

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT MANJIMUP,
WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2006**

SESSION TWO

Members

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

Co-opted Member

Mr P.D. Omodei

Hearing commenced at 10.21 am**BENNETT, MR IAN****Delivery Driver and Local Manager for State Emergency Service, examined:****BARNSBY, MR DENNIS****Farmer, Captain, Eastbrook Bush Fire Brigade and Fire for Life Inc member, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: 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?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Dennis, could you outline to the committee your role as captain of the brigade, how long you have been involved in the organisation and the strength of the brigade? Likewise I would like Ian to provide answers to the same questions.

Mr Barnsby: I was elected Captain of the Eastbrook Fire Brigade six, maybe seven, years ago. I am a hand-me-down, because my father lived on the opposite road and, for as long as I can remember, he was a fire control officer. It was more or less a hand-me-down role. I moved to another brigade and logically became a member instantly. From there I was elected Captain of the Eastbrook Fire Brigade after someone else retired.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How much plant, equipment and manpower does the fire brigade have?

Mr Barnsby: We currently have 40-plus members. We have five firefighting slip-on units, plus the normal farming firefighting unit. My son and I have one. He spends a lot of time on the vehicle this time of the year because it is our own privately-owned unit that we use for other purposes.

Mr Bennett: I have been involved with the SES for 20 years. I have been the local manager; I am into my second year as local manager here. Through my time with the SES I have had varied roles, from communications officer to transport officer and so on. Our main roles are general rescue, storm damage, search and flood boat. We also assist other organisations as required. We have about eight or nine members at the moment. We are in the middle of preparing for a recruiting drive. We have two vehicles, a general purpose rescue trailer and other equipment. We have the capability of calling on flood boats from surrounding neighbouring units.

Mrs J. HUGHES: A number of local governments are proposing that FESA take over part or all of a local government's bushfire responsibilities. These responsibilities include supporting and administering bushfire brigades and the like. Do you have any comment?

Mr Barnsby: Yes. I personally believe that the relationship that the bushfire brigades have with CALM does not need to be interfered with by anyone at all. In the situation of a bushfire, I wonder

how long it would take FESA to get to wherever. If we had somebody of quality based in Manjimup, for argument's sake, I cannot see how FESA could get to our area and take control of the fire when the local bushfire brigade is on the job. In the four or five fires that we have fought, we have been on the job instantly - and I mean very very quickly. I cannot see the situation ever changing. We are in a small-sized area surrounded by CALM and unallocated land. It does not take long for a fire to go through your place, if that happens to be case, and it is on CALM land. Why would we need FESA to handle the fire when it has no idea of the surrounding areas, water supply and terrain? It also does not have much in the way of machinery. CALM has everything and the relationship between the bushfire brigades and CALM in our area is excellent.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Given the fact that you are pretty close to CALM, how important is local knowledge? Is that knowledge spread evenly across CALM and the brigade? Do the brigades have more knowledge, and how important is that?

Mr Barnsby: I think it is very important for the simple reason that CALM is aware of the area. Its officers stay some length of time and they become very acclimatised to the area. They know what runs where; they know what happens, when it happens and how it happens. I cannot speak highly enough of CALM for what it has done when we have had problems. The best people who can manage the area that you live in are the people who are there.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: If the government passed legislation and FESA became the primary body that controls major incidences and it delegated that power to CALM - in most cases, that is what would occur here - surely that would not be a problem.

Mr Barnsby: That would not be a problem. As far as I am concerned, there should be only one fire body outside the town sites, and that body should be CALM.

The CHAIRMAN: That is in this area of Manjimup?

Mr Barnsby: I can speak only for our shire. I have very little knowledge of the surrounding shires and their terrain.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you see a problem with a scenario whereby FESA would be the overarching body that controlled emergency services across the state, including fires, and it delegated to either local governments or CALM - in the case of Manjimup, I assume it would be CALM? Is such a suggestion workable?

Mr Barnsby: Yes, I do see that as a workable proposition. There is no better protector of the forest in our area than CALM.

