

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PINJARRA
FRIDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 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

Co-opted Member

Mr P.D. Omodei

Hearing commenced at 11.07 am

CAMPLIN, MR JAMES NICHOLSON

Chief Bushfire Control Officer, Shire of Murray, examined:

THOMPSON, MS CHRISTINE IRENE

Deputy President, Shire of Murray,

Chairperson, Local Emergency Management Committee, examined:

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you for allowing us to come to your town. It is very pleasing to be in my own area. I am very proud to be here. 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, and do you understand the notes attached to it?

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. As you are probably aware, we have been travelling through the south west, and Pinjarra is the last stop on our tour. We have been to Kojonup, Albany, Manjimup and Bunbury. We have been asking all the interested parties in emergency services a series of questions on the current arrangements for emergency services and how we can improve on those arrangements. A number of submissions have been put forward by various groups, including CALM, FESA and local government. Those submissions have made certain recommendations. The purpose of these hearings is to get down to the grassroots level and ask the people at the coalface how the current arrangements are impacting upon them. We will start with some local government questions. These are pretty much pro forma questions, but we have been able to elaborate on particular points as they relate to a particular locality. Mr Camplin, would you please give us a brief outline of the bushfire arrangements in the Murray district.

Mr Camplin: There are five bush fire brigades, which have been formed over the past 20 years. Each brigade has a fire control officer, a captain, lieutenants and a number of members. Each brigade has two fire units, a heavy duty unit and a light tanker unit. These were originally funded by the Shire of Murray before the ESL came into effect. The South Yunderup-Ravenswood brigade, which is situated on the Murray River at South Yunderup, has a fire boat. That is the only fire boat in this state. That is specifically for fighting fires on the Murray River delta islands, many of which are inhabited. They need to fight fires from the water because there is no way of getting a vehicle onto those islands. The brigades are run by a bushfire advisory committee. They are also governed by the local laws of the shire, and by standard operating procedures set down by the bushfire service. There is a standard training policy before firefighters are allowed onto the fire ground. There is a standard education, and then there is a further standard before people are allowed to become officers of the brigade, or fire control officers. Training is ongoing with these brigades. It is quite intense, and it is of a pretty high standard compared with the rest of the south west.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Where are your five units located?

Mr Camplin: There is a station at the West Murray hall with both a heavy unit and a light unit. There is a station on Yunderup Road at South Yunderup with a light unit, a heavy unit, an ICS trailer and the fire boat. There is a station in North Dandalup near the community hall with a heavy unit and a light tanker. There is a station in Dwellingup with a heavy unit and breathing apparatus. That is a dual FESA unit, you might say, or it is becoming that way. There is a dedicated fire station at Coolup with both a heavy unit and a light unit. There is also the town brigade in Pinjarra.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: You also have a CALM brigade in Dwellingup. How much interaction do you have with CALM in determining who will control which type of fire?

Mr Camplin: All forest fires are controlled by CALM. If CALM needs our help it will call for it through south west headquarters in Bunbury. The Dwellingup brigade has a close liaison with CALM, and it is often called upon personally to assist CALM, and that will then filter down through the system as to whether more is required.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Recently there was a fire in state forest and a number of brigades were called out. Can you give a brief outline of your role in that fire?

Mr Camplin: My role was purely as liaison. I was organising teams to go to that fire from Sunday afternoon through to Tuesday. I spent most of my time in the office at home with two phones, a computer and a radio monitoring the fire and organising crews to go to it.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: I want to ask you both a question. This is a generic question that we have been asking people as we have been travelling around, and if you could make some comments on it we would appreciate it. Both the Auditor General and the coroner have expressed concern about the current fire control arrangements in Western Australia and have criticised the fact that three bodies - local government, CALM and FESA - could be in control of a fire at the same time, particularly if the fire has crossed into different land tenures. It has been suggested that FESA be empowered to take over control of a fire from the local government or CALM when FESA considers this to be necessary. It is anticipated that this power would need to be used only two or three times a year. CALM and some local governments are opposed to this power being given to FESA. Do you have a view on that?

