

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 12 APRIL 2006**

SESSION ONE

Members

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

Hearing commenced at 9.47 am**BOWERS, MR DAVID****Secretary, United Firefighters Union of WA, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Bowers, thank you very much for coming in this morning and giving evidence to the committee. The committee comprises five members; however, we have two members who have sent their apologies, one of whom should be present later. We apologise for that. Before we start, I have certain things that I have to read to you, to which you must respond verbally and not just with a nod or shake of your head, otherwise Hansard cannot record it properly.

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 the Details of Witness form?

Mr Bowers: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

Mr Bowers: Yes, I do.

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

Mr Bowers: Yes, I did.

The CHAIRMAN:. We have received your submission. Have you any amendments that you wish to propose to that submission?

Mr Bowers: No.

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

Mr Bowers: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN:. Before we ask any questions, do you wish to make any statements in addition to your submission?

Mr Bowers: Not at this point.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you again, Mr Bowers. You are obviously coming at it from a slightly different angle from most other people we have spoken to. In your submission, on page 2 item 4, you mention that the Fire Brigades Act and the Bush Fires Act should be amalgamated into one fire rescue and emergency services act, but that the identity of the fire and rescue service should be retained. Will you elaborate on that for us, please?

Mr Bowers: It is the United Firefighters Union's view that the fire and rescue, or the old fire brigade, has been an identity in Western Australia for well over 100 years now and as the lead authority we believe that any erosion of the identity is in conflict with the UFU's main view. People of Western Australia have come to rely on the Western Australian fire brigade, or the Fire and Rescue Service, and particularly in times of emergency it is always good to know exactly who you are dealing with. From that perspective, at traffic accidents and fires, people are under stress. When a hand goes on their shoulder, they look over their shoulder and that person says, "You are going to be okay", they can readily identify with the Fire and Rescue Service, and have done more

than 100 years. That would be our main submission. Not only is it the culture of Western Australia, but the community has formed a great deal of trust in the Fire and Rescue Service. Any erosion of that would undermine the community in the way they feel and think. We live in a liberal era where community values are being undermined and these sorts of institutions are very important, particularly in times of emergency.

The CHAIRMAN: That is also supported literally by the advertising that we see on television at the moment - the hand of a firey on a person's shoulder.

Mr Bowers: Yes, it is very important. As an ex-firefighter, I intimately understand what it is like to be in contact with someone who is under duress, and you put your hand on their shoulder and say, "Are you going to be okay?" They identify with the badge and they identify with the clothing that we wear, and it is very reassuring.

The CHAIRMAN: In a combined service such as the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, do you not see that that actually causes any problems for the other rescue people, ie the sea rescue, the State Emergency Service, the police and all those other people?

Mr Bowers: Not particularly. Once again, it depends on the nature of the incident. If for example we are doing a search of the bush, people identify with the SES. These sorts of institutions and the clothing are very important. People understand that certain competencies come with them and they are readily identified. Firefighters around the world have taken on roles such as marine rescue. Oakland is an example of where there was a combination of sea rescue, marine rescue, fire rescue and ambulance services. I do not think that the people within FESA are under pressure. There has been some miscommunication over the past few years, I guess. It is often reported in newspapers and on television at night that, "FESA personnel . . .". No-one really knows what FESA means. If you ran a survey in shopping centres and asked 1 000 people what FESA means, they would not be able to tell you. If you asked them what fire and rescue means, they would tell you in a second. If you asked them what SES means, they would tell you in a second. With the establishment of the department, one of our main goals is that the identities of each of the services that comes under the department's umbrella be maintained. That is good for the community. They will understand exactly what is going on.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Do members have any questions?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Page 2, point 6, of your submission refers to the need for FESA to have the power to vet building plans and to inspect the buildings for the purpose of fire prevention and fire suppression. Currently, developers, in making application for a building permit, are required to provide building plans to FESA for assessment of their compliance with the Building Code of Australia. There is a lack of clarity about FESA's responsibilities and actions in relation to the latter. FESA suggests that local government be restricted from issuing a building permit unless FESA approves the plans as meeting their operational fire safety requirements. You have mentioned in your submission that you believe that they should have more control. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr Bowers: Traditionally, the Building Code of Australia was an instrument that the fire service used to make sure that the equipment that goes into the building complies with fire protection and fire prevention measures. It is the UFU's opinion that if buildings are not vetted from their inception, they will not have the required safety equipment. Also, we believe that we should have right of entry all the way through. For occupational health and safety reasons, we must be completely aware of what is going on in buildings these days. At night or under emergency conditions when a building is full of smoke, firefighters need to know what is in the building. If you go into the building and you do not know what is in there, you are putting firefighters at risk and that is a dangerous situation.