The CHAIRMAN: Operationally it would stay as is, but the ultimate responsibility would come back to FESA.

Mr Barnsby: I know it is not possible, but I would like to see the "F" left off "FESA".

The CHAIRMAN: For a number of reasons FESA is proposing that it be re-established as a department of emergency services. This would mean the removal of "fire" from the corporate name. FESA's argument is that that removal is appropriate because fire is just one of the many emergencies that volunteers attend to across the state. There has been objection to this on the basis of a loss of identity. Should the authority be re-established as a department? Do you have a view on a name for such a department?

Mr Barnsby: I am just a local farmer. Names do not bother me. However, departments must work and they must work well, otherwise they are just a bloody nuisance. I have a real problem with it, but I do not know what the name should be.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Bennett, from the viewpoint of the SES, do you have any issue with turning FESA into a department?

Mr Bennett: I think the money that might be spent on changing FESA to another name could be better spent on volunteers. FESA should be left as a corporate body over the top of the individual departments that are there now. Why change the SES, fire and rescue or bushfires to another name? Leave them as they are and put the money where it is needed.

Mr S.R. HILL: Ian, you mentioned that you have eight or nine members and that you are going to undertake a recruitment drive in the local community in the next few weeks.

Mr Bennett: We have been talking with fire and rescue and we will talk to bushfires. We will be doing a combined recruitment drive with the ambulance service also.

Mr S.R. HILL: With the ESL funding that has come through since 2001, what impact has that had on the local SES being able to purchase equipment etc?

Mr Bennett: It has been of great benefit. We have never had it so good really. We have had money to buy equipment.

Mr S.R. HILL: Can you tell the committee what equipment you have purchased?

Mr Bennett: We have acquired new radios and other items for the welfare of the unit, including urns.

Mr S.R. HILL: Does the ESL mean that your members have been freed from holding cake stalls and running raffles etc?

Mr Bennett: That is right. We are not doing the fundraising that had to be done prior to the ESL. The ESL has been a godsend. It has really benefited us.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Ian, does the SES work with the town brigade during, say, a storm? It is a shame that representatives from that organisation are not here because it has its own rescue equipment, including a rescue trailer. Do you work together or do you work independently?

Mr Bennett: We have started talking to each other. Working with the SES is something that we need to do more of, along with bushfires. We can free up officers to get back out onto the field to do what they do out there and we can carry out operations, communications, welfare and other items. The agencies in town really need to work together to benefit the community and the shire.

The CHAIRMAN: You said that the ESL has been a great help to you. The current ESL process calls for local government to complete the grant scheme application form for SES unit funding.

Mr Bennett: That has been of great concern to us. If it goes back to FESA, I can see a relationship forming between the shire and ourselves. It has been stretched in different ways and with different opinions. I have seen the way it is holding the funds and not understanding completely the information it requires from us and what we want from it.

The CHAIRMAN: So you agree that it should go back to FESA and that you apply straight to FESA and FESA gives the money straight to you rather than going through the local government?

Mr Bennett: That would be of benefit to us.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you believe there would still need to be a reporting system back to the local government to inform it of your requirements and capabilities?

Mr Bennett: I have found it hard to find out why the shire needs to know a lot of the things that we do. I do not have a problem with letting it know. We must work more closely, which we have not been doing. We need a reporting system because public funds are being spent. There certainly needs to be a report back to the public.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Are you a member of the LEMAC?

Mr Bennett: Yes, I am.

Mr M.J. COWPER: With an organisation such as yours that has limited staffing, do you consider that training is the key to attracting people to your organisation? Most people try to divert away from the administration aspect of an organisation. If administration training were available for organisations such as the SES, would that be of benefit?

Mr Bennett: It certainly would be. The administration aspect is something that is pushed aside. If we are lucky enough to recruit someone who is good at that, that is fine, otherwise we are battling. Training in administration and reporting procedures would be of benefit to all clubs and organisations.

The CHAIRMAN: How do you envisage we could improve emergency services across the state or in your local area?

