

# **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE**

## **INQUIRY INTO WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT ALBANY  
TUESDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2006**

### **SESSION THREE**

#### **Members**

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)**  
**Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)**  
**Mr S.R. Hill**  
**Ms K. Hodson-Thomas**  
**Mrs J. Hughes**

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**Hearing commenced at 12 noon****RYE, MR MAYNARD****Acting Chief Executive Officer, Great Southern Development Commission, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** The number of members attending this hearing is depleted because members have decided that not all five members of the committee will fly around the state to each hearing. Committee members will discuss each of the hearings together and all members will receive a copy of the transcript of the hearings so that everyone is up to speed. All the members of the committee will travel to different parts of the state at different times and the information will be collated. The reason for that is that members of the committee have spent a great deal of time travelling and doing committee work and they want to spend time in their own electorates and with their families.

The 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. Have you completed a "Details of Witness" form?

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you understand the notes attached to it?

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The committee received a submission from you. Do you wish to propose any amendments to the submission?

**Mr Rye:** No, but at some stage I would like to give some feedback on the commission's role in the process.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is it your wish that the submission be incorporated as part of the transcript of evidence?

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Before we ask questions, do you wish to make a statement in addition to your submission?

**Mr Rye:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You have an opportunity to make an opening remark.

**Mr Rye:** In preparing for this hearing, I did a search for the types of information that are available for episodic events and disasters, and I could find virtually nothing on either the Western Australian government or FESA's web site. Eventually I got information from a Parliament House web site on the guidelines for emergency relief. However, it contained only very brief information on which agencies and so on are involved. My secretary and I worked pretty hard to try to get this information. I compared that with the information provided by the Queensland government. Admittedly, it had just experienced cyclone Larry. However, the information provided by the Queensland government was clear about what the state government did. The Queensland government established a main central calling number

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and provided online application forms for assistance for businesses, farmers and residents. The situation in Queensland was far more transparent than it is in WA. It is concerning that as a fairly senior public servant I had some difficulty trying to understand what information the state government had provided. There was nothing on the web site.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Nothing there is simple.

**Mr Rye:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you provide some background information from your point of view on the recent disasters that were proclaimed in this area?

**Mr Rye:** The commission is a contact point in the great southern region for all non-farm businesses that experience a natural disaster.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** For non-farming?

**Mr Rye:** Yes. Fortunately, it was not an issue. At Pingrup non-farm businesses experienced a minor boom from having to supply farming fences and so on. In some ways I am glad it was not a major issue because I have had no formal experience in disaster situations. I have not been trained in that field, although I have been trained in assessment. In some ways I gained those skills in another life when I was a social worker, and so I know about emergency crises and how to respond to people. That is going back some way. The commission rang FESA and asked whether it could undertake this role. FESA was very professional. When a natural disaster occurs, it contacts us immediately. As I said in the submission, the processes we were meant to go through and the reporting system back to FESA was pretty slick. However, our concern was what we were supposed to be slick about. What information were we supposed to gather and provide to FESA? FESA is very professional at notifying us of a disaster; I could not fault it.

I spoke to a few of my fellow CEOs who work at the shire level. My good colleague from the ACC, who is also on the Shire of Kent, said that the shire had an issue because in the past six months it has received no formal feedback about road repairs. The shire found that Main Roads was very professional about how it handled the assessment process and that it had made very clear what it had to go through. However, the small shire is concerned about the time it is taking to get back that money. No doubt members from the Shire of Lake Grace will give the committee a different view. An old colleague of mine is a CEO there. That council had to engage an officer to work through the maze of financial assistance that could be made available. Recently I noticed a ministerial press release announcing funding for a sport and recreation centre as an emergency provision under the sport and recreation regulations. No-one knows about that. No-one knows whether the minister made a special arrangement. Apparently it was a formal funding process under the CSRFF.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Was that for the sports and recreation centre in Albany?