Traditionally, and I was in fire safety for a short time when I first became an officer, we would vet the plans and make sure they complied with the Building Code of Australia. There has been some confusion in recent years because the vetting of plans or the issuing of them went back to local government. We believe that should be maintained within FESA because we have a vested interest in making sure that all buildings comply not only with the building code but also that we have a handle on what is going in to the buildings. From our perspective it is an occupational health and safety issue.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Supplementary to that, are you not confident with local government adhering to the codes?

Mr Bowers: Well, as you said, there is confusion. We say put it under one authority - we will vet the plans and we will make sure that the buildings comply, we will go out and do the inspections and when they are completed, we will do the strategic fire safety management plans and we will know what is going on. From that perspective, we will look after our people and public who enter.

The CHAIRMAN: I will push that a bit further. Under the building code things are laid down. The codes stipulate exactly what you have to have in a building - particular sizes and particular uses. Are you suggesting that once the plans are passed there are occasions on which the standards drop below the Building Code with the removal of fire equipment, or rather the non-replacement of fire equipment?

Mr Bowers: That is possible. If we take nightclubs as an example, nightclub owners have a vested interest in keeping people out so they will lock doors of egress. We are saying that if we have control over that, that will not occur. This is no slight on local government, of course, but as the authority we should have the power to enter a premises and we should have the power to investigate any problems that may crop up from time to time. We need the power to, firstly, enter the building and, secondly, we need the power to inspect the buildings while they are being developed.

Mr S.R. HILL: Do you not have that power now once they are completed?

Mr Bowers: Once they are completed. We would like to be able to inspect them while they are being built to make sure that they do comply. That is no slight on local government. However, we feel that to get rid of the confusion we should have it under one authority and in that way we are in control from the word go.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I weed out the confusion bit? A five-storey building was built in my electorate. The plans went to FESA and FESA made certain recommendations. The recommendations went to council - they were recommendations from FESA that you must do certain things. If council decides not to implement your recommendations or to force the proponent or the builder of the building to comply, what sort of position, legally, does that leave FESA and the council?

Mr Bowers: At the moment we do not have the teeth to enforce local government to do it. We would like that power to be vested in FESA.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you saying that people are of the opinion that once the plans have been through you and you have made recommendations, that then is what should happen in that building?

Mr Bowers: Having made the recommendations, should we not then have the power to ensure that it does occur all the way through rather than leaving it with the local government authority? With the massive amount of building that is going on in Western Australia at the moment, we can never be certain. Once a building is completed we will do the inspections, test the hydrants etc. Sure, we can make that everything is right then, but would it not be -

Mr S.R. HILL: You are saying that should happen at certain stages of the building, for instance, the lockup. Like the building surveyor and the health surveyor, you want to be one of those to inspect?

[10.00 am]

Mr Bowers: Yes, you get an inspection on your house at plate height and all the way through at each stage. We come out and inspect to make sure that everything is complying and then we move on.

Mr S.R. HILL: Would FESA have the resources or would it need additional resources?

Mr Bowers: We have a built-environment department now, which used to be the old fire safety branch. They have the facility. Firefighters inspect buildings under 500 square metres all the way through, and I think up to 2 000 square metres, but with anything over 5 000 square metres, the council usually gives that back to the fire service anyway. We are saying that we should have control of all the buildings. We have got the resources.

Mr S.R. HILL: What about a location, say, in regional WA where you do not have a courier service?

Mr Bowers: Once again, if we are to become a department, then we should have the resources. I want us to talk about the resourcing of the fire service a bit later on, or FESA itself, but we should have the resources.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would it be appropriate for one of your people to be part of the local government?

