and DPaW and it went to the extent of saying inadequate resource management system—it said here that the inquiry was especially concerned by the inability of operations officers to quickly see the location of all DFES and DPaW resources deployed and found that the operation of two separate systems was inefficient and a potential safety risk. Given that that has been identified, would you say that that now has been remedied to the point where you are ready for this year's bushfire season as a holistic approach?

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**Mr Sharp:** I would comment that I think DPaW was more advanced in knowing where its resources were, because we had a system in place, but in terms of now integrating the two—Peter can comment on that—I think we are in a better position.

**Mr Dans:** We have a satellite-based vehicle tracking system in place since late 2009. DFES has made some significant progress over the past six months, I understand, in having what they call AVL or automatic vehicle location. I think they have 500-odd vehicles satellite tracked for this coming fire season. We are currently working on the necessary mechanism to be able to exchange that spatial satellite-based information, and we think we will have something ready to go as required during the season.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask on that, and I may be naive, but I do not understand why DPaW and DFES do separate procurement, separate tenders, and end up getting equipment that cannot be integrated or can talk to one another. How does that happen?

**Mr Dans:** We built our own system in-house in 2009. We have got some brilliant young electrical engineers in our office for information management who actually built the system on open-source software in 2009.

**The CHAIR:** Was that offered to DFES?

**Mr Dans:** It has been.

**The CHAIR:** Was it rejected?

**Mr Dans:** It was not taken up.

**The CHAIR:** Why not?

**Mr Dans:** I could not tell you.

**Ms L. METTAM:** In relation to the fuel loads, where are we at, and what progress has been made on the fuel load prescribed burning target for the south west region this financial year and how are we looking with our autumn burns?

**Mr Sharp:** We will be able to give you some up-to-date figures; obviously, we check those. We have been vigorously pursuing that in the context of a late, wet winter, which has had a significant impact on the capacity to burn. A lot of the preparatory work was actually done last season, but the actual burning that is undertaken, Peter could give us the exact breakdown.

[11.40 am]

**Mr Dans:** October was fantastic; we started October with less than 2 000 hectares burnt across the whole south west. This morning we were a shade under 132 000 hectares. It was an exceptional October. We had a nice gradual drying. We have had one or two hot days. We have not had a long hot spell, and things are looking particularly good. There is another 4 000 on the books being planned for today. In the Swan region, which is largely the Parks and Wildlife-managed lands around Perth down to about Waroona, we have achieved about 65 000 hectares. In the south west region, which is essentially from Waroona down to Blackwood—Augusta, around that sort of area, we have achieved 58 000 hectares and in our Warren region, which is sort of Pemberton, Manjimup, Walpole, it is still quite wet down there; they have only done 8 000, but it is not uncommon for them to achieve most of their burning in November and December as it dries out in the tall forest down there. I am quite confident that by Christmas we could exceed last year's 154 000 hectares, so it has been excellent. I guess, as the director general said, the additional royalties for regions funding has provided the resources to really get on the front foot in preparing burns. So, through the winter, through periods when it is not appropriate and not possible to burn, they have been out preparing the boundaries of burns, upgrading roads and tracks and mulching and grading and getting the perimeter of the burn in tiptop condition so that when the opportunities arise, they have got a little bit of leeway to allow them to ignite the core of the burn, because they

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have a good safe perimeter on it and have a little bit more variance in the conditions in which they can ignite the core. The plan is, over the coming seasons, to get a lot of burns set up well ahead so that they are all ready to go when the ideal conditions arise, which has been the case through October, and the writing is on the wall so to speak.

**Ms L. METTAM:** How has your approach changed?

**Mr Dans:** I think the funding and the mechanisms we have put in place give us ways to move human resources and trucks around the south west to where the opportunities exist. I think it has been quite motivating to our staff. There is some healthy competition out there between the regions, which is good. There are no constraints on starting burns. I guess it would be fair to say that we might have hesitated to start a burn on a Friday afternoon, knowing that we would have to have crews out all day Saturday and all day Sunday patrolling it and mopping it up. The additional resources have allowed us to take any opportunity that presents, and we can go for it.

**The CHAIR:** In that context, it has been said that DPaW is a little risk averse now, post-Margaret River, and also with the requirements of OBRM. Is that something you would agree with or disagree with?

**Mr Sharp:** I do not think we are risk averse; I would think we are much more risk prepared, and part of that was the year when we had the low burns, where we put in place, I think, far superior preparatory exercise effort. I would think we are much more risk aware, but not risk averse. In many respects, as Peter has indicated, it is about having the risk known and understood, but also we have done much better and much more extensive preparation, and that is why we have been able to pursue what I think is a remarkable outcome of well over 100 000 hectares in one month.

**The CHAIR:** In terms of OBRM I am told that even a small burn requires a 30-page form to be completed. Is that the case? Can that act as a bit of a deterrent?

**Mr Sharp:** I am not sure of the exact details. We think we have good processes to progress with our burning program, which is examined by OBRM, but at a broad scale. It is an auditing process, where they audit what our measures, our processes and our responses are likely to be. Peter, could you comment on that?

**The CHAIR:** Can you elucidate on that, Mr Dans?

**Mr Dans:** Following the special inquiry into the Margaret River bushfire, we engaged consultants who were recommended to us by AFAC to assist in building a risk management framework, combined with ISO 31000, into our prescribed fire planning process. Casting back to your previous comment about being risk averse, it was not so much that, but it has taken a while for staff to really become fluent in the new prescribing and risk management process. I think we are through the worst of that now, but we are still looking for a few system enhancements just to streamline it and to reduce the complexity of preparing a prescribed fire plan.

