

ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT THE MIDLAND TOWN HALL, MIDLAND
FRIDAY, 10 AUGUST 2001**

FIFTH SESSION

Members

Mr McRae (Chairman)
Mr Day (Deputy Chairman)
Mr Bowler
Mr Masters
Mr Murray

JONES, MR GREGORY ALLEN,
Brigade Captain, Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade,
examined:

WARNOCK, MR MICHAEL JOHN,
Brigade Fire Control Officer, Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade,
examined:

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the House require. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Thank you both very much for coming. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Warnock: Yes, I have.

Mr G. Jones: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Warnock: Yes.

Mr G. Jones: Yes, we do.

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

Mr Warnock: Yes, we have.

Mr G. Jones: Yes, we have.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you understand all aspects of that information?

Mr Warnock: Yes, I did.

Mr G. Jones: Yes, we did.

The CHAIRMAN: For the record, can you state the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

Mr Warnock: I am here as the fire control officer of the Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade.

Mr G. Jones: I am here in my capacity as the brigade captain of Stoneville Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee received the submission prepared by Mr Jones. Do you propose to make any amendment to it?

Mr G. Jones: I wish to give further evidence at a later date, but not at this stage.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it your wish that the submission we have received be incorporated as part of the transcript of evidence of this hearing?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you like to amend your submission?

Mr Warnock: Greg compiled the submission. He is here as the captain and as a parent of one of our members who was involved in the issue, so he is acting in two capacities. As Greg prepared the submission, he has the full details.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Jones, would you like to speak to your submission before we ask questions?

Mr G. Jones: Certainly. We are here today to present ourselves to the Economics and Industry Standing Committee regarding the inquiry into the Bellevue hazardous waste fire and to give evidence to support our submission. We assume that all members of the committee have examined our submission and are aware of the issues we have raised and the deep concerns we have about the state of the site at Waste Control Pty Ltd, the combating of the chemical fire and surrounds, and the post-crisis management for those involved. This was not an ordinary fire for our bushfire volunteers. Our members were among the worst exposed to the effects of toxic chemical smoke, fallout and waterborne pollution. Our members were placed, without their consent or knowledge, directly downwind of the fire without any proper protective equipment such as breathing apparatus, chemical suits or specialised training. Our aim today is to convey to the committee some of our findings, fears, needs and recommendations in the hope that this event, or any similar event, never occurs again. We intend to provide some of our evidence to the committee today. However, it is most likely that this will not be completed today in the limited time available and due to the need for evidence to be taken from other key witnesses. The submission and the evidence we will give are restricted to material relating directly to the terms of reference of the standing committee, and we are well aware of our responsibilities under a parliamentary inquiry. Some of our evidence will also need to be given in camera to protect our sources of information. We will also require a facility to enable telephone conferencing or videoconferencing so vital evidence can be given by a witness who is currently overseas. That evidence will also need to be given in camera.

We have looked at this in three segments: prior to the fire, combating the fire and post the fire. Today we have time to deal with only the period prior to the fire.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr Jones, you should feel relaxed about that. If there is a need for you and Mr Warnock to appear again so we can take more oral evidence, we will make that time available.

Mr G. Jones: We appreciate that, Mr Chairman. We do not intend to focus too much on the situation leading up to the fire. That is obviously the interest of other groups. However, we have tried to establish what knowledge the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia had of the site prior to the fire. We have obtained documents - that information is included in our submission - regarding the approval of \$100 000 for Waste Control to remove 1 000 drums of chemicals. That document contains evidence that the Environmental Protection Authority, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Water and Rivers Commission, the Water Corporation and FESA jointly sanctioned the proposal for the continuation of the storage and processing operations on-site at Waste Control. We have also acquired documents showing that various fire inspections were carried out years before the fire. FESA was well aware of the state of the site as far back as 1995, but we believe there were reports from before that time. In July 1999, the Midland Fire Station attended a major chemical spill at the site operated by Waste Control. We have reports of that incident from FESA in our documents. Those documents confirm that FESA and others must have known what chemicals were on-site for processing before granting their approval for the facility to continue operations and that the operators had failed to comply with the legal requirements and had breached the operating standards that were set.

Mr DAY: Did you say that FESA gave approval for this activity to occur on the site?

Mr G. Jones: It jointly sanctioned that to go through.