Ms Thompson: I represented the shire on the operations area management group for the Dwellingup-Yarloop fire, and even though that was a CALM fire and it was on private property I got the feeling at the time that FESA was quite happy for CALM to retain the lead role in that fire. There is a memorandum of understanding between our shire and CALM that if an incident escalates to a size that there needs to be a change in the lead agency from the shire to CALM or to FESA, we are happy for that to happen.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: It sounds as though you are all working cooperatively.

Ms Thompson: Yes. In our area we are functioning well.

Mr Camplin: I do not have much to add to that. We are working well. From my experience it is normally better if the lead agency that started work with the fire stays with it and the others tag along in an advisory capacity if necessary. It is also better if FESA is liaising between the bush fire brigades and the town brigades and is acting as a liaison officer to the main controllers rather than just trying to take over.

[11.20 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: As it stands, you have MOUs in place.

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: How would you feel if they were legislated for in legislation in which FESA would take control?

Mr Camplin: I think there is capacity in the present act for that to take place. There is a way for it to happen within the act. It would probably be dangerous for FESA to come along and actually take over. One of the things that came up about the fire down there was a lack of local knowledge because it was being run from a remoter area. Local knowledge is very important in controlling a fire. By all means use the expertise and the resources that are available from other areas, but I think it would be dangerous to actually come in and take over without consultation.

Ms Thompson: I think so also because we have a large area of CALM land around the estuary and up in the hills. Quite a large percentage of our shire is CALM land and, apart from some rural areas, there is a lot of land abutting CALM land. Personally I think you still need that option there, without it being regimented.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The Murray shire is unique in that you have a vast variety of potential fire conditions. You have in the hills, obviously, forest; on the flats here we have agricultural grasslands; and, as mentioned, over on the estuary we have heath-type scrubby country. Can you give us a bit of an understanding of how important it is, in the main, to have local knowledge when it comes to fighting fires?

Mr Camplin: Mainly in fighting fires in the different terrains and being able to access areas of the fire from different roads or tracks or whatever; that sort of thing. For instance, knowing that if you go into a particular area with a heavy-duty unit, then you are very likely to get it bogged because it is far too sandy for heavier trucks; or if you go through a certain area there is going to be a big drain in the way; or something like that. It is that sort of local knowledge that all our firefighters are very experienced in in all of the brigades, because we have a cooperation response plan that means that if there is any sort of fire, particularly at this time of year, just about every brigade gets out and fights it.

Mr S.R. HILL: Ms Thompson, currently the Bush Fires Act empowers local government to order private landowners to install fire breaks; however, this provision does not apply to state government-owned land. You just said earlier that CALM was one of the key agencies that has large tracts of land. Should the act bind the Crown so that the state government is bound by the same provisions as private landowners in your shire?

Ms Thompson: Yes. That is quite a recent issue with us. We have our firebreak order and the landowners who do not abide by it or who get an exemption for one reason or another get infringed, yet you have farmers on the other side of the fence who have bush right up to their farmland. So there should be the same rules for everyone

Mrs J. HUGHES: On that subject, would you foresee that it could also perhaps be an alternative for fire management or risk mediation plans put out by CALM, rather than large tracts of firebreaks? What is your view on that?

Mr Camplin: Probably if there was a burning hazard reduction scheme in place that was up-to-date, yes. However, they have got so far behind with their hazard reduction in CALM areas that there are now areas that are becoming quite dangerous. That fire the other week passed through several of those and it made that particular fire impossible to control in some areas. The inability to reduce hazard when they need to is probably one of the things that holds CALM back in that area. So if they cannot hazard-reduce, then maybe there will have to be strategic firebreaks.

Mr S.R. HILL: I have another question for both of you. The ESL was introduced in 2001. What impact has that had on the Shire of Murray, such as equipment for the brigades etc?