Mr Barnsby: On the emergency services side of things, I feel I do not really have any input. I am not qualified to speak because I have no training at all. My daughter is very involved. I often hear her go on about rescues at Bluff Knoll and so forth. All I can say is that it appears to me to be pretty organised. She is always at training camps. Fires are vastly different today than when I first started fighting them as a 16 or 17-year-old. They do not last much more than 35 or 40 minutes. It is either in your property and then it is out and gone, or it is someone else's headache. It is obviously CALM's headache. Given that I have relations in the organisation from top to bottom, I cannot see how we could improve its ability and the way it works. It is not something I consider to be at our back door.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: The brigade probably does not have a lot to do with the SES.

Mr Barnsby: In our community there might be one or two ambulance drivers. Because of the QA system under which we operate, most of us have done some medical training first, such as a first aid course.

Mr Bennett: We need to work closer together. Dennis says he has no skills, but the skills Dennis has are vastly different from ours. He has the control of fires, while we have input into searches. By working together we can cross-train. All training is nationally recognised. Certainly there is scope for us requiring their assistance in times of storms and searches and so on as there is from them requiring assistance from us during fires that go on for a long period. Working together will be the key to that.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How do your communications line up with CALM's and the brigades'? Is there any connection?

Mr Bennett: Our unit has four communications. We have CALM and bushfire radios in our vehicles and at our headquarters. We often use CALM radio because it is a better system than our system. We used it on the weekend for a search. The new radio system has been vastly improved and will give us the capability of talking to the CB radios that some farmers may have in their fire units, right through to aircraft flying overhead. It is a completely new and state-of-the-art system that is being trialled in Western Australia.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Dennis, what do you have in the brigades?

Mr Barnsby: Ninety-five per cent of the Land Cruisers and Nissan Patrols have CB radios. In our farming area, we know the six channels that seven or eight farmers operate on. We normally go to our bushfire control officer's channel if we are at a fire and he instructs us to go straight to the fire.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Does that channel hook up to CALM?

Mr Barnsby: No, we have only two CALM radios in our area. Needless to say, our chief bushfire control officer has one and there is one on the highway.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you happy with the level of support you receive from local government and FESA?

Mr Bennett: The support is there. It is a matter of asking for what we require. There is communication between each one. I know we can get on to the shire and organise what we require. It is the same with FESA; we can get straight on to it. We have full support there.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any other matter you wish to raise with the committee? Is there anything you want to raise that we have missed?

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Dennis, would you comment on the issue of controlled burning and the need for co-ordination? Is that an issue for the brigade?

Mr Barnsby: Controlled burning is an issue for everyone around the state. It surprises me that we have a fire about once a week. This week we had a fire in Neerabup, a suburb of Perth. Why? Have we not learnt over the years that we need to do controlled burning? We need to do more controlled burning than we are currently doing. I was outside last night - I suppose I am a queer character - and I chose to have a look at the sky show, which was for free. It did not cost the shire a cent. We would have copped four or five lightning strikes in our area last night. We definitely got one, because my son and I were looking at it through our binoculars. What do you do at 9.30 at night?

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Call CALM.

Mr Barnsby: It is interesting. We need to do more burning. There must be less interference. I wish I could emphasise that more strongly to the committee. There must be more controlled burning. I read in the paper last week that 256 000 acres have been done. Do you know how big the Manjimup shire is?

Mr Bennett: It is 860 000 acres.

Mr Barnsby: And yet we have done only 256 000 acres across Western Australia. It does not make sense that we do not carry out more controlled burning. The other issue is unallocated crown land. No-one wants to do anything with it. Two of the fires I have been to in the past 11 years have been on the same piece of land that no-one wants to burn. My mother died in 1990 and that was the last time it was burnt. I wish she were still alive because it would have been burnt twice in the meantime and we would not have had to waste Christmas Eve chasing a fire. Why are we looking to the old people? They know; and yet we can get nowhere today. We definitely need more controlled burning. I know that pressure is coming from the greens. The pressure in this shire is now out of grapevines. I did not enjoy it when last year we lost a volunteer from Bridgetown. I had played football against that young fellow and enjoyed his company. It will happen in our area some day. Our area has been very fortunate, believe me. All I can say is that we need more controlled burning; hence, my love of CALM will never die.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Do you participate in the prescribed burning with CALM as volunteers?