Mr DAY: Did it have a role in approving these sorts of operations? My understanding is that that is a responsibility of the Department of Mineral and Petroleum Resources. I would expect FESA to provide advice to that department. However, if you know otherwise, can you make that clear?

Mr G. Jones: The cabinet papers show that FESA jointly sanctioned that. Those departments gave approval, so it stands to reason that FESA would have understood what was going on. The other

reports from FESA indicate that it had knowledge of the waste spill on-site in 1999, and it would have had a fair amount of insight about what was on the site.

The CHAIRMAN: Would it be fair to characterise it not so much as an authorising agent but as an expert agent; that is, it was providing expert advice on the best course of action, rather than being the authorising agency.

Mr G. Jones: I cannot comment on the role of each department or on the approval, but I think that the Fire and Emergency Services Authority would have had a fair amount of influence on this site, given its history.

The CHAIRMAN: I think you are right.

Mr G. Jones: We also are aware that the Midland Fire Station conducted a fire inspection of the site approximately one month before the fire and reported that the site contained quantities of liquid mercury in large glass jars in the house. Also, large quantities of nickel-cadmium and lead batteries were among the drums stacked in the yard.

The CHAIRMAN: Where is that report?

Mr G. Jones: I do not have the report in writing. I learnt of it at a debrief meeting held at FESA House after the fire. At that meeting one of the fire officers from the Midland Fire Station reported that he had conducted an inspection a month before the fire. He had deep concerns about the pickled onion-sized glass jars of mercury.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you say "large quantities"? Is that what you quoted?

Mr G. Jones: I am using his words at that meeting; that is, there were quantities of liquid mercury in large glass jars.

The CHAIRMAN: Stored in the house?

Mr G. Jones: Stored in the house.

The CHAIRMAN: They were stored not in the yard, but in the house.

Mr G. Jones: The glass jars were in the house; correct. Also, the nickel-cadmium and lead batteries were a problem. We learnt at a later stage that the Midland Fire Station had developed a fire plan in the event of a fire, which was located in a red canister outside the front of the gate, and that there was a Hazmat sign. We have seen photographs of that, which were presented by Trevor Wigg from FESA. Questions that we need answers to on this issue -

The CHAIRMAN: Before you continue, what would a typical fire management plan that would be put into a canister contain?

Mr G. Jones: Similar to the dangerous goods requirement, it would need a map of the site showing the entry and exit gates, the position of fire hydrants and sprinkler systems, details of any fuel storage and gas cylinders, and things that are normally on a site. In a case like this, I would expect to find details of storage stockpiles -

The CHAIRMAN: That is an inventory of chemicals?

Mr G. Jones: That is separate; it is not part of the fire plan. A fire plan would have a method of combating the fire. Separate from that, under the Explosives and Dangerous Goods Act there is a requirement for a manifest to be placed in the canister. That would be required on a daily basis and would detail -

The CHAIRMAN: It would be updated daily?

Mr G. Jones: Daily, yes. My background is in storage and transport.

The CHAIRMAN: It is good to be asking you these questions.

Mr DAY: Do you work in that area?

Mr G. Jones: I am currently unemployed, but at the time of the fire I was the transport manager for P&O Trans Australia in Fremantle. I have a dangerous goods qualification, so I am aware of the requirements. Certainly, the fire plan would need details of all the chemicals that are held on-site, as well as material safety data sheets for those chemicals, so that any agency attending the scene could gather the information and know immediately how to fight the fire and what precautions to take.

There are questions to which we would like answers. We would like to see the details of the fire plan that FESA or any other authorities or agencies had in case of a fire at that site. We would like to know when the site was clearly marked as a hazardous materials site and whether there was a dangerous goods manifest detailing the chemical storage on-site at the front entrance gate. The facilities were there, but we do not know for sure whether they were used. We also want to know why the initial brigade - that is, Midland - ignored the established fire plan when it arrived at the fire. Our information is that it just went straight in and started combating the fire; it did not look at the fire plan.

The CHAIRMAN: Your evidence is that the brigade did not go to the canister.

Mr G. Jones: No. It just went straight through the gate and started throwing water on the fire.

Mr BOWLER: Who gave you that information?

Mr G. Jones: It was obtained at a debrief meeting held at Darlington Fire Station about two months after the fire when we had what we call a post-incident wash-up. That was attended by the Mundaring chief bushfire control officer and Trevor Wigg, who was appointed by FESA to conduct the post-incident wash-ups.