Ms Thompson: It has got to the stage now that council as a whole thinks that anything to do with fire brigades should be provided by the ESL. We know that there are exceptions that do not apply, and the ESL was supposed to help the brigades with the operation side, the provision of units and stuff like that. However, even with the ESL and because a lot is not covered by the ESL, the majority of brigades or units still have to go out and fundraise. Equipment purchased from a

donation or fundraising is not covered under the ESL for maintenance later on, which is an issue at the present time for a lot of brigades. It is all right if it is purchased under the ESL, but not if you fundraise for it. We have an example at the moment. The west Murray brigade was given a collar tank from bushfire services in Bunbury, and that was to help with water supply. The brigade had to go out and fundraise to purchase a trailer to put that collar tank on and to outfit the trailer so that we could transport the collar tank to any incident. That trailer cannot be covered under the ESL at the present time, and if we want to do maintenance on it, currently it is up to the brigade to continue the maintenance because it was not bought with any ESL funding.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you also have the same issues with insurance over that equipment?

Ms Thompson: No, I think at the present time all brigade staff are covered under local government insurance, but I do not know if the full total of the value is covered. That is something we would have to ask the financial section of the shire.

Mr S.R. HILL: Still on ESL funding, obviously at the moment the SES unit comes through the shire, the shire members sit on a committee and they then allocate the ESL funding.

Ms Thompson: Yes

Mr S.R. HILL: Would it be easier for the SES to go directly to FESA to access that funding?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr S.R. HILL: Would you, as a shire, prefer that?

Ms Thompson: I think the shire would prefer that, speaking from my own personal opinion. Without asking the CEO, my personal opinion would be yes.

Mr Camplin: I just add on funding the ESL, that before the ESL, the shire had a 10-year vehicle replacement program. That has been set back six years.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Sixteen years?

Mr Camplin: Ten plus six.

Ms Thompson: The shire also used to purchase new vehicles and now under the ESL some brigades are getting refurbished vehicles, which is a change from what we had before.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Just quickly, a question on the importance of volunteers in the Murray shire when it comes to emergency management.

Mr Camplin: We could not run it without them basically.

Ms Thompson: We are finding it harder to keep them because a lot of them are working and some employers do not allow their workers to leave to go to a fire; and it varies from business to business.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: How many active volunteers do you have in your particular shire?

Ms Thompson: We would be looking at about 100.

Mr Camplin: Yes, about that.

Ms Thompson: One hundred-plus, give or take a few. Probably a bit more than 100. Do you mean firefighters, or the auxiliary and RA-COM's people and all that type of thing?

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: All of them.

Ms Thompson: Over 100, without knowing all the exact figures.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: There is a particular issue here that the member for Geraldton was very keen on and which affected his area.

Mr S.R. HILL: I was just going to ask about that. This is another question to you, Christine. In Geraldton particularly we have an issue with the City of Geraldton fire hydrants. Under the current system FESA pays for the installation, removal and maintenance of fire hydrants in gazetted fire

districts. Local government pays for the cost of everything that is done to the pavement. Outside of gazetted fire districts local government pays for the lot. The committee notes that in other states the water body, such as the Water Corporation, is responsible for the installation and maintenance of fire hydrants. Does the shire have a view on this issue at all?

[11.30 am]

Ms Thompson: Outside gazetted fire districts we have to make an allocation of X number of dollars a year to get fire hydrants established in a lot of our old residential areas such as old fishing settlements that are now developing into large communities. Some of them are still serviced by overhead refill. The Water Corporation should take more responsibility than it does.

Mr S.R. HILL: Is that something that WALGA will follow through on? Has it been raised at the local government level through WALGA?

Ms Thompson: I am not on the committee of WALGA so I do not see all its minutes. The issue has been raised at various councils at times, but I am not quite sure whether it is still on WALGA's books.

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

Mr Camplin: Whether they be career fire fighters, fire and rescue volunteers, bush fire service volunteers or CALM fire fighters, they should all be under the same umbrella as country, or state, fire services, not necessarily as part of anything else.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The point is that FESA also covers the SES and other rescue volunteers. I understand that the proposal is that the overarching name for all those organisations be "emergency services". I understand that within the structure the next level would be fire bush services, town-based volunteers etc.

Ms Thompson: They should be all under the same umbrella. Fire is just one division of emergency management. I think it is a matter of what the public gets used to. In the short period it has been operating, FESA has established itself, and FESA is easy to say. Everybody knows what it encompasses. It would not take long for everyone to learn all the service groups covered by emergency management.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You mentioned earlier that one of your brigades also had involvement with FESA. Is there any plan for that to expand, rather than be involved with just one brigade?

