

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO 2011 KIMBERLEY ULTRAMARATHON EVENT

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 23 MAY 2012**

Members

Dr M.D. Nahan (Chairman)
Mr W.J. Johnston (Deputy Chairman)
Mr M.P. Murray
Ms A.R. Mitchell
Mr I.C. Blayney
Mrs M.H. Roberts (Co-opted Member)

Hearing commenced at 10.25 am**STEVENSON, MR TONY JOHN****Fire Services Manager, East Kimberley, Fire and Emergency Services Authority, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks, Mr Stevenson, for appearing before the committee today. This committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Before we commence, there are a number of procedural questions I need you to answer. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an "Information for Witnesses" briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, I have and I do understand.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions about appearing before the committee today?

Mr Stevenson: No.

The CHAIRMAN: As you were overseas when the committee travelled to Kununurra, the committee was unable to meet you and discuss your role regarding the events leading up to, during and following the incident that is the subject of the inquiry. Before we ask any questions, do you wish to make a brief opening statement that addresses your role or the terms of reference?

Mr Stevenson: No.

The CHAIRMAN: You recognise that your organisation, FESA, gave us advice and made a submission.

Mr Stevenson: Yes, and I have seen the correspondence included in that.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks very much for appearing before us today. We have a lot of evidence now and we are trying to collate the various streams of evidence coming on and what happened at the event. Can I first go back and ask you a question about RacingThePlanet's 2010 race? Did you have any knowledge of, or involvement or interaction with that race?

Mr Stevenson: No to all those questions, until after. When I was notified of the next race, I made myself aware of the events that occurred in 2010, other than a couple of snippets that I had seen in the media where the race went a little bit wrong for them.

The CHAIRMAN: When did you have your first interaction and communication with RacingThePlanet either for the 2010 race or the 2011 race?

Mr Stevenson: The first interaction that I had with any of the organisers from RacingThePlanet was a direct telephone conversation to my home address at somewhere between 1.30 and 2.00 am on Saturday morning post-fire.

The CHAIRMAN: A person from the Kununurra Visitor Centre, Nadia Donnelly, had a conversation. Did you have a conversation with her about RacingThePlanet?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, I had a brief third party conversation with Nadia in relation to the event that was due to occur within a couple of days' time.

The CHAIRMAN: Could you relay that conversation?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, and I can provide to the committee, if you wish—if you do not already have it—the correspondence that was sent to me after that telephone conversation, which was cc-ed to Mary Gadams as well. It was in relation to the event that was going to take place. I was contacted by Nadia and I did say that I had concerns in relation to the dehydration issues that they had in the last race, which was in 2010, and that if I was to provide any advice whatsoever to RacingThePlanet, I would need to see, firstly, a route and, secondly, a copy of the risk assessment to see what they had already prepared for in terms of mitigation, preparation and communication.

The CHAIRMAN: Did Ms Donnelly at that time advise you when the event was going to be run?

Mr Stevenson: She advised me of the day it was going to be run but could not give me the route, and the email follows on from that where she requested that I be provided with the route so I could give information, and that I could not provide RacingThePlanet with any information until I knew the track that they were going to take.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you attempt to contact RacingThePlanet yourself?

Mr Stevenson: No. For myself, it was quite clear from the visitor centre that RacingThePlanet staff and organisers were going to make contact with me. I had every faith that that would occur.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you at any time ask RacingThePlanet, either indirectly or directly, for the route map?

Mr Stevenson: No. There had been no contact with RacingThePlanet until after the event, and that is either from themselves or myself. No route map was provided to me.

The CHAIRMAN: You never received the route map. To your knowledge, did they refuse to give you the route map?

Mr Stevenson: No, because I did not directly ask them for it.

The CHAIRMAN: Moving to the events of the day, what do you recall of your conversations with the female staffer at El Questro that you refer to in paragraphs 13 to 15 of your police statement?

Mr Stevenson: I will just refer to that statement; I have a copy in front of me. That was a telephone conversation that I had between myself and a staff member, as I made an inquiry to El Questro to see if they had any knowledge of it because it was close to their boundary and to see if El Questro had actually in fact already commenced any search for these people. I have a good working relationship with the El Questro staff, in particular the manager there, Michael Bass. For any event that happens out in that area, Michael would be one of my first points of contact because he has good local knowledge. At that point, it was my intention to ascertain as much information as I could about what had happened so that if there was a need for FESA to have a response, we could be informed and also respond to it with the necessary resources that we would require to assist there.

The CHAIRMAN: What did you ascertain there?

Mr Stevenson: What I ascertained out of that phone conversation was that everybody was out of the gorge—the park manager, Michael Bass, had seen the last three cars that had RacingThePlanet logos on them leaving the vicinity of Tier Gorge—and that there were some small fires burning in there and that they would continue to monitor those for the days to come.