Mr BOWLER: Forgive my ignorance, but I am from the country and I do not know where Stoneville is. If there is a big fire, are you normally called out, or are other brigades normally called out before you are?

Mr G. Jones: We are one of 10 bush fire brigades within the shire of Mundaring. We are called out by a pager through the 000 system. If there is a fire, people call 000. The 000 operators then look at which district the fire is in and which will be the closest brigade to respond. They then activate the pagers. We get called to other shires' fires. We have been all over Perth. We go to Bullsbrook, Whiteman Park and Byford. We are a resource to the greater community, not just within the shire of Mundaring.

Mr BOWLER: If you had been told this was a chemical fire, would your members have worn different equipment?

Mr G. Jones: We would not have gone for a start. I do not intend to go into those aspects today; that will be part of our later evidence. However, briefly, we were called five hours after the fire started. We received the message at 4.14 am. We responded to the station on the call-out with the rostered team, the fire control officer and me as captain. The message stated -

Request for two fast attacks for mop up, go to bridge on Military Road, Bellevue . . .

It said acknowledge, gave the telephone number and was signed "Group". On receiving that call, we thought it was extremely odd at that time of the morning to be called out to a mop-up - that is just cleaning up - at Bellevue, which was an industrial and residential area outside of our gazetted fire district. It is not the first time we have been called out incorrectly by pager. Operators at the communication centre press the wrong button and activate the wrong brigade. Because it was all so odd, our fire control officer rang the FESA communication centre and asked for the background on the fire. He was told that it was a factory fire that had escaped into bushland and we were required to assist in mopping up. We were also required to go directly to the bridge on Military Road. It is normal procedure that we go to a mobile control unit or a forward control unit. We were to meet District Manager Webster from FESA and our brigades were to report directly to him. That seemed

fairly logical when we made the call. Given that it was not a wildfire situation, it was only mop-up and it was in the hands of the district manager from FESA, we decided to let the team leader and the rostered team go without either the FCO or captain because of the experience they would gain.

The CHAIRMAN: That is the two of you.

Mr G. Jones: That is us. Had it been any more serious than that, either one or both of us would have attended the fire.

The CHAIRMAN: From the information you had, you still assessed it as a mop-up, notwithstanding the fact that it was in an industrial-residential area.

Mr G. Jones: There was no mention of a chemical fire. We were told that it was a factory fire that had escaped into bushland, and that sounded logical. My son, who is a volunteer firefighter - this is his third year - was 16 years of age at the time. He had nearly two years experience at that stage, and I felt comfortable with his attending the fire based on the information we had been given.

The CHAIRMAN: All indications were that this was a low-level call-out. Is that how you would characterise it?

Mr Warnock: Yes, and from the verbal information from the communication centre.

The CHAIRMAN: The call-out and the subsequent conversations indicated that it was a low-risk incident?

Mr Warnock: It was what we call mop-up. It is just blacking out. There is very little running fire.

The CHAIRMAN: You knew the nature of the country that you would be dealing with.

Mr G. Jones: We are familiar with Bellevue. We thought it would only be a little grassland or something.

The CHAIRMAN: With a few trees lining the river and so on.

Mr G. Jones: When we are called out to help the Fire and Rescue Service of WA in this area, our experience has been that we usually just go round the edges. We are not deeply involved. Basically it belongs to fire and rescue; it controls the fire. We are just there as hired help.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it usual to take a 16-year-old to a mop-up fire?

Mr G. Jones: To any fire really. He might have been 16 years old, but there are 10 members of our brigade whose ages range between 15 and 17 years. They have done all 12 modules. Some shires require people to do only three modules. Our members are all qualified.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that the national training standards?

Mr G. Jones: It is the nationally accredited training standards. They are all qualified as firefighters. They take the same risk as anyone else. In fact, we are quite proud of these people in the community. Even at their age, they are still prepared to give to the community as firefighters. It is quite admirable that these young people do that.

Mr MASTERS: You are all volunteers, yet you received your directions at the fire from the Midland brigade - sorry, the Midland Fire Brigade was fighting the fire. Were they professional, full-time staff?

Mr G. Jones: Yes, they are. Midland Fire Brigade did not direct us.

Mr MASTERS: Yes, that was my mistake. It was fighting the original fire.

Mr G. Jones: There were a number of brigades there at that stage. There were the Belmont, Bassendean, Guildford and the City of Swan brigades.

Mr BOWLER: Is the Bassendean brigade a volunteer brigade?