**The CHAIR:** Does that 30-page form sound familiar?

**Mr Dans:** That is the prescribed fire plan.

**The CHAIR:** And it does not matter how small the burn is?

**Mr Dans:** It does not. The risk assessment has to be done and the setting of the context and identification of the risks, the specifications of the treatments of the risk, the traffic management planning, the smoke impact planning. Depending on the complexity of the burn, there are certain templates that have to be addressed, to address all the potential consequences of the burn.

**Mr Brennan:** Can I just clarify that? The OBRM does not dictate what the template for a prescribed burn should be, so the template we use is ours, and it meets a number of requirements of our own plus those of OBRM.

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**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** In recent times there have been a few fires—so-called controlled burns that have got away, and got quite spectacular, to say the least. What considerations are given, and why is the focus on burning into a summer period instead of a winter period? Why do we not do more work in the autumn, and then hopefully the rain would put out some of those smouldering logs et cetera?

**Mr Sharp:** Mr Dans will outline this in more detail, but the focus is on the right conditions for the fire, and part of that earlier answer about the effort that is going on in Swan at the moment is reflective of the fact that the conditions are right in this northern part of the south west at the moment, and we will move, in a general way, further south as time goes by. Therefore, the time of the burning depends on what the conditions are like, but we do take into account—and part of the effort that we have talked about in burning recently has been about winter burns or autumn burns. It is whenever the conditions are right, and you can get the outcome you want. That is our response.

**Mr Dans:** When history tells us our greatest achievement over several decades, we generally achieved more coming out of a winter into a summer. Spring burning is generally the most productive for us, whereas going from dry fuel to wet fuel, winter often breaks quite suddenly, as happened in autumn of 2016, whereby we started burning in April this year, and we were shut down within a few weeks. We achieved very little in autumn of 2016. If the conditions are right for a burn to go and the impacts and the risks can be managed, we will do it when the occasion presents. We do not necessarily try to achieve more in spring than we do in autumn; it is just that it is generally more favourable for achievement in spring.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** It is a bit difficult trying to tell that to tourists along those lines. The conflict that is there—I am not criticising—certainly in some places does not show our best side to our spring visitors.

**The CHAIR:** I was in Collie the other day and it was beautiful air out there and it is terrible up here. You cannot have it both ways.

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** You have not been down there when there is an inversion and you cannot see more than six feet!

Just one further thing on that: is it true that at times, if there is no danger to life or housing or that sort of thing, that you will let a bushfire run, or do you give in and try to put it out?

**Mr Sharp:** That is not true. The decision is around how you fight a fire, but it is not true that we let bushfires run.

[11.50 am]

**Mr Dans:** There may be occasions where we would choose to fall back to an existing road or track and let the fire run out to an existing road or bush track or firebreak rather than put a machine in and bash down hundreds of trees and things and cut a fire line with a bulldozer. That would be a reasonably common approach. We are talking hundreds of hectares of additional burnout material; not thousands of hectares. It will be rare that you would fall back to an existing road or track or firebreak; that sort of dictated you had thousands of hectares to burn —

**Mr M.P. MURRAY:** The comment has come from the Walpole area a couple of years ago where it went for quite some time. People were saying, “Oh, no, they’re letting it run until it gets right through there; they mightn’t have to burn it next year.”

**Mr Dans:** In some of the forest around Walpole, we do have significant problems with flotation for heavy machinery. They will drop into the mud and they will not go anywhere. You cannot put a machine into some of that forest country around there. It is probably, around there, more common practice to fall back to existing tracks and boundaries and roads and the like.

**The CHAIR:** On the target figure of 200 000 a year, is it possible to drill down and get that into “high fuel load, has not been burnt for 20 years” to have a more meaningful figure?

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**Mr Sharp:** Yes.

**Mr Dans:** We can cut it whatever way is required, but our annual report 2015–16 includes a range of other performance measures that we are introducing now. I think you have probably heard of those in budget estimates, Madam Chair. We are looking at, I guess, dividing the land that we manage up into various land management zones. I will probably let Mr Brennan actually refer to that because he is closer to that particular subject.

**The CHAIR:** We have got about 45 seconds, I am sorry.

**Mr C.D. HATTON:** Okay; one quick one from me.

**The CHAIR:** No, no; he has not finished answering.

**Mr C.D. HATTON:** I am sorry.

**The CHAIR:** When you leave, we will be inquorate!

**Mr Brennan:** The target of 200 000 hectares is broken up by those three zones that Peter has mentioned: 20 000 of it is intended for land management zone A, which is closest to urban development; 70 000 for the next zone further away; and then 110 000 for the zone beyond that.

**The CHAIR:** So it is proximity to people and property; it is not that high fuel load, has not been burnt for 25 years or anything?

**Mr Brennan:** That is a factor in deciding which burns are a priority as well. There is a range of factors.

**The CHAIR:** Is there anywhere where you can get that figure breaking up, say, the annual figure into “high fuel load, has not been burnt for 25 years” or whatever and so on?

**Mr Sharp:** We can give that description in the broad sense.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr C.D. HATTON:** Just a quick one, in 10 seconds. In its current form, OBRM encourages coordination between agencies but does not take an active role in your mitigation, as I think you mentioned before. Are you happy with that current model? Do you think it is going fine?

**Mr Sharp:** I think it is working well, but I have not actually discussed that. I think that is an appropriate role for OBRM. Having been through this teething period, I think we are getting to a point of much higher productivity in that space.

**Mr C.D. HATTON:** That is fine. Thank you for that answer.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for your evidence. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. Any corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information—you will provide that about the fuel loads—or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee’s consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you, and I am sorry we kept you waiting.

**Hearing concluded at 11.54 am**

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