**Mr Rye:** It was for Lake Grace. I use that as an example because it shows the myriad support that is available, but where do we get the information about it? I was speaking to people from Lake Grace who had to employ an officer to do that and hunt for the assistance that could be made available beyond what was made available through FESA.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** It might allay your fears to know that the outer metropolitan City of Wanneroo also employs a grants officer to search for what funding is available. Obviously the remote councils have more problems, but even metropolitan councils are finding it difficult to access information.

Your job is to liaise with non-farming businesses. When a disaster is declared, do you disseminate information to the businesses?

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**Mr Rye:** FESA does that through the local government network and press releases, but not through its web site.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** FESA is informed of a natural disaster within its region or district.

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** The businesses can then swing into gear to provide assistance, materials or whatever is needed to meet the demands of the disaster.

**Mr Rye:** I can speak only from my perspective about what I did when cyclone Clare struck. I rang the shire and asked whether there were any issues for small non-farm businesses. The shire told me that there were no issues and that the non-farm businesses were going through a mini boom because of the situation. When a flood occurred at Mt Barker, I rang FESA's office. It seems perverse, but I was the contact to work out whether any small businesses had been affected by floods. My role was to feed that information back to FESA once I had visited the area and had a look. However, I am not qualified; I am not an insurance assessor.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** How long after a flood occurs do you swing into action?

**Mr Rye:** Almost immediately.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** It is an immediate point of contact.

**Mr Rye:** Yes. That is where I must credit FESA. It is very swift at disseminating information to the contact points. The commission is involved also in the drought relief project here. Although the events are different, they have a similar impact on the communities. It was very interesting to see the governmental response to the drought. I appreciate that there is time to build up to it because droughts last a year or two. However, Minister Chance had set up a 1800 number that anyone could ring and information was made available on a web site. The commission is involved in the 1800 number in the sense that a group of aid agencies supports the Department of Agriculture and Food and commonwealth agencies. A raft of agencies is behind that number. They include highly trained social workers and psychologists and agriculture counsellors who can immediately provide assistance on the phones, and they did.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Obviously you have dealt with a few state government agencies in disaster situations. The committee has heard from previous witnesses that there are not enough staff on the ground when a disaster occurs. You seem to be saying that for your purposes there is plenty of information and assistance and plenty of people to talk to.

**Mr Rye:** It is a matter of coordinating it and making the information clear and succinct for people.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You have said a couple of times that many businesses had a mini boom. Had any of those businesses been directly affected by the floods?

**Mr Rye:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did the flooding not have a negative impact on small business generally?

**Mr Rye:** No.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is that because the businesses are town based?

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are the businesses aware of risk factors such as floods and fire? Do they have mitigation measures in place to prevent that?

**Mr Rye:** They have the normal insurance processes, but they would not know where to go regarding natural disasters.

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**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is there nothing there for them should this occur? Is there no access to information about who to see, apart from when you ring them and ask them how they are going?

**Mr Rye:** Yes, and maybe what has filtered through FESA through a press release. I found it strange when I conducted some research for this meeting that there was no information on disaster relief.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Do FESA operatives within the region not promote the need for disaster plans or arrange meetings with the council or businesses to provide information on disaster management?

**Mr Rye:** I am unaware of it. I do not want to comment in the negative because I am unaware of it.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Are you aware of anything of that sort taking place?

**Mr Rye:** I am aware that DCD has been doing some good work with its local management plans regarding the immediate impact of a crisis. It has put officers in the region to coordinate those types of processes.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is that on an individual basis?

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** A small amount of money is provided to primary producers under national disaster relief arrangements. The committee heard earlier that people consider it to be an insulting amount of money. Nothing of that sort is provided for businesses. Would it be valuable to have a similar type of arrangement for businesses?

**Mr Rye:** There is a provision for non-farm small businesses to loan up to \$150 000 at 4.5 per cent per annum.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** That is for a loan, but it is not necessarily for an assessment.

**Mr Rye:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You have answered our next question about the obvious omissions; that is, the lack of information on the web sites.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** What is a seasonal variation committee?

**Mr Rye:** That committee is formed by the Minister for Agriculture and Food if there is a looming agricultural crisis due to a drought. He forms that committee and that usually results in the formation and meeting of regional committees. About eight agencies are on our committee, including Centrelink. We give advice to that committee on what action must be taken.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is that committee based on business rather than on farming?