Mr Bowers: Liaise with local government, and we are trying to do that now. We have fire safety advisers that are being underutilised in the built environment at the moment. Traditionally it was their job to go out and inspect buildings as they were being completed. That does not occur anymore. One of the reasons that that stopped was that there was a bit of wastage because fire safety advisers were going out to buildings and inspecting empty blocks. As a way of being more efficient they actually gave that back to local government. We just see that as a bit dangerous. We will just stay with the line that building inspections ought to be completed by competent personnel within FESA, purely for occupational health and safety.

The CHAIRMAN: Can we take that a bit further? Should FESA, or the new department if it goes that way, have authority to basically close a building?

Mr Bowers: Certainly, if it does not comply or if there are identified hazards that are not going to be dealt with.

Mr S.R. HILL: So, for example, as in Queensland, after the tragic backpackers' situations over there, does the fire service have the power to close a building or to put a notice on it?

Mr Bowers: I cannot speak about Queensland. I do not know how they operate over there. Traditionally, if there are going to be injuries occurring in buildings, it is usually because there are egresses blocked. The fires in the United States in the mid-thirties and forties tell us that for people who locked doors, for example, when they had 1 000 people on the inside, if someone had been out and done a building inspection and made sure that those egress doors were always open and not chained up, they would not have the sorts of situations that then occurred.

The CHAIRMAN: That has happened all around the world, and I think we are fairly aware of that. Even if fire services are inspecting that, if they inspect it on a Friday morning, by Saturday night people could have it locked again. How do you manage that?

Mr Bowers: Certainly, if we left it with local government, would that be any different? People are people. You can have all of the safety equipment in the world, but if it comes down to someone

locking a door or turning off an alarm because they want to run smoke on the stage during the evening, that is out of everybody's hands. That comes down to the owner.

The CHAIRMAN: Under the current legislation FESA is empowered to enter, inspect and ask for the closure of a building if they consider it to be necessary to protect life and property. The Department of Housing and Works is recommending that this power be restricted to when danger is imminent. At times when danger is not imminent, local government would be the body responsible for entering, inspecting and closing a building. FESA and DHW have not yet reached consensus on this issue. We got most of that out of you just now.

Mr Bowers: That sounds like a bit of a turf war to me. FESA, as the authority, ought to have the power. We are the experts in fire prevention. I am not sure that the Department of Housing and Works is. If we are the experts in all things fire, then we ought to have the power. If they could show that they have the expertise, then perhaps the turf war is something that the CEO has got to sought out, not the UFU. It is our contention that, as the leading authority, we ought to have the power to close buildings.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Just on that point, it actually states that power be restricted to when danger is imminent. I find that an odd clause. How do you discern when danger is imminent?

Mr Bowers: Exactly; how do you assess when danger is imminent? If the building is of a nature where there are dangerous substances, then it is always imminent. In a chemical factory, for example, danger is imminent all the time. So when is the danger mitigated?

Mrs J. HUGHES: There needs to be a better understanding about what that catchphrase actually means.

Mr Bowers: Certainly, and perhaps this is where the Fire and Emergency Services Authority has a better understanding than the Department of Housing and Works. As the lead authority and the experts, they would know.

Mr S.R. HILL: Just following on from that and taking a different tack, other agencies, like CALM, hold big tracts of land throughout regional WA. FESA is suggesting that they also implement bushfire plans and things like that. What is the stance of the union on that? Should all those government agencies be held to account, like private landowners?

Mr Bowers: Once again, it is our view that the fire responsibilities be transferred to the authority. As the lead authority and the experts in the area, we believe that it is FESA's responsibility. They are the supreme, if you like, authority in the state. CALM, without being disparaging, deals with parks and gardens and benches, but at certain times, where property or lives are going to be threatened, it comes down to fire and rescue or FESA. We say that the responsibility ought to be transferred over to FESA.

The CHAIRMAN: From my point of view, when we have been travelling around talking to the various groups, CALM seems to be recognised as a very well prepared and organised -

Mrs J. HUGHES: In some areas.

The CHAIRMAN: In some areas - bush firefighter.