The CHAIRMAN: Ms Balderson, who I think is the staffer you had the conversation with at El Questro, gave as evidence a description of the conversation with you. She stated —

Tony said that he had told the RacingThePlanet people, “Yeah, no worries, just give me a map of where you are going and I can tell you where the fires are” ...

Mr Stevenson: That is incorrect.

The CHAIRMAN: In the fog of whatnot, as you have stated now, you had no direct communication with RacingThePlanet prior to the race.

Mr Stevenson: Yes; that is correct. I can allude to where there might have been confusion in the conversation. There was a reasonably lengthy conversation. What may have got mixed up is that I said that if I had known where they were going and if I did have a route map, I would have been able to advise them. I was also advised by them that El Questro had received a route map but it had changed three times prior to the event starting, so that may be where the confusion lies, but I am sure you will be able to confirm that with the person involved.

The CHAIRMAN: Were you a bit angry that they had not contacted you by that time or that they had not particularly provided you with a route map so you would know where they were to assist them?

Mr Stevenson: I do not know about angry. I think I was frustrated and empathetic towards the poor victims who were hurt on this occasion. There was no anger towards RacingThePlanet. At that point in time, which was late in the afternoon when I found out that someone was injured, it was one of empathy.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: We have been provided by FESA with the calls that went to the 000 number. When was the first occasion that the FESA 000 centre contacted you following their calls?

Mr Stevenson: That would be in the notes that you have there of myself from the recorded information that I put into our incident management system, but it would be, I believe, somewhere around 2.15 or 2.30. Originally, there was a message left on my telephone, because I was already on the phone at the time when that occurred, and I believe there was a conversation between the communication centre and the State Emergency Service district manager, Mr Graham Sears, who also works out of our office. It was post-fire.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: As you say, it was around 2.15. Were you aware that there may have been injured people from the information the call centre had provided to you?

Mr Stevenson: No; the call centre never provided any information to me to indicate that there were persons injured, just that they were missing and they had not made it to the checkpoint.

The CHAIRMAN: At approximately 2.30, you received a call from Mark Crumblin, who advised you that there was a major fire in the El Questro area and at Gibb River Road and there were reports that people were unaccounted for. Mr Crumblin passed on a satellite phone number and requested that you contact the paramedic en route, and that is what you did; the evidence shows that.

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You called the paramedic and he advised you that he was going to Emma Gorge, and you advised him to go to the Tier Gorge area.

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: That was a correct direction. How did you know that the fire was in Tier Gorge as opposed to in the Gibb River Road area and Emma Gorge?

Mr Stevenson: Because that was the information that was relayed to myself. There was a lot of confusion around where the people actually were. I am sure that you have got a map of that area. Emma Gorge and Tier Gorge, for country people, are not that far apart, by the way. It is not that far. My concern for the paramedic was that he did not go past it and actually go to Emma Gorge. The missing persons had not got from one checkpoint to the other, and the information that I received was that there was a checkpoint on Tier Gorge and a checkpoint at the barrel, and it was somewhere in between there. So I did not see the need to send him all the way to Emma Gorge when it was going to be more than likely somewhere in that vicinity.

The CHAIRMAN: Were you and the paramedic operating on the same source of advice through 000?

Mr Stevenson: All emergency services operate under the 000 arrangement, as you would be aware. However, when a caller calls 000, they are directed to different areas depending on what advice they get from the caller. As an example, if a caller made a telephone call via 000, they would be asked, "Do you require police, fire or ambulance?" The Telstra 000 call taker will then direct that call to the appropriate area that the person has asked for.

The CHAIRMAN: Which service was it directed to this time?

Mr Stevenson: From my knowledge from investigating some of those calls into our communication centre, it initially went into the FESA communication centre and then the persons who called were notified that they would need to call the ambulance.

The CHAIRMAN: It went to FESA and then it went to the ambulance. FESA would have more full information about where the issue lay between Tier Gorge and the barrels, and that is why you had that information.

Mr Stevenson: They would do, but you would need to confirm with the communication centre what occurred on that day. There is a direct line in the communication centre where we have a direct tie-in line to our lifelines, including police and ambulance. I am not aware if that call was directly placed to the ambulance. I am aware that the caller was advised that if there are persons injured, they will need to call the ambulance. They are recorded tapes that would be available to the committee. That is part of FESA's communication centre.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Mr Stevenson, about 2.15 on the day you got the information from the call centre, did that include the GPS coordinates?

Mr Stevenson: No; that came later. I am aware that there were problems with the communications that were being used. It was a sat phone. Initially, the caller, who I now know to be Samantha Fanshawe, was not really aware of the coordinates and then had to go and seek the coordinates and phone the centre back again.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: So when were you advised of the GPS coordinates?