Mr Barnsby: While I was on the shire - I have been off it for nearly five years - a CALM officer drew up a prescribed burn and we burnt the Collins reserve, which was some 80 acres. Two of those involved were CALM people, the rest were locals. If you think that we have time to leave farming and look after the bush for the government, I have news for you. However, on the other hand, I also have grandkids and a wife, and I do not need a fire roaring through and down the hill because suddenly it could be my grandkids over the road and then my wife and I who are in danger. We did it. The following year we did the reserve along the road. I was unable to get to the next one, but our chief bushfire control officer did another two. It seems to me that the government wants to sit back and let us do it. Yes, we operated with CALM through that burn. We had 26 then.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I have another leading question. Obviously CALM has a certain strength and there are certain times of the year that are ideal to burn. With good planning and some kind of a proper hazard reduction plan for the whole region that combines all the resources, surely we would be able to burn more than we do now. Do you agree with that? Is that a valid statement?

Mr Barnsby: You can combine all the resources you like, Mr Omodei. If you send people to Esperance from Pemberton for 10 days - that happened last year - and after five days of being home they are sent to the hills outside of Perth for 10 days, where are your resources? Our resources mean that we are chasing and have a total inability to do control burning, and one day - I hope it is not my brothers - they will be cooked. It will happen. You only have to talk to certain people who were at the last fire in Perth. There was no need for that fire the other week from Dwellingup to Collie. It could have been controlled if a little bit more had been done. If we continuously send our resources from Manjimup and Pemberton to fires all over the state, how can we get work done in our area? Those figures are right too - they are spot on. It was 10 days in Esperance.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you referring to CALM officers or the volunteer fire brigade people?

Mr Barnsby: I am referring to CALM people. If you start taking one or two gangs, as they call themselves, out of the area, some of these people get uptight when they do not see their families for periods of time.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What sort of a reduction in the numbers of CALM personnel has there been in Manjimup in recent times? Perhaps I am directing this question to the wrong person.

Mr Barnsby: I cannot answer that.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Have you seen a reduction?

Mr Barnsby: Yes, there has been a reduction in personnel since the election of the current government six years ago.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Terrible mob!

Mr Barnsby: You asked for it. I sat with a group of newly-elected government members who were creating 168 new jobs. However, they removed 170. Two people ended up out of work. I would love to have the four people back there.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I refer to liability issues for the volunteers, especially with private equipment. Do you believe new legislation may impinge on liability issues?

Mr Barnsby: America here we come! That is the easiest way to put it. My immediate friends in the farming community and I are insured 24 hours a day unless we are proven to be drunk. That is the best insurance. I would not waste my time - I hope I never get injured - applying to the government. The paperwork and the rubbish you would go through would be a total waste of time.

Mr Bennett: With the issue of personal equipment, we tend to lack certain equipment which means that people tend to provide that equipment themselves. It is equipment that we take in because we know we need it and it is awkward to purchase through the unit or whatever. We have had a few break-ins that have resulted in a loss of personal items. They have been replaced by FESA. We are in a position in which we have two insurance policies; one through local government for items purchased through the ESL and then we have to insure other items through FESA, items that it has purchased. During a break-in not long ago we lost some stuff. I am not sure of the amount. Half of it was not enough to be covered under the shire's insurance because the excess was in excess of the items. In turn, that meant that the equipment was lost. We need everything to be insured by one policy rather than splitting it. If everything had been put together, it would have been covered because the amount would have been over the excess. We get hit with two excesses with the insurance policies.

Mr Barnsby: As I travel into Manjimup, I do not like looking at the mess that the fire caused in April last year. I hate to see black forests. I would prefer to see managed areas.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for giving us the benefit of your experience and knowledge. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for your correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced and the sense of evidence cannot

be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit supplementary submissions 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 10.55 am