Mr Bowers: I think the key there is "some areas". If we can identify what those "some areas" are and weed that out and push the rest over to FESA . . . Most of these things to me sound like turf wars and not necessarily being helpful. It seems to me it would be better if one authority had the overall responsibility. FESA, as the umbrella organisation for fire and emergency services throughout the state, should have the authority.

The CHAIRMAN: How do you see that working practically with CALM? If the committee decided to recommend that it be one authority and the government took that up, do you think it would cause a fair amount of friction between CALM and FESA?

Mr Bowers: Professional jealousies are going to exist, have existed and will continue to exist. Perhaps if we departmentalise and amalgamate the three acts that FESA currently works under and make it one act, we will do away with some of the professional jealousy. When you are dealing with people, it is just very difficult to get rid of professional jealousy. Perhaps CALM ought to be brought into FESA as well.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Talking about different people being part of the emergency services, we have had a lot to talk about down south with our volunteers and our bush fire brigades and so forth. On page 2, at point 7, you support the need for FESA to have the power to both establish and cancel bush fire brigades. Give us your understanding of why you think that is necessary? Do you think it will have an impact on our volunteers?

Mr Bowers: No, I do not believe it will have an impact. Once again, FESA, as the - for want of a better word - supreme authority, ought to have the power. We are not saying that we should completely do away with local government. There should be some sort of liaison there. It is about competencies. The UFU is more worried about competency. There is a situation where FESA are at their endgame, if you like, in the country. They now want to incorporate a bilateral FRS-bush fire situation into the SES as well. We are concerned more about the competencies of bringing people into the management role. We understand that they are all very competent people, but FRS - or FESA, if you like - has provided the people and will continue to provide the people. We have the expertise. So I think the management system in the country is working quite well at the moment, where FESA liaises with local government. I think there is a synergy. I am not sure that there are too many problems in that area.

[10.10 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you have any dialogue at all with the volunteers?

Mr Bowers: With the association?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes.

Mr Bowers: No, the UFU deals strictly with its members and FRS people. We have brought the bush fire service people into our union. We will see that when they amalgamate and bring SES in as part of the management structure as well, we will try to get industrial cover for them. Once again, that is a turf war. That is not as easy as it sounds. The UFU rules will allow for that to occur. I am not sure that the CSA, or whoever they are covered by, would like to see any of their members disappear; but we have had and continue to have a very good working relationship with our volunteers. We appreciate that they are as old as we are and that they are very much needed in a state as big as ours.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So you don't feel that they are feeling threatened by this FESA push?

Mr Bowers: Everybody has been threatened by the FESA push. Shirts have changed, but people are people. Everyone identifies with their own competencies and the shirts that they wear. The fire and rescue, for example, is 100 years old. There is a history and heritage there. There is a push to shift Perth Fire Station. We started there; we do not want to leave. Moving Perth Fire Station 300 metres north seems ridiculous. We have a fire station that will take us right through this century. It is an iconic fire station. Sure, everyone feels threatened at certain times. We just believe from the perspective of FESA becoming a department that nobody's nose will actually be put out of joint. It seems to me that it will be like a department of defence. For example, when I was in the Defence Force I wore SAS badges because I was an SAS soldier and the people I worked alongside of had signals' badges, truck drivers' badges or medical badges. We all worked together with synergy. Everyone understood where they came from, and in times of emergency it is very good and handy to know exactly who you are dealing with so that you can identify readily the competencies. If you are dealing with a bush fire brigade or a Bush Fire Service person, they might not have the same expertise as an FRS volunteer when there is a house fire or a traffic accident. So we see that the

identification or markings is very important to identifying and keeping command and control of an incident.

The CHAIRMAN: In your submission on page 3, points 9 to 12, you state that there is a lack of accountability in terms of local government being able to hand over control of a fire incident to FESA at any time during an incident.

Mr Bowers: From that perspective, if FESA had control right from the word go, there would be no confusion.

The CHAIRMAN: I will give you one scenario that was put to us in a particular shire that primarily has grassfires. Predominantly they are dealt with by volunteers. Those volunteers are generally the local farmers. They object strongly to FESA taking control or command of that fire.

Mr Bowers: Why?