Mr Warnock: Yes, Bassendean is a volunteer fire and rescue brigade and the other, as was Guildford.

Mr MASTERS: The Midland and Belmont brigades were the professional, full-time firefighters?

Mr Warnock: We are not sure how many and which fire and rescue brigades were involved, but it was of those four.

Mr DAY: One overall commander would have been a full-time person from FESA.

Mr Warnock: There should have been one incident controller for the whole fire, but we believe that was cut into two. The task of the mop-up was given to District Officer David Webster for the bush fire brigades. The other incident was under the control of the fire and rescue fire control unit.

Mr BOWLER: Your brigade was situated furthest from the fire, yet you were called. Why - because it had reached a bushfire stage and that was your expertise?

Mr G. Jones: Wooroloo, which is in our district, would have been the furthest fire brigade from the fire.

The CHAIRMAN: From this incident?

Mr G. Jones: There was a fire at Neerabup at the same time, and a lot of resources from this region were committed to the Neerabup fire. The FESA communication centre has authority to draw one brigade from the shire of Mundaring without consulting the chief bushfire control officer. Darlington Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade had been called out earlier in the night. I think it went to a false alarm. It was called immediately to assist at Bellevue. That was early in the night. Later on, the Glen Forrest, Mt Helena and Stoneville brigades were activated to assist with the fire.

Mr BOWLER: You are the only brigade that has put in a submission so far.

Mr G. Jones: That is correct.

Mr BOWLER: Are you surprised at that?

Mr G. Jones: No, not at all.

Mr BOWLER: Why?

Mr G. Jones: We have had discussions with the other brigades, and there has been a divide-and-conquer aspect to the way in which the brigades have been dealt with, the way the information has been passed -

The CHAIRMAN: By?

Mr G. Jones: By the authorities.

Mr BOWLER: By FESA?

Mr G. Jones: Through local government and through FESA. The meetings have been held in small, all-over-the-shop places.

Mr BOWLER: Did you feel under any pressure not to make a submission?

Mr G. Jones: Certainly not; I was compelled to make this submission.

Mr BOWLER: I know you were, but did you feel there was pressure coming from other areas to shut up?

Mr G. Jones: I understand some pressure not to make a submission may have been applied to some people.

Mr BOWLER: In your brigade?

Mr G. Jones: Not in our brigade. Other brigades felt differently about their exposures and their involvement. Other people did not have the wherewithal to do this. It has taken us an enormous

amount of time to put this submission together. Other people just do not have the skill base to do that.

The CHAIRMAN: This is a very substantial document, which includes sources such as cabinet minutes, communication centre communications, DEP materials and Department of Health papers. It is very comprehensive. Your observation in that regard is absolutely right: it would be very difficult for many volunteer bush fire brigades to find the resources to make such a submission. We heard evidence earlier today that there has been either a perception of intimidation or the potential intimidation of witnesses. It is passing strange, given that so many units were called in, that we receive a submission from only one unit.

Mr BOWLER: Which arrived four hours after the fire started.

The CHAIRMAN: And it was not the first there. The question Mr Bowler is pursuing is whether you are aware of any encouragement not to submit evidence to the committee or whether you were directly encouraged not to submit evidence.

Mr G. Jones: There has been a cultural approach to this by various authorities. My impression is that it has been extremely difficult to get information. Evidence will be given later at this inquiry on the post-incident management that will demonstrate clearly that people have purposely withheld information and that, in effect, we have been given the run-around.

Mr BOWLER: By FESA and the shires?

Mr G. Jones: I will need to give some of this evidence in camera to protect the sources of the information. I beg your leave not to answer that at this point.

The CHAIRMAN: If you were here this morning, you would understand from the information session that a request for in camera evidence is a matter that the committee will consider. However, we would need a submission from you directly about why that would be necessary. Taking in camera evidence puts extraordinary limitations on our ability to use and disclose that information, and it might be critical to the deliberations and findings of the committee.

Mr G. Jones: I understand what you are saying, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN: Of course, we would consider it, and we are not saying no. However, it is not our first choice.

Mr G. Jones: If it could be avoided, it would be. However, in this case, it is vital that you hear the evidence. Unfortunately, at this point it must be in camera.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you make that submission in writing as soon as possible?

Mr G. Jones: Will that submission be confidential?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mr DAY: Is that a submission that you do not want made public?

Mr G. Jones: That is correct.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that the argument that he will present to the committee?