Mr Stevenson: Sometime after that, which I think I wrote down in my notes. Once again, that would be recorded in the management system that FESA uses, which would give a date and a time of approximately when that was done. Again, it was after the incident had occurred. In the initial stages, I think it would be fair to say that there would have been a period of probably 60 minutes when it took us time to gather information from our various sources, remembering that the fire was burning at that time. The correct procedure was followed. The chief bushfire control officer from the Shire of Wyndham–East Kimberley, Mr Mark Crumblin, responded to that. Until such time as Mark could get on the ground and get some information for us, it would be probably somewhere in the vicinity of one hour, because it is a reasonable drive from Kununurra out there; hence, that was the other reason for myself contacting the park manager to gather as much information as I could to assist the chief bushfire control officer.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: When you were advised of the GPS coordinates, were you also advised of the phone number for the sat phone for the race organisers?

Mr Stevenson: Yes. However, Mr Graham Sears and myself tried unsuccessfully to phone the number that was given to us. The satellite phones that were used were from Hong Kong and the area code was not on the front of it. It was an Iridium sat phone and we needed to dial that Iridium code to make it work. To the best of my knowledge Mr Sears was not aware of that code from reading the SAT phone so when we deduced that is what it was, Graham had limited broken contact with the caller.

[10.45 am]

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: When the call centre gave you the phone number, do you remember how many numbers were in the phone number?

Mr Stevenson: No, I do not but I can see from my notes where I have added 0011 that the number was [].

The CHAIRMAN: Would it have helped you if the number you were given had a plus in front of it?

Mr Stevenson: Look, yes it would have helped to attempt to make contact, but as was proven, the satellite communication on the day was not very accurate. For whatever reason, it just was not working properly and the calls into the communication is testament to that.

The CHAIRMAN: The reason I am asking is: would that have signalled to you it was an overseas phone and you had to dial 0011?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, it would have done that. It would have allowed us to immediately be able to dial the correct number. But even after we had that correct number it still took some time to be able to get a call through. I am not saying a couple of seconds; it took a few calls to be able to get in, even with that correct code. Once in, the information was broken, at best.

The CHAIRMAN: You deal in that area all the time; are communications an inherent problem in that area?

Mr Stevenson: Most definitely.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any way you can overcome them?

Mr Stevenson: For that you would need to ask a telecommunications expert. Unless we had the national broadband network all the way up through the Kimberley for our mobile phones—a series of towers—I imagine that would be the best way to fix that. As we say, there is a solution to every problem, however, a big cost associated with it, so I am not sure that that would go ahead. Sure if we had national coverage for mobile phones, the problem would be solved.

The CHAIRMAN: What various types of radio communication does FESA have?

Mr Stevenson: FESA has various types of communication that we utilise. We use a UHF radio; we use a VHF radio and we have a high-frequency radio and we also have a satellite radio and BGAN units. We have word of mouth.

The CHAIRMAN: Those were in your vehicle or with you at the time?

Mr Stevenson: Yes; they were all firmly mounted in the vehicle.

The CHAIRMAN: Given that array, you still had a very difficult time communicating once you got the numbers or had to contact them with the people on the ground organising the race?

Mr Stevenson: Yes; that is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: One question that puzzles me is: when you talked with the ambulance people, they went on to find the injured people from the Barrels inward, why did you not go in and see what was happening at the accident site; why did you not attend the accident?

Mr Stevenson: We never had confirmation of what had occurred. If we had a picture of where that incident occurred that would be 70 kilometres from my office. For me to take off and just direct myself out into that area, I do not think would serve any purpose. We were trying to establish whether it was a search for missing persons or we had persons injured or it was a fire that we were dealing with. We had no confirmation of any of those three things until well after the event. We were not aware of the race route. We were also not aware of the impending danger that had been identified there early in the morning. We had never been notified.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: You did know that there was a problem in Tier Gorge because you told the paramedic to go there.

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: In your police statement you never directly spoke to—at paras 19 and 20, page 4, you talk about Graham asking Samantha for the information and Samantha unable to supply the answers to any of the questions. They were questions asked by Graham and not by you?

Mr Stevenson: That is correct.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Were you in the same room as Graham when he was asking the questions?

Mr Stevenson: At that stage, yes.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: By then, okay.

Mr Stevenson: Graham and I share a building that is an office and you do not have to raise your voice very high to hear the conversation in the next room.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Sure.

The CHAIRMAN: According to our schedule, when the ambulance driver first talked to you he knew there was a problem. You directed him to Tier Gorge in your conversation with him. At that time it was not a priority 1 to him. About 10 to 15 minutes later he got a call and it was designated priority 1. Did he communicate that change in priority to you?