The CHAIRMAN: Because they put the argument that they are actually on the spot; they are out on their farms; they can respond faster; they do not have to ring anyone; they see a fire; they go to it; they contact their council or shire, if I remember rightly; and they coordinate other units into that area. They lay claim that they have never had a fire run more than eight hours, I think.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Eight hours.

Mr Bowers: Once again, that sounds to me like a turf war issue. Traditionally, if the FRS turned up and it was the lead combat authority, let us say in a chemical spill, command and control would go down to the expertise. If you are the first-arriving appliance, you combat the fire. If FESA has overall control of that, there is no need for it to actually take over; it is the lead authority, it is the combat authority. If the local farmers' association is doing a good job, why would we actually intervene or take over? If it gets out of hand, of course, because FESA would be the lead combat authority, then it could assume control; you do not always have to take control.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So in that account, if the volunteer brigade was on the spot, yet FESA was still technically in control, and if, unfortunately, someone was caught up, injured or whatever, would FESA then have responsibility or the people combating the fire?

Mr Bowers: No, if FESA were the lead authority, it would assume control, or it would assume responsibility.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It would assume responsibility?

Mr Bowers: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Even though it is nowhere near the scene?

Mr Bowers: If it wants to assume control and be the lead authority, the buck stops with it. You cannot push the buck down onto the local farmers' association. If it has fought the blaze, lost somebody and FESA has assumed control, the buck would stop with it.

The CHAIRMAN: I think that was actually the fear of the farmers in this particular area. They were saying that if FESA had the responsibility, there is no way that they would delegate their lads to have control and, therefore, they are going to have to wait until a FESA operative gets down there and attends -

Mr Bowers: That would be impractical, do you not think?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes, that is what they are worried about.

The CHAIRMAN: That is their concern. We are talking about volunteers. As far as they are concerned, they have managed the situation for as long as fire brigades have been there. They have managed it in this way and what they are saying to us is that any change to that will cause some of those volunteers to walk away, because they just will not accept that FESA can get there on time and they will not have the responsibility.

Mr Bowers: That may be the case at the moment. That might not always be the case. If FESA expands - if it does take control and the organisation grows - it will have district managers, area managers, who will be in the area, and that would be part of an overall strategic plan. It is one thing to say that you want to be the lead authority and not put anyone down there. It seems to me that if you are going to be the lead authority, you would want to have somebody in the area who can readily respond.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA has district officers now around the place, but for argument's sake - I am trying to think of the spot - I think the district officer with responsibility for Nannup, I think it was, or Kojonup -

Mrs J. HUGHES: Kojonup.

The CHAIRMAN: - actually resides in Albany, which is, what, a two-hour drive or something away?

Mr Bowers: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And they are asking how he is going to respond sufficiently.

Mr Bowers: Geographically we are a very difficult state to manage.

The CHAIRMAN: Yes, and that was their concern.

Mr Bowers: And we have to be cognisant of the fact that we are a massive state. There are probably going to be issues like that. I do not think the farmers, for example, have anything to fear from FESA if FESA became the lead authority, the combat authority, for all things fire. When I was a station officer in Wanneroo, for example, while Joondalup was being built, a third-alarm bushfire would normally be taken over by a district officer. He would have to come from town. If I am doing a good job out there, he does not need to turn up. I take responsibility then, and I do not think that that will change in the country. I do not think anyone has anything to fear from FESA. I do not think the farmers' association has anything to fear. I do not think the VFS has anything to fear. FESA will take responsibility. If it is doing a good job down there, even if there is a two-hour lag in arrival, that should not make any difference.

The CHAIRMAN: So operationally you would say that things would basically continue as they are, except that everyone across the state would understand that ultimately FESA has responsibility for any fire.

Mr Bowers: The buck stops with it.

The CHAIRMAN: And it will send its resources and delegate resources from anywhere around the state to a fire.

Mr Bowers: Certainly; that has been its endgame since 1998.

[10.20 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: In the submissions, reference is made to FESA taking control over major incidents. Do you believe that there is a point at which an incident actually changes from a minor incident to a major incident?

Mr Bowers: That can be as simple as a change of wind.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Okay. Therefore, it is just subjective to the day or the person doing the call.