Mr DAY: No, the submission. Mr Jones, you will need to make that very clear on the submission.

Mr MASTERS: Is it the request for a confidential submission, or is it the submission itself?

The CHAIRMAN: Are you asking that the argument that we go in camera be held in confidence?

Mr G. Jones: I have no problem with a summary of the evidence being made public.

The CHAIRMAN: I will differentiate those two matters. Without giving us the evidence, or even revealing the nature of it, when you make the submission that we go in camera, will you need to go beyond explaining that people will be at risk in a particular way to substantiate your request, which would then lead you to ask that the submission be in confidence, or are you satisfied that you can

substantiate the request and allow us to deliberate on the matter and let you know whether the evidence will be taken in camera?

Mr G. Jones: If I give you a confidential submission on this matter and allow you to deliberate on it, I am confident that you will understand our reason for asking that the evidence be taken in camera.

The CHAIRMAN: We can receive your submission and hold it as a matter of deliberation within the committee without tabling it. I will recommend that the committee follow that procedure when it comes to your request for in camera evidence. Is that clear?

Mr G. Jones: Yes.

Mr BOWLER: Will that include the names of other brigades which we should talk to and assure that either they can do the same as you are doing, or, if they want to give evidence, we would do whatever we could to ensure that no pressure is put on them.

Mr G. Jones: We have canvassed other brigades. There were 30 volunteer bush firefighters involved at the Bellevue fire. Some of those were from Kalamunda, Swan and Mundaring. There were about 14 or 15 from Mundaring and four of them were from our brigade. All of the people we have canvassed have different views on whether they should submit evidence. They are all in different positions. Some of those brigades are becoming dual registered.

The CHAIRMAN: What is dual registered?

Mr G. Jones: Dual registered means they were previously a bush fire brigade and are now a fire and rescue and bushfire brigade in one. Some people believe that it is not in their best interests to comment at this inquiry.

The CHAIRMAN: Because it might jeopardise -

Mr G. Jones: People have different feelings. We have canvassed them, and we are on our own at the moment.

Mr MASTERS: Do you believe that the four volunteers from your brigade were subjected to the highest level of interaction with pollution from the fire, or do you believe that it is possible or likely that volunteers from one or more of the other brigades were potentially as badly affected?

Mr G. Jones: Our members were placed in a position in which they received maximum exposure to the fallout. So far people have been concentrating on airborne pollution. Our people were also involved in waterborne pollution, because they were in Helena River downstream from the fire. Later we will put evidence to this inquiry to support the claims we have made.

Mr MASTERS: By evidence, do you mean chemical analyses?

Mr G. Jones: A range of evidence, which will include expert opinion.

Mr DAY: Can you summarise the crux of your overall concern?

Mr G. Jones: How the fire occurred in the first place is being dealt with by other people. The combating of the fire and the way it was mismanaged is of extreme concern to us. Every conceivable step of the process in fighting the fire was a complete failure, and continued to fail. People just continued on. They did not stop and start again; they just kept making more and more mistakes. That is one of our concerns. Our evidence will support that later.

Mr BOWLER: Even though you were not there for the first four hours?

Mr G. Jones: That is right. You will receive a report that details what happened in the fire. We have knowledge of the report and what is contained within it. That is why we can speak with some authority. To answer Mr Day's question, at the moment our main concern is about the long-term health effects of those affected. To date, people have just looked at the short-term health effects.

Our concern is for the long-term health effects of anyone exposed to the toxic fumes and pollution from the fire and what will be done to manage that.

Mr DAY: Before we digress somewhat, you said that FESA did not look at the fire plan before going in. That is your assertion.

Mr G. Jones: It is not our assertion; it is what we know from the debrief at Darlington Fire Station.

Mr DAY: Are you saying that that led to the situation in which the fire was not dealt with as effectively as it should have been?

Mr G. Jones: It was a chemical fire, and even now people are calling it a solvent or a structural fire. FESA is calling it a structural fire. I fail to see how it could be.

Mr BOWLER: What do you call it?

Mr G. Jones: I call it a chemical fire.

Mr MASTERS: Are these strict definitions that are spelt out in some form of regulation or document? You are not just inventing the word “chemical” to try to make a point? Is there a clear understanding in the minds of people involved in putting out fires that there is a big difference between a chemical fire, a solvent fire and a structural fire?