Mr Stevenson: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Would it have made a difference to you?

Mr Stevenson: It would depend on the information that the paramedic had given back to me. It could have; it could have changed my response, yes. I will support that by saying that if I had got information back in relation to the severity of the injuries and the event that had occurred and the need to get those people out of there as soon as possible, I would have gone reasonably rapidly through FESA's system to organise a helicopter if possible to go out and do the evacuations, rather than wait for the ambulance to drive in there.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Had you been given, say, a month's notice of the event, what would you have done differently to what you in fact did do?

Mr Stevenson: Had we been given notice one month before the event, I would have contacted the shire, who organises local emergency management committee meetings and I would have tabled it before a special meeting to discuss to see if there are other parties that could also assist if they had any knowledge. We would usually go through, as we have done with other events, a series of meetings, or telephone hook-ups if that was required, to ensure that we would mitigate wherever possible any risk occurring.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: It has been put to the committee that fire would not have been seen as a major risk in the Kimberley. What is your view of that statement?

Mr Stevenson: I would say that that is a pretty open statement and I would like to clarify it by saying that on a given day it may not be; however, fire, where we know we have runners, would be a risk and it would be a problem.

The CHAIRMAN: We have received this quote from a FESA booklet titled "Bush Fires in the North of Australia", published in 2008. I will read it to you —

When visitors first see bush fires north of Australia it can come as something as a shock—fires and smoke seem common, fire trucks are rare and the country is often burnt and black for many kilometres. Bush fires are a natural part of the savanna landscape in the north of Australia.

Under the heading "Am I at Risk From Bush Fires?" It states —

In most cases no—provided you respect the fire and follow basic fire awareness. These fires are usually much less intense than the bush fires of southern Australia. This is because the vegetation types are different and the level of fuel available to burn is lower.

Mr Stevenson: Okay.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you put that in the context of the incident there? Does it denote an indication from FESA that fire is a low risk for events such as took place with RacingThePlanet?

Mr Stevenson: Given that that document is 2008, and I know it certainly has been updated, I would say that you could draw that conclusion that it is not a risk. But I would say that that would be taking it out of context. A small fire is not a risk unless you walk through it. A large fire is a bigger risk if you walk through it. When we say “a risk” we would expect, given those set of circumstances, that common sense would prevail and you would run away, not to.

The CHAIRMAN: If a race organiser had come to you and sought your advice as to the severity of the risk of fire, what types of things would you have told them about dealing with fire in that area at that time of the year?

Mr Stevenson: At that time of the year, it is a time of the year when things are tinder dry. We would be getting strong easterly breezes that are already blowing here in the East Kimberley at the minute because of the big high in the bight. We are experiencing those. You need to be always aware that although fires may start out small, if left unattended, they will grow into large fires. If you are going to go into any of those areas, you need to make sure that at all times have you a safe means of egress and that wherever possible avoid the area.

The CHAIRMAN: Are there any examples in your experience or knowledge of people, tourists getting caught by flare-ups of what otherwise were small fires into at least temporary or location-wise limited catastrophic fires, anyone burnt; anyone hurt in your mind?

Mr Stevenson: None that I can recall have been reported, no. There may be evidence but none that I can recall.

The CHAIRMAN: The Salernos, who run one of the stations where the race went through, indicated they were very surprised that fire was an issue, and they were shocked that people got burnt. They said you could just run around these fires. Evidently, that was not the case because the fire was quite catastrophic in the end. Is that a general view up there. If you were going to talk to locals, is that the type of advice you would get from locals?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, sure. The Salernos refer to the fact that you can go around them: we need to take that into context. When you are surrounded by a gorge you simply cannot run around it and you need to be very aware of the funnel effect of the way that fire will race up a gorge. If you go up a hill, you need to be very aware of how rapidly that fire will chase you up the hill. In hindsight, it is okay to say we can go around them. You can only go around them if you have the room. If higher ground is the answer, that is not the option.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I return to the question I asked before about what you might have done had you had more notice. Are there other events in the Kimberley that you can use as examples of events you have taken to the local emergency meeting?

Mr Stevenson: Well most of those events do not come directly to FESA. They come through the shire. One particular event that we are about to go into at the moment is the Kimberley Moon, the Ord muster which is an event that runs for two weeks. Mellon events, who prepare the risk assessment for a Kimberley moon experience meet with stakeholders and the local emergency management committee and start handing out the plans for their current event, usually somewhere eight to 10 months prior so that people do have a chance to go and have a look at the plans and see if there are any inherent risks they can identify. Also, remember, these events are taking place in a

controlled environment. The bush and the outback would not be what I consider to be a controlled environment with control measures in place.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: There is a bike ride down the Gibb River Road; is that taken to the emergency management committee?