Mr Bowers: Absolutely. Fire and emergency incidents are dynamic. They are inherently dangerous. We understand that. When do they change from a minor to a major incident? That is pretty much in the lap of -

Mrs J. HUGHES: Whoever is there.

Mr Bowers: - whoever is there.

Mrs J. HUGHES: When we were in New South Wales, they were talking about the incident changing according to the number of agencies that become involved in a particular incident. Do you see that as a good guideline?

The CHAIRMAN: It is not just agencies; it is the amount of resources that are sent to -

Mrs J. HUGHES: The input. For instance, if the bushies are there and they are doing their thing, and then all of a sudden they need to call in CALM, that actually changes the incident from minor to the next one. Would you see that as a good guideline?

Mr Bowers: That is a stepping up, if you like, of resources and input. That comes down to management plans. What is required are strategic management plans, whereby you understand that an incident escalates by the amount of equipment, personnel etc that is poured into it. At some point the local bushfire service officer is going to hand over to FRS or FESA. Now, I cannot sit here this morning and tell you at what point that actually happens. In the metropolitan area, it goes on the number of pumps, for example. It is a one-pump fire; then it's a two-pump fire. A three-pump fire usually goes to a DO, so there is an actual upgrading.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So there are classifications.

Mr Bowers: Yes. It is upgraded depending on the incident itself.

The CHAIRMAN: You are saying that there is an appropriate balance between centralised control and local management of emergency incidents. What impact do you see some of your recommendations having on that balance; for example, response measures being overseen by qualified authority personnel and/or transfer of control to the authority in major incidents etc?

Mr Bowers: One of the issues that FRS has at the moment is competencies. We have a situation in which, in the regional areas, BFS officers who are not trained in structural firefighting are looking after essentially bushfires, and now they are managing areas where there could be -

Mr S.R. HILL: Houses, sheds.

Mr Bowers: - houses, sheds, traffic accidents, any nature of incidents. We have a real concern about the competencies. If SES people come into the organisation, we have a problem if they are going to run BA drills, for example, with local FRS volunteers. We have real concerns about competencies, particularly if people are going to take over professional fire stations. There was an incident recently in which a Bush Fire Service area manager took over as the district manager, and that included Bunbury Fire Station. The union recognised that perhaps he was not qualified to take over or manage a professional fire station, so he was shifted. We do not wish to put a union member's nose out of joint, but it comes down to competencies. We are acutely aware that we do not want these people exposing themselves to being out of their depth.

Mr S.R. HILL: So how do we manage those volunteers? This is a big issue in the mid-west at the moment, an ongoing issue with level 2 tunics. Volunteers are saying that they want access to that training.

Mr Bowers: This is an organisation in its infancy. There will be teething problems, and we have to work through those problems. It will take several years to get everyone qualified. The FRS itself has a huge problem with staff. We cannot complete our own training. I have raised this issue many times. Training is falling down and it will be the same in the country. You need qualified, competent people to run training programs. You need equipment that is going to stand up to the test. This is an organisation that starts out as an umbrella and is absorbed. In the corporate world it would be called a hostile takeover. There are teething problems that will take some time to sort out. The UFU is concerned about competencies. We do not want to see, for example - and this is no slight upon anyone - SES people taking over career fire stations. We do not want to see Bush Fire Service people taking over career fire stations. These are issues that have to be sorted. That is why

identity is very important, so that we understand exactly who is who, what they are wearing, and how much training they have had. It will take some time to sort through this.

The CHAIRMAN: I think that that is one of the concerns of volunteers. They are of the view that they have been doing this for however many years, and then all of a sudden career firefighters - even if they show up at a fire, whether it is a bushfire, grass fire, or whatever - take over and say, "We are the experts in this; just move along." That seems to be one of their greatest fears.

Mr Bowers: Just because a career firefighter shows up, it does not necessarily mean that they need to take over. If the incident is being managed properly, does he need to take over? He is there to oversee. If they are doing a good job, why would he interfere? I think, once again, this comes down to pride; it comes down to turf.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I have a question about local government. You mentioned that they should continue to take care of preparedness measures such as fire breaks, inspections and those types of things. Do you see that local government would be seen purely as the workhorse for the organisation, without any responsibility as such - basically the collection agency and the enforcement agency?

