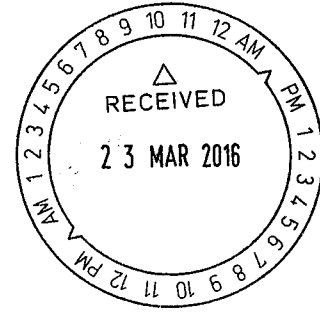


Hon Simon O'Brien  
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs  
Parliament House  
WEST PERTH WA 6005



16 March 2016

Dear Mr O'Brien,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit further information in support of my Petition No 108 – Operations of DFES.

I ask that the Committee consider the following topics in consideration of a Parliamentary Inquiry:

#### **Fuel Loads**

Prescribed burning and fuel reduction by local Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade (AVBFB) members and Local Government, in fact all government landholders, is being hindered by Office of Bush Fire Risk Management (OBFRM). OBFRM was established after the 'Keelty Inquiry' and has since impeded DPaW and the volunteers from reducing fuel loads. Private land holders can burn off after April 29th of each year without approval from OBFRM. DPaW and the AVBFB however, are required to be granted authority from OBFRM prior to undertaking vital prescribed burning of areas with dangerous fuel loads. Granting of such an authority can take a significant amount of time. Bureaucratic requirements prevent experienced volunteer units performing prescribed burns on behalf of sometimes, inexperienced landowners, and removes the opportunity of using these tasks to provide training and an exchange of knowledge and experience within the volunteer units.

#### **Firefighting Methods**

- DPaW and AVBFB firefighters will engage earthmoving machinery to cut a break along a fire's flanks. Machinery is then followed by heavy duty firefighting units and light duty 4 wheel drive vehicles which actively put out the fire. DPaW and AVBFB also proactively engage in night firefighting programs when the conditions are favourable. These methods have proven the most effective in combatting bushfires. DFES Incident Management Team are inexperienced in these methods and have only one single team member that has the skillset to perform these tasks (a former DEC officer).
- DFES officers are instructed not to leave the road and not to engage in actively extinguishing grass fires. They are instructed to defend property (houses) and lives only. The rationale for not leaving the road is unknown.
- While DFES equipment is appropriately designed for use in urban areas, it is not appropriate for the purpose of bush firefighting for which off-road vehicles are crucial. Pump trucks (Scania) are not designed to 'pump and roll' as their pumping gear and transmission cannot operate at the same time. Pump Trucks are therefore teamed with a light duty 4WD tender (Landcruiser) but these vehicles are instructed not to leave the pump trucks or the road. So Pump Trucks could act as a valuable water source for DFES light duty tenders or for refilling AVBFB Light duty tenders but those tenders are precluded from leaving the Pump Truck or the road to attend the fire.
- In relation to the mopping up of containment lines, which is vital to ensure that the fire edge is fully extinguished and often requires vehicles to leave the road, DFES personnel have been seen to remove themselves and their equipment from this procedure. In some instances, DFES failed to burn out to containment lines which left fuel loads to re-ignite.

In my opinion, DFES demonstrated an inability or reluctance to deploy these methods due to their lack of bushfire specific training, experience and the requirement that their vehicles do not leave the road. They are also reluctant to use earthmoving machinery and fail to utilise appropriate farm equipment, such as tractors and ploughs, to assist in paddock grass fires.

### **Road Blocks and Closures**

The road blocks established during the recent Waroona Bushfires were disruptive, inhibitive and excessive. They adversely affected the towns' people, farmers, small businesses and small property owners as well as communities in neighbouring towns not endangered by the fire. Specific instances as the fire approached saw horse and stock transport companies denied access as they attempted to destock properties prior to the fire overtaking them. Farmers and property owners were then prevented from being able to return to their properties once the fire had passed. This meant animals and stock that were severely injured in the fire were unable to be humanely destroyed in a timely manner, Veterinarians were unable to access injured livestock, horses and pets, and simply ensuring the availability of adequate food and water to surviving stock and animals was impossible.

The road blocks created animosity and a sense of disempowerment amongst the Community as people were treated with arrogance and disrespect by the road block officers and the barriers were indiscriminate and remained in place for excessive periods of time. People, including those that stayed to defend their properties, had to leave the area and pass through road blocks to gain access to fuel, generators, food and other vital equipment and supplies but were then restricted from re-entering. In some instances, road blocks even impeded and delayed the transport of vital equipment to and from the fire ground. .

The Permit System for access was also poorly administered with some farmers having to obtain new permits on a daily basis, for all of the vehicles they needed to use, even after being told that the initial permit would suffice.

### **General Communication**

In instances where earthmoving machinery was sent to a DFES managed sector, machinery operators cited they had experienced poor communication and lack of instructions from DFES personnel. Communication also failed in respect of refreshing firefighters whereby in some cases, personnel waited up to 14 hours for food and water to be replenished. These omissions do not occur during DPaW and AVBFB managed operations.

### **Level 1 Fire v Level 2 Fire and Poor Relationships**

When managed by AVBRB, the Fire Captain is empowered to make a decision regarding the use of equipment and what methods to adopt to fight a fire. They are also able to carry out back burning procedures for a fire assessed as Level 1. Once a fire is assessed as being a Level 2, a DFES Incident Controller is appointed and the Incident Controllers' authority overrides that of the AVBRB Fire Captain. As a matter of policy, DFES will not back burn as a fire control method despite it being proven and adopted by DPaW and AVBRB.

AVBFB members reported being treated poorly and that their local knowledge of the terrain and conditions was largely ignored resulting in general contempt between DFES personnel, DFES management and AVBFB that extends to DPaW. This was worsened by the fact DFES Fire fighters will not take instruction from senior AVBFB or DPaW officers. The relationship between AVBFB and DPaW however, from my experience, is sound.

### **Reform of Regulation**

Regulations now in place as a result of the fires at Southern Cross, which unfortunately resulted in the deaths of truck drivers, has now impeded the ability of Sector Commanders and Incident Controllers from making on the spot decisions. Fear of being prosecuted has affected their willingness to adopt vital firefighting methods such as back burning, engaging earth moving equipment or directing personnel into an area. Firefighting takes place in a moving, unpredictable and fluid environment. Personnel require the authority to react to the movement and opportunities as the environment changes without fear of prosecution.

The points raised are intended to demonstrate the lack of efficiencies, waste of resources and the inadequacies of DFES to manage bushfires in rural areas, possibly as a result of their failure to adequately engage with DPaW and AVBFB. Sadly, experiences at the Waroona Fire are a repeat of what other rural communities have already experienced under DFES management. I am more than willing to meet with you and the committee to provide further clarification of the points raised, alternatively, I can be contacted on 0428931986.

Yours sincerely,

Raymond J Hull