Mr Stevenson: It may be from Broome or Derby, but I am not aware that it has gone through our local emergency management committee. However, the bike ride down the Gibb River Road, to the best of my knowledge, stays on the road. It does not go into the bush in great detail and up gorges.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: There is some foot race, I think, up around Lake Argyle or something like that.

Ms A.R. MITCHELL: It is a swimming race.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: A swimming race.

Mr Stevenson: We do not have any problem with that one.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Have there been other foot races in the Kimberley that you are aware of?

Mr Stevenson: I think there is a foot race on in the Kimberley this weekend. But, once again, it is in a controlled environment in the town site. I am aware of other mountain bike events that have occurred; we have received notification for mountain bike rides—not large numbers of people I do not believe, but I do not have any knowledge I can report back to the committee on, one, for when any of those plans have gone bad. I believe we are here today to discuss an issue that did go bad and that there was nothing reported on.

[11.00 am]

Ms A.R. MITCHELL: Tony, I am going back a fair bit in your original conversation to the call centre, and I think you made a comment that the call centre is a Telstra operator. Is that right?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, to the best of my knowledge the call centre operator is in Melbourne that answers all 000 calls for Australia. Then the call centre passes it to the individual agency. I have been a former supervisor of the communications centre and I have been in the room when our communications systems officers are saying, “Telstra let the call go, let the call go”, because the Australia operator can listen in on the call, and obviously our operators have requested in the past that they drop the call and just leave it directly with our communications centre.

Ms A.R. MITCHELL: Thank you.

Mr Stevenson: I would just like to add to that I have been in the Kimberley for six years; I do not think it has changed, but I make the statement on the best of my knowledge from when I was in the communications centre.

The CHAIRMAN: Tony, one of the issues is when groups from particularly outside and do not know the area and they have interaction with the government agency, such as FESA or Health. Who takes responsibility for ensuring that they are brought in and advised on what they need to do to address issues of relevance to their event up in the Kimberley? Who should be responsible for making sure that it goes through—that they get briefed?

Mr Stevenson: Are you asking my personal opinion?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Stevenson: The people who hand over money to promote it.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay. Who would that be? Would it be just off the —

Mr Stevenson: I believe it is Eventscorp —

The CHAIRMAN: Okay.

Mr Stevenson: Well, I believe there was a substantial amount of money from Eventscorp.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay. What about LEMC? Do you sit on the LEMC in your area?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, I sit on the LEMC, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Who usually starts that off? Who is in charge of it? And is that the appropriate process for large events like this, or high-risk events, to make sure that they have all the contacts and local knowledge?

Mr Stevenson: I guess that the committee itself shoulders some of that responsibility, and it goes via the shire. If there is an event being run, to my knowledge there are certain permissions that need to be required, whether it be for catering purposes or road closures or access. It is my understanding that those notifications would go through the shire, and I believe that the shire in that case would be the gatekeeper who would bring it to the LEMC to discuss. I think, from my practical experience, if there was an event that caused us concern then the LEMC as a group would express in our strongest terms, by correspondence to the event organisers, that we have some concerns of that event and how it is being run or how it is not being run.

The CHAIRMAN: So you think the shire in this case should be the gatekeeper for LEMC?

Mr Stevenson: In that case, yes. Given that applications need to already be collated through the shire, I think that would be a reasonable expectation. I know that it could be an extremely lengthy process because we are obviously not involved with everything that happens in the Kimberley, but in hindsight maybe events where you have to pay an admission fee should attract that attention.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Just to step back a bit, having heard you say you had some experience in the communications area, what are the checks and balances to make sure the right numbers are written down and the right numbers are passed on, because it seems to be along here that there are some problems about the number given or the number being the right number to be able to communicate? What checks and balances are put in there; and would some checks and balances be put in there that could have helped in this case?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, look, that is a good question. FESA communications centre operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week; every telephone call, every radio line that goes through that communications centre is taped. Usually what would occur in that instance is that if there was a number that did not appear to be right, the communications centre supervisor could go and replay the tape and listen to the call again. The committee would have that available to them now; from the time that event started, all those communications that went into the communications centre and came out of the communications centre are recorded and held by FESA.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: So when —

Mr Stevenson: So in checks and measures, it is recorded so it can go back and follow up. They are trained people in the communications centre, and you would have every bit of faith that that correct number has been passed on. I would also like to add that in this case it may have been broken communication via the poor satellite telecommunications that we had on the day.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Tony, have you heard the tapes of the calls?