Mr Bowers: That is a good question. The recommendation of the UFU is that FESA continues as the supreme authority in all things fire related and emergency related. Local governments are on the spot; they have the resources to issue the permits for firebreaks etc. I do not think that that needs to change. The UFU's position is that that does not need to change; that FESA can continue to do that. There is a FESA area district manager that can liaise with local governments. I do not believe there should not be any problems there.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So infringements and those sorts of things would remain the responsibility of local governments?

Mr Bowers: Yes, and I think that that is a liaison issue with FESA representatives. They are the local government authority with responsibility for those things. When there is an incident, FESA should take over.

The CHAIRMAN: On page 5 of the submission, point 18, the UFU identifies the abolition of fire districts as a further attack on the identity of the fire service. The committee's understanding is that the fire districts were initially used to determine funding for brigades, and that new boundaries were set under the ESL that in effect negated the previous emergency services funding system, and therefore the original intent of fire districts. It has been argued that the existence of two overlapping boundaries is confusing. We are wondering if you have any further comments on that issue, or if you would like to explain it further?

[10.30 am]

Mr Bowers: The UFU recommendation is that the fire district boundaries be maintained. The only issue we have with identity - from my perspective - is not necessarily with boundaries. If FESA is the lead authority, the combat authority, and all things fire and emergency - we are worried ostensibly about our identity. We have the situation on the fringe of - not Success, the next one down -

The CHAIRMAN: Port Kennedy.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Oakford.

Mr Bowers: - where there is a bush fire station being built; they will back up FRS. We have no problems with that as long as they are not called out as the primary call-out. The Fire and Rescue Service has been around for a long time; we are the experts. We want to maintain that. Our identity is very dear to us; very important. Boundaries help establish that. If we got rid of boundaries, then we would have the fire district of Western Australia. That is massive.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Who should manage and determine those boundaries, do you think?

Mr Bowers: Some people would say that it should be the ESL. That might determine whether you were category 1 or 2. I think FESA should determine the boundaries.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is interesting. The committee travelled to New South Wales and we spoke to a very learned chap there by the name of Phil Coperburg. He explained that the boundaries in New South Wales are set in meetings between him and Greg Mullins. Do you think that there might be benefit in that in determining the boundaries in WA? When you say that it is the ESL that does it, it just becomes a matter -

Mr Bowers: Are you saying that it is a gentlemen's agreement?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Between rural and metro.

The CHAIRMAN: They have a different system there; they have the rural and the metropolitan. Phil runs the rural fire service and Greg Mullins runs the metro.

Mr Bowers: He does an excellent job, by the way. Coperburg, that is.

Mr M.J. COWPER: They both do.

The CHAIRMAN: I think they actually have two systems. In Western Australia, we may ultimately wind up with one system.

Mr Bowers: One system seems easier to manage. We do not have the same topography as New South Wales. I lived in New South Wales for seven years. The topography there is completely different. The population density is completely different. There are many factors in New South Wales that do not apply to Western Australia. We are a little flatter; you can see over the horizon here. The circumstances are different. From that perspective, one authority makes sense here.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I have a question about the boundary issues. The metropolitan area continues to shift outwards, certainly areas such as Wanneroo, Swan and Gosnells. For instance, there are places in Wanneroo that do not have professional firefighters although it is part of the metropolitan area. How do you see the boundaries being set, as the suburbs are continually pushing outwards at a large rate?

Mr Bowers: Come and talk to the UFU; we will tell you how to set your boundaries. There is a big problem in the metropolitan area. There are gaps in turnout times. One of the major problems with the FRS at the moment is that we have the longest turnout times in Australia. Fire stations have been replaced. I think that the community believes there have been a significant number of new fire stations built. There have, but they have simply been replaced. For example, between Perth, Bedford, Belmont, Duncraig and Osborne Park there is a black hole where turnout times are in excess of 13 minutes. The international standard for turnout times is six minutes. Just look at the fire recently in Morley at WA Salvage. That fire was well under way in seven minutes. We have argued for years that, as they have replaced stations, they have shifted them out. The resource is very skinny. We are stretched to the max. FESA knows this and so does management. We have identified it on a number of occasions. There is a problem at Butler. As you know, they do not have a 24-hour service at the moment. Joondalup is covering that in the evenings. To get from Joondalup to the other end of the Butler district takes in excess of 20 minutes. I do not want my kids living in Butler. I do not want them being involved in a traffic accident up there one evening because we are not getting there.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned that many of the stations have just replaced old stations. I know that Osborne Park has gone to Collingwood Street from Main Street. You mentioned Duncraig. Surely that is a brand new fire station that has not replaced anything else.