Mr G. Jones: I return to the cultural difference. Our experience since the fire has been that the authorities have downplayed every aspect of the fire. If they can call it something that does not sound quite so bad -

The CHAIRMAN: A little fire.

Mr G. Jones: Yes, or whatever.

Mr DAY: I have not heard anybody describe it in those terms.

Mr G. Jones: No, but they are downplaying it and minimising the whole issue. We have evidence that supports what we are saying, and there is some evidence in our submission. The very first letter from FESA at the debrief said that some firefighters may have been exposed to smoke. That is ludicrous. There were 30 firefighters. To my knowledge, of the 300 emergency personnel involved, 115 people submitted themselves for blood testing, of which 15 returned results above the norm - whatever that is.

Mr MASTERS: Was that for any particular chemicals that you can recall?

Mr G. Jones: Nobody has tested for any particular chemicals. There has been no protocol. The Health Department did not advise doctors on what to look for. The initial blood tests that were done at Swan District Hospital just looked for blood damage. The doctors had no idea what to look for.

The CHAIRMAN: That is cellular damage?

Mr G. Jones: No. The doctors just took a blood test.

The CHAIRMAN: They are not looking for quantities?

Mr G. Jones: The local general practitioners were not briefed on what they should be doing.

The CHAIRMAN: They were not looking for lead, cadmium or mercury?

Mr G. Jones: Nothing. They have not been looking for heavy metals, or whatever.

Mr DAY: Do you know whether they are now?

Mr G. Jones: We do not know. We are also attending private doctors, who have not been briefed either.

Mr Warnock: One of our problems is that we still do not have a full list of the chemicals that were available at the site. Part of our letters to the authorities asks for that.

Mr G. Jones: It has been six months since the fire. All we have asked for is somebody somewhere to give us a list of all the chemicals that he or she thinks or knows were at the fire, so we can use that information and make informed decisions.

Mr DAY: Was there a fire plan in the canister on-site on the night?

Mr G. Jones: According to the debrief we received, yes.

Mr BOWLER: However, it was ignored?

Mr G. Jones: Again, according to the debrief, yes.

Mr DAY: Was that debrief provided by FESA?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. It was at the Darlington Fire Station two months after the fire when we had a post-incident wash-up.

The CHAIRMAN: Does FESA manage that process of debrief?

Mr G. Jones: Yes. At that point Mr Wigg -

The CHAIRMAN: Who is Mr Wigg?

Mr G. Jones: Trevor Wigg was the officer appointed by FESA to conduct the incident analysis. Prior to his attending our meeting, he had 53 recommendations pending on the fire. I believe that at the end he had 105 recommendations. It has also come to our attention that his report was scrapped.

The CHAIRMAN: His central report or his submission to us?

Mr G. Jones: His original report was scrapped.

Mr BOWLER: By him or by his superiors?

Mr G. Jones: By his superiors.

Mr MASTERS: I commend Mr Jones for the quality of the report. It is very professional and I say, well done. His report will help us a great deal in terms of direction for this committee inquiry. I want to ask one simple but almost-impossible-to-answer question: why do you think you and the other volunteer fire brigade members were not told it was a chemical fire? How could something as basic as that not occur?

Mr G. Jones: When we went to the debrief, we did not want anyone's head on a plate; we just wanted some answers to what had happened. We wanted people to 'fess up to what went wrong and have it fixed so it never happened again. After listening that afternoon to what went wrong, how it went wrong and why it went wrong, we were just gobsmacked at how a professional, full-time organisation could get it so wrong at every step of the process. For example, when the local brigade, which drew up the fire plan, turned up at the fire, it ignored its own fire plan and went straight in.

The CHAIRMAN: The first brigade unit on the scene was responsible for drawing up the fire plan?

Mr G. Jones: That is my understanding.

Mr MASTERS: That is the Midland Fire Brigade.

Mr G. Jones: Yes. The other brigades that were called in were not diverted around the plume of smoke. They were not given directions; they actually drove through the smoke. The Bassendean and Belmont brigades could not get there because they could not see their way through the smoke, and burning 44-gallon drums were landing on the road and in properties either side of them. They called back and said that they could not attend the incident as it had another one to deal with. After two hours, there were no communications on the site because the generator that was charging the batteries in the bus was not working, so there was no radio communications. Then the units used mobile phones. The disadvantage with mobile phones is that no other crews can hear conversations

and they are not aware of what is going on. The whole thing was totally disjointed. It was just one calamity after another. I dare not use the phrase “comedy of errors” because there was nothing funny about it. However, it was just one thing after another. After we had been called out, I went home and listened to the two-way radio. I heard the chief bushfire control officer say that he was taking Stoneville brigades and he was in charge. I thought that was great and I could relax. I turned on the television at six o'clock in the morning and watched Channel Seven's *Sunrise News*, which showed footage of the Bellevue fire. There were great big fireballs and exploding drums going in all directions and a report of a major fire erupting in Bellevue, Perth. I was horrified, because I realised what our crew and my son had been sent to. That was shown at Eastern Standard Time.