Mr Stevenson: I have heard some of them, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Just a couple of issues: I think FESA stated in their evidence that, in their view, if they had been brought on to the race—brought into the planning and information—they would have advised, given the knowledge that there was a fire sweeping around the area to the east of it, that the race should be cancelled or rerouted —

Mr Stevenson: I was going to say, I think I would like to add that I think the submission said “or rerouted”.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Stevenson: And I was directly asked that question when I was able to get the RacingThePlanet organisers. At that time I believed the organisers who met with us on the day—which is myself, Mr Waters, and Mr Seaman from Western Australia Police—were Mr John Storey, Mr Alisdair Morrison, Samantha Fanshawe, and Ms Mary Gadams. It was my observation at that time that they were the officials. At the conclusion of our discussions and our note taking, I was asked by Alisdair Morrison what advice we would have given, and that is the same advice that is in the submission that you have received. We would say that given that area and uncertainty, and the conditions that can come up, we would suggest that you reroute the race.

The CHAIRMAN: Who is Mr Morrison again?

Mr Stevenson: I believe he is the partner of Mary Gadams, who was an adviser at that time. You can correct me if I am wrong, but that is my understanding of what his role is with that.

The CHAIRMAN: What did you think—or do you think—John Storey’s role in the race was?

Mr Stevenson: It is my opinion that Mr Storey was their fire adviser. I believe that Mr Storey advised them on what he believed would occur in the area. I know that Mr Storey had previously met, prior to the race, with the then president of the shire, Mr Fred Mills, and discussed the fires in the area. So at that time he had actually advised the Shire of Wyndham–East Kimberley that there was a problem; we did not receive the problem. Now, Mr Storey, by his own admission, flew to the fire in the morning to start the race, so in that capacity he, in my opinion, performed as an official of RacingThePlanet by starting the race. He then flew over those areas, which is in his evidence—sorry, his submission—that he flew over, noticed the fire indicated, it would be there within two hours, tried to communicate, was unable to communicate, flew back to Kununurra, and, for reasons that are unknown to me, elected not to call 000 at that early stage of 10 o’clock in the morning and advise us that there was a dangerous fire there that would be upon the runners, by his own words, within two hours. My understanding is that Mr Storey’s capacity, although not paid, was in an advisory capacity for fire.

The CHAIRMAN: At that time, also, he could not get in touch with the people on the ground, so he communicated to the helicopter pilot, who landed and told the people on the ground that there was a fire coming and it would be there in two hours; right?

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you think that should have been communicated to you also for advice?

Mr Stevenson: Most definitely. I do not understand how Mr Storey, who has lived in the Kimberley for so long, could fly back to Kununurra and not tell anyone. I do not know how that did not happen. Mr Storey, in his own submission, professes to be a fire expert, and he has good knowledge—as you will see from the submissions that he had made on a number of occasions to various ministers that he has a knowledge of the fire behaviour—and he elected not to phone 000 and warn them that there were runners running into that area within two hours. I do not understand.

The CHAIRMAN: Did he have the capacity to call 000 if he was in his gyro?

Mr Stevenson: Well, he had the capacity to land the gyrocopter where he took off, which was Emma Gorge, and do just that.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay.

Mr Stevenson: He also had the capacity to, when he flew back to Kununurra, raise the alarm, which was, in my understanding, still well before this tragic incident occurred.

The CHAIRMAN: The course director in the sense of laying out the course was a Mr Garcia.

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you have any communications with him? He also recognised fire, and he had problems with the fire burning his markers at a couple of spots, and then he also saw a fire in the gorge. You got no communication from him?

Mr Stevenson: No; correct, I did not. And it is my understanding, from a discussion we had with Mr Bass from El Questro, that himself and Mr Garcia had a coffee the Sunday prior to the event and actually in fact discussed that fire that was burning. So, yes, I am not sure as to why that was not relayed either. But he needs to be questioned; no, I have had no contact, and still have not had contact with Mr Garcia.

The CHAIRMAN: You received a call on Saturday, 3 September 2011 at 1.47 am from Samantha Fanshawe. Why did she call you at such an odd time?

Mr Stevenson: I have no idea why Samantha Fanshawe decided to call me at that time, given a couple of factors. The first factor is that Miss Fanshawe was never given my private home telephone number. I believe that the organisers were provided with my contact details from the visitor centre, which was not my home phone number. I do not know why she left it to such an early hour of the morning. And I would like to add that I am also dumbfounded at the first words that were uttered from that conversation, which were, I believe, an admission that RacingThePlanet had not cooperated before. Samantha's first words to me when she was able to identify that it was myself who was the person she wanted to contact in FESA was, "I am now ready to fully cooperate with FESA." In my understanding that is an admission that they had not cooperated prior.

The CHAIRMAN: So you say you were dumbfounded. That implies —

Mr Stevenson: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: — that they were refusing to cooperate prior to that call?