Mr Bowers: It replaced Balcatta and it shifted eight kilometres to the north west. It is back to the ocean. They have to travel back to where they came from. Bedford has been shifted out to Malaga. The Perth fire district has been extended. During my campaign to get the job, I drove through the metropolitan fire districts extensively and did about 4 000 kilometres. I identified all the holes. I

informed FESA of the numerous holes they have in their fire districts. It is a real concern. For example, some of the C-class hospitals in Bedford that were traditionally covered from Walter Road are now covered by the Perth fire station. It took me 38 minutes to drive there one morning - in peak hour traffic, admittedly. If I had been in a fire appliance, and if we halved that, it would still be 17 or 18 minutes. If Malaga, for example, had a bush or scrub fire, and a C-class hospital went up with aged people, we could not get there in time. This is a real problem. One of the other problems with FESA is that, nationally, \$4 756 is the average - it might be \$3 800 - amount spent per thousand people on fire services. In Western Australia we spend \$959. We are the skinniest fire service in Australia, bar none. Apart from that, geographically we are stretched. We all understand that. There is a real problem in the metropolitan area. As the city backfills under urban renewal, we are bringing people back into the city, which means that roads and traffic will become congested. We are having people come back into the city itself. When I joined the fire service in 1984 there were 35 firefighters and 12 station officers in Perth. That is now down to two and eight.

The CHAIRMAN: How do we address that through our review of this legislation? You cannot cover that under legislation.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is administrative.

Mr Bowers: It is administrative, I know. These are some of the problems you are going to face. The UFU has been identifying these problems for a number of years, particularly the Perth issue and the one area appliance. They want to shift the fire station 300 metres and put it in a suburban home, basically, and have three and eight firefighters. It is simply not enough. You have just got to look out the window to see the development going on and people moving back. As they move back into the city, traffic will increase. As the density of population goes up, so does the fire loading. When I say "fire loading" I am talking about the inherent dangers. You have a fire station there that is essentially bombproof and earthquake proof; it will see to needs for the next 50 years without needing to move. A move 300 metres north is absolutely ridiculous.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I recall when that facility was built. I was a bit surprised to learn that they were going to go over to Wellington Street. In your view, what is the reason they are doing that? Is the land valuable?

Mr Bowers: No. In my view, FESA has extended its administration. They have simply outgrown the building in terms of administration. It is my personal view that they want to move 300 metres north so that they can downsize the fire service in the city, which essentially leaves it unprotected. They want to move the administration elsewhere. It is a crazy move. We have argued; I have lobbied the previous minister and the new minister. I have seen the engineer's report for the fire station. It is earthquake proof and essentially bombproof. It is in a prime location. The facilities in there are excellent. It is state of the art in terms of what it provides. It has 11 bays. As the fire service is expanded, which we will inevitably have to do in the city, it is there and ready. What will happen is that the small station they are going to build on Wellington Street will eventually not be any good. They will spend \$6 million or \$7 million. The building in Hay Street is worth about \$8 million or \$9 million. They can sell the block in Wellington Street and buy one in West Perth somewhere because as the city expands they might need another station up here.

[10.40 am]

Mr M.J. COWPER: Is there any need to have the administrative wing at the fire station?

Mr Bowers: Certainly not. We have argued for years that the operations centre and a hierarchy ought to be located at the Perth Fire Station, but that most of the administration could go. Where they go is up to them, but the operations centre should come back into operation. That should be run by the Fire and Rescue Service. The building could more than adequately cope with that.

Mr M.J. COWPER: When you say "the operations centre", do you mean the switchboard?

Mr Bowers: The communications centre, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of the 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 within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct.

Hearing concluded at 10.41 am