The CHAIRMAN: During the daylight-saving period.

Mr G. Jones: Yes. That footage would have been taken at two o'clock in the morning and then edited, transmitted to the east and put to air. The media got it right. It could see it was a big fire and knew it was a chemical fire; yet at a quarter past four in the morning, it was still being called a factory fire and people in yellow overalls without any protection whatsoever were being sent to the site and put in the path of all the smoke.

The CHAIRMAN: On page 6 of your submission at point 5.1, under the heading “Sequence of Events”, you say that the FESA ComCen received a call at 2300 hours on 15 February and an unidentified caller stated that there was a chemical fire burning at Irwin Street, Bellevue.

Mr G. Jones: This information was gained at the debrief at Darlington station. Transcripts of all the calls were presented at that debrief. FESA has the transcripts on record. The first call that came in said that there was a chemical fire burning in Irwin Street, Bellevue. That is exact. The operator asked what type of chemicals and how many chemicals were involved. The caller replied “a shitload of chemicals” and that was it.

The CHAIRMAN: Somebody in the - we assume - general public, who must have known something about the site, was able to say that there was a chemical fire. The answer to what type of chemicals and how many chemicals were involved was “a shitload of chemicals”.

Mr G. Jones: That is right, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: That suggests two things: first, a whole lot of questions arise about the knowledge of the caller; and, secondly, in relation to the evidence that you are giving now, there is a whole series of questions about that being the first point of contact to ComCen. Do you have any thoughts about why that first bit of information did not then affect every subsequent action?

Mr G. Jones: My understanding is that the people who work at the communication centre are like air traffic controllers. They can be sitting at their console landing a plane and as soon as it is time for their swap-around, they will swap seats with somebody and the next person will continue landing the plane. That is very much the way the communication centre operates. One person took the first call, and he received that information. I believe he then went on a break. He swapped seats with the next person, but he failed to put that information up on the screen.

The CHAIRMAN: Why would that happen?

Mr G. Jones: A human error is all I can say. The first call has been logged and is on record; the transcripts are available. It was identified clearly as a chemical fire. For some unknown reason, that information was not passed on to the other operators in the communication centre. The subsequent calls about other fires - there were more than one at that stage because of the drums - just called them fires. The other operators did not get that original information.

The CHAIRMAN: Would it be true to say that, to your knowledge, subsequent callers did not identify it as a chemical fire?

Mr G. Jones: That was the evidence that was given to us at the debrief.

The CHAIRMAN: The first caller said that it was a chemical fire, but no other caller after that said that it was a chemical fire?

Mr G. Jones: No-one used the word “chemical”. That is what we have been told; that is in the transcripts.

Mr Warnock: Each 000 call is recorded as a separate incident. In this case, when 200-litre drums were landing hundreds of metres away, they became wildfires. When someone reports that fire, it becomes a separate fire. That is how there could have been confusion with the number of fires and the calls that were made.

Mr BOWLER: As well as commending you on your submission, I commend you on your courage to make a submission in the first place.

The CHAIRMAN: I note that you are dealing with this as a before, during and after submission. We have concentrated on the before period, a little on the during period and a bit on the after period. It will be our intention to invite you back at some point to continue this discussion and your submission of evidence. Before we close, is there anything you want to say about the before period?

Mr G. Jones: Our two biggest areas of concern are about what happened when combating the fire and, more importantly, what has happened since the fire. We will always be called to events and, hopefully, there will never be another Bellevue. We are in the business of fighting fires. We want to be able to fight them safely and come home safely every time. That is our focus. We have tried not to just whinge in our submission. We have tried to come up with some positive recommendations and solutions.

The CHAIRMAN: I do not sense one sentence of whingeing.

Mr G. Jones: We have tried to make some positive recommendations, so that this or any similar event never recurs. That is our motivation here.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you both very much.

[The witnesses retired.]