Mr Stevenson: That is my understanding and my opinion.

The CHAIRMAN: I guess you had no interaction with them so you had no way of collaborating whether the lack of interaction was purposeful or otherwise?

Mr Stevenson: Correct, but that is just—

The CHAIRMAN: Go ahead.

Mr Stevenson: What I would like to say is that I believe I am here to express my opinion, and from the conversation, to say those words to you is that an admission that you have not cooperated prior.

The CHAIRMAN: At that time did you go into a discussion with her about other issues?

Mr Stevenson: No, not at that time. I understand —

The CHAIRMAN: How did the conversation end?

Mr Stevenson: I will just refer to my notes, but I asked her at that time about the wellbeing of the people and how they were. I was very cognisant of the fact that Miss Fanshawe would be under a great deal of stress. I did not see that it would be any value for me to go and talk to her at that hour of the morning. I thought it was best—I said this to Miss Fanshawe—if she got a good night's sleep and we met first thing in the morning. That was out of care and compassion for the tragic event that she had just been through.

The CHAIRMAN: Then you met her the following morning with others, right, which you have already referred to?

Mr Stevenson: No, that was—yes, sorry, we did; we met on the Sunday morning. She told me they were staying at the Kimberley Grande hotel and I could contact her there. Samantha had a telephone number but said, "It's a Hong Kong number so just contact me at the Kimberley Grande." I made several attempts on the day to make contact with Miss Fanshawe and was unable to. It was not until later in the afternoon—if my memory serves me correct it might have been somewhere around 1600

in the afternoon—she agreed that she would meet with me the next morning at 0800 at the centre, at which I advised her who would be accompanying me at that meeting.

[11.15 am]

The CHAIRMAN: That is the meeting you had with the police, RacingThePlanet, Mr Storey and yourself?

Mr Stevenson: And Mr Waters.

The CHAIRMAN: What issues were discussed at that meeting?

Mr Stevenson: The issues that were discussed, from my point of view, were to ask why we were not contacted prior and why the Department of Environment and Conservation was contacted but not ourselves. Also, Mr Morrison expressed concerns that we had not warned them of impending danger. We discussed, basically, a time line of events—how the event unrolled for them. There were a couple of unusual things to come out of that. One was Mr Morrison saying the he was surprised his BlackBerry telephone did not work where he was, because it works in most other places in the world. We just discussed how the event unfolded, what actions they took and how they work. Ms Gadams herself had some minor burns to her arm. She briefly told us how she acted in the event and how she got burnt, and relayed those comments. I did say in that meeting that the thing that concerned me was that I had not been contacted. However, RacingThePlanet felt that it was my obligation to contact them. Knowing what had already occurred, and given the information that I had already supplied to the visitor centre, I asked, “How, if you had an incident, were you going to get someone out of there?” They replied that would be the helicopter. I then asked, “How would you get them out?” They replied, “In a stretcher.” I questioned that a little further, knowing that the Bell helicopter would not fit a stretcher in it. Samantha just went through a couple of processes. The first attempt would be to put them inside, the second attempt would be to sling them underneath and the third attempt would be to hang them from a basket, none of which could have been tested or checked before because that aircraft did not have a sling or the capacity at that time to do that. They were some of the general issues that were discussed.

If I can briefly look at my notes to make sure that I have not missed anything; they were also concerned that one of their officials—volunteers—had tried to make contact, they believed, with someone from the Salerno property, who had not offered them any help. That concerned them. They passed on the registration details of what they believed was the vehicle. They mentioned how police had arrived and said that it was a controlled burn and El Questro rangers had advised them that it was normal because it was a controlled burn. They mentioned that they had already had trouble with fires burning in the area and that they had had to reroute the traffic a couple of times and the ribbons had been burnt. They mentioned that they had to do that. They gave us an overview then of how the race would have unfolded if it all had gone okay.

The CHAIRMAN: At that time, did you query Samantha Fanshawe as to her statement the previous morning, or that morning at 1.47 am, on what she meant by, “We are now willing to cooperate”?

Mr Stevenson: No, I did not do that because at that point in time I had the group together, which to me was what we wanted to do at that time. I have had time to reflect on that.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you question Mary Gadams or Morrison: “Why the hell did you not contact us?” or something to that effect?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, I did, to which they replied that they had contacted at DEC—the Department of Environment and Conservation—Luke Bentley. They said that they had contacted DEC, to which I now know that the information they received from Mr Bentley was that they would need to contact myself, and Mr Bentley gave them, I believe, my email address and office telephone number.

The CHAIRMAN: So both the tourist centre and DEC said to them, “Contact FESA”, and they failed to do so?

Mr Stevenson: That is correct. Two independent people that they have elected to contact both gave them all my contact details and they elected not to contact us.