**Mr Rye:** It is totally focused on agriculture and farming.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** If information is being fed through a particular committee that a crisis is happening, is no information fed about disaster management? You are saying that a considered response was given and that a range of measures were implemented to address different circumstances. Are those types of circumstances part of that committee's deliberations?

**Mr Rye:** At the moment it deals only with drought.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is the seasonal variation committee fixed for a particular purpose?

**Mr Rye:** Yes. The minister has just formed it again because of the drought in the northern part of the region.

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**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is a committee not set up to deal with farmers for different types of climatic events that might occur in different areas of Australia? Is it set up only as a drought measure?

**Mr Rye:** Yes; it is only a drought measure, and it has worked well. It coordinated agencies; it resulted in a hotline that was supported by a range of agencies; it was a single point of contact; and it provided one web site from which information could be found.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** That was for the drought.

**Mr Rye:** Yes.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Did it not swing into action when the flood occurred?

**Mr Rye:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It could basically do the same type of thing. A flood causes the same type of problems as a drought, such as there being no feed for the animals and stock losses, etc.

**Mr Rye:** It was interesting that when the fire occurred, although there was no formal response from our group in Albany, the agencies worked so well together that the managers for Centrelink, DCD and the Department of Health travelled in the same car.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is the Great Southern Development Commission part of the local emergency management committee? Obviously it has a role to play because of its contacts with businesses.

**Mr Rye:** Yes. The commission is asked to nominate a name. That is the extent of its involvement.

**The CHAIRMAN:** It either is a part of it or has the opportunity to be a part of it.

**Mr Rye:** Yes, but the commission has had no formal involvement in the LEMC meetings for a number of years.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are there any further matters that you wish to raise with the committee that may not have been raised?

**Mr Rye:** There seem to be a lot of coordinating committees about. DCD and FESA each have a system, a pandemic system is being established by the state government as we speak, and there is a drought system. It is a bit of a maze for the average punter. It is a maze for me. I am sure that behind it all it is in people's minds that it is all established, but where do they get information from? How is the information going to be released? As my good colleague from Cranbrook pointed out, a proactive rather than a reactive response is needed.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** What is your primary job when a business is caught up in a natural disaster?

**Mr Rye:** In retrospect, my role was a little vague. I was to make an assessment on whether it had actually happened.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Did you determine whether people were truly affected by the disaster?

**Mr Rye:** That is right.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** It was an assessment of involvement.

**Mr Rye:** I am neither an insurance assessor nor an infrastructure assessor and do not know what would be covered. I cannot provide that level of detail.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Once you have assessed that a particular business is affected by a disaster, are you the person whom the owner of the business would go through to tap the requirements for assistance?

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**Mr Rye:** My role is to provide information to FESA so that FESA can follow it up. Technically, that is where my role stops. However, the reality of working in a small community is that my role would continue for sometime and I would be an advocate for that business.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Therefore, the information you provide would go to FESA, but not necessarily to the agencies that might offer the owner some sort of relief.

**Mr Rye:** That is right, unless through my own knowledge I can advise the owner to ring Centrelink or the emergency services. It is only through my local knowledge and past training that I can do that.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is it not your job to assist the business to access relief?

**Mr Rye:** No, but I would as a call of duty. I was trained as a social worker 25 years ago to deal with emergency crises. A youngster on the Wheatbelt Development Commission who was not as skilled and who had not been confronted with this type of information would be an inappropriate contact.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** It is a life skill.

**Mr Rye:** The committee is most welcome to have a survey the commission conducted of businesses affected by the drought and the potential response by government. As a result of that survey we did some follow-up work with those businesses and provided a mentoring service. Despite being in a drought, all those businesses turned the corner. It was a nine-month mentoring program for non-farm businesses.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for attending and giving the committee the benefit of your experience this morning. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced in the sense that the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned to us within 10 days of receipt, we will deem it to be correct.

**Hearing concluded at 12.25 pm**

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