The CHAIRMAN: Did they mention that satellite fire monitoring system? Did they refer to that in any way? Did they use it, can you remember?

Mr Stevenson: I cannot remember that they said they had. I cannot recall that they said that they had monitored it on FireWatch.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Tony, the first call that went to 000 was a couple of minutes after 2.00 pm. In that call, there is a clear statement that there were injured people. If you had been advised half an hour earlier than you in the end were advised and were told that there were injured people, would that have changed your response?

Mr Stevenson: It very well could have changed our response, depending on the level of injury. If it was a broken arm or leg, no, but certainly if it was notification that these poor persons were burnt as severely as they were, it would have changed our response. I would have immediately contacted our regional coordinator to have approval to provide assistance in terms of aerial support to get these people out of there and worry about the rest later.

The CHAIRMAN: You referred a minute ago to a controlled burn at El Questro station or Salerno. Did you know anything about that? Have you been able to confirm it?

Mr Stevenson: My reference was that that is what we were told by the group from RacingThePlanet and that they had received that information from one of the police officers who attended. No, I was not aware of it.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you investigate it?

Mr Stevenson: That was after the event. Yes, I believe that Mr Waters and Mr Seaman had. I personally did not, but I believe Mr Waters and Mr Seaman had made inquiries as to whether or not that was the case. The Shire of Wyndham–East Kimberley should have a record of that if that was the case because a permit should have been issued for that burn to go ahead.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Stevenson, if you could produce the summary of calls made by FESA and SES in Kununurra related to the event—do you have a transcript of those audios?

Mr Stevenson: The communications centre will have, yes. I will be able to obtain those.

The CHAIRMAN: And could we have a copy of your personal notes?

Mr Stevenson: They have not been provided to you as yet?

The CHAIRMAN: No.

Mr Stevenson: No problems. Apologies for my handwriting.

The CHAIRMAN: That is all right; it cannot be any worse than mine. Can we get a copy of the 2008—I quoted from a document from 2008 about fire in the north? Can you provide us with an updated version of that? You mentioned there is one.

Mr Stevenson: I can do that. It is freely available on our website. I am sure that is not a problem at all.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it the same name, so we can download it?

Mr Stevenson: Yes, it should be.

The CHAIRMAN: It is just an updated version of it?

Mr Stevenson: I am look looking at one at the moment. It comes under “Prepare. Act. Survive.” There are different routes when travelling during the bushfire, what if I encounter a bushfire—there is a whole document. It is electronic and will not be a problem.

The CHAIRMAN: One of the issues, when you write a risk management plan, are: what are the risks? You have to identify them and prioritise them. Would fire, in your view, if you were sitting and advising someone to go and run a race like this in that area, be a risk, and a risk, especially at that time of the year, that you would have to plan for?

Mr Stevenson: Yes. I would like to add to that that the focus seems to be at the moment on assessments and plans and things. None of those are any good unless you test the plan. That is where I believe there is a difference in what we do in our controlled environment for the events that we do have here in the Kimberley. We do a walk-through to see how those things unfold. One of the major issues that we can tell from this incident is communication; I believe that if someone had been out there and tested that communication, they would have found the difficulties that they would have in that area. A plan is great, but it is no good unless you test it.

The CHAIRMAN: And that means that you have to be there more than the day before. You have to go through the whole system and test it.

Mr Stevenson: I guess that is not such a difficult thing for them to do for their event, but I would look at it as a two-pronged approach. It could be tested in that time because they have to lay the markers if we are talking about an event like this. The markers have got to be laid out and you could do that. The other important factor is that if you have got a proper and tested communication plan and there is a problem, that will show up and you will need to remedy that. From the submissions that I have seen, if those people had been made aware of the fact that it was dangerous to go through there, they could have turned around and gone back, but that is all about communication.

The CHAIRMAN: In terms of going through Tier Gorge, it is a kind of no-zone for communication. Could you have done something about it to make sure that you had communication whilst you were in or going through the gorge?

Mr Stevenson: I think there are a whole host of things. I stated earlier that there is a solution to every problem but there is a cost associated with it. If there had been a helicopter there looking after the safety of the competitors rather than filming it, I do not think we would be here today.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for your evidence before the committee. It has been very instructive. Thank you for coming back after your leave. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of minor errors. Please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 working days of the date of the covering letter. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it is deemed to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information, which you have agreed to do, or elaborate on a particular point, please include a supplementary submission for the committee’s consideration when you return your corrected transcript. Thank you again, very much.

Mr Stevenson: In that email, will there be the further information that you require me to provide?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr Stevenson: Thank you, and thank you for allowing me the time to come along.

Hearing concluded at 11.27 am