Mr Camplin: That particular brigade is the Dwellingup brigade. It receives funding for breathing apparatus through the fire and rescue service part of FESA. As normally happens, it could become the fire services brigade rather than a bush fire brigade. That would be up to the members to decide. At the moment they have not moved either way.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is there any talk about other groups branching out in the same direction?

Mr Camplin: Given the development occurring in the Shire of Murray at the moment, that is inevitable. It will happen in the next five to 10 years.

Ms Thompson: Mandurah is being built out, so pressure is occurring on areas to the east. In one area alone, Satterley is developing 7 000 houses in a couple of stages in the South Yunderup area. Much of the Ravenswood-South Yunderup area will experience enormous pressure. Developers are already purchasing land, so once the Peel deviation is built, areas will be opened up and the environment will be under a great deal of pressure from developments. As a result of the sheer

number of people, there will come a time when some of the bush fire brigades will have to become dual purpose or permanent volunteer fire and rescue services.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: How well do your communication systems operate between units, given the topography of the land and what I understand are changes in communication systems?

Mr Camplin: Communications at the moment are a problem in the scarp. There are blank areas across which normal radio communications will not carry. A repeater station that the shire maintains on the scarp covers most of the shire, but once on the scarp, transmission becomes a problem. We are looking at ways to improve it. We hope that the new communication system will improve the range of communications that are available.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The other issue in most areas is training. Do you have access to the required training to maintain skill levels?

Mr Camplin: Training is not a problem in the Shire of Murray. We have a number of - probably close to 10 - certificate IV trainers. Training is available through the bush fire service in Bunbury and we conduct our own modules 1 to 12 at the moment, but basic fire fighting skills will be done in-house.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Are your volunteers traditionally farmers or are they more the hobby-type farmer?

Mr Camplin: There are very few farmers in the fire brigades now. Most of them hold other jobs in local industries such as Alcoa. A few members are people who are unemployable, but the majority of them are employed persons.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: It has been suggested that the legislation will enable individual local governments to enter into an agreement with FESA whereby all fire brigade responsibility could potentially be transferred to FESA. If a local government did not want to be part of such an agreement, the transfer would not occur. Do you have a comment on that?

Ms Thompson: It would be in the interests of local government. If it is transferred to FESA, in the end FESA will pick up the cost because it will have control in the long run. We need the expertise. If an incident escalates so much that we need outside help, I think local government would be silly not to use that other expertise on the ground to help.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Is the management of the ESL a burden on local government?

Ms Thompson: I am not the finance officer. We have people employed to manage the ESL and they are reimbursed for handling it. I am not sure what they get for handling it. In the early stages local government was unhappy with it because no extra funding was provided for the extra work. I do not know. I think you will probably find they are still unhappy with bits and pieces. However, I think some of them have jumped on board and it is just part of their duties now.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: FESA has suggested that it be empowered to request the development of fire management plans of landowners when the land is CALM-managed land, plantation land or land used for pastoral or grazing purposes. The fire management plan would be requested only if FESA considered it to be necessary to mitigate the risk of fire to life and property; for instance, in an area of high risk such as where CALM land abuts private land or where a eucalypt plantation is located near a housing development. Do you have any comment on this proposal?

[11.40 am]

Ms Thompson: The developers, as part of their subdivision conditions, must have fire management plans, especially in special rural or residential areas, or farmlet areas. They should have it there, especially if they have no scheme water. They have to have 25 000 litre tanks, or whatever size, to assist the residents in that area. Yes, I think they should be involved in it. They

should supply it for the community. If they got people to move into these areas, and there is no scheme water available, and some of them do not have dams, I think developers should make available provisions for fire management.

Mr S.R. HILL: Just following on from that, currently FESA has the power to direct owners of a premises to install fire suppression equipment - this is a bit different from a subdivision - if you had a development application for a showroom, for example. The Department of Housing and Works is asking that this power be removed. Instead, the Department of Housing and Works recommends that FESA be given the power to make recommendations to local government on the installation of fire suppression equipment, but local government would make the final determination. Would you be happy for the Shire of Murray to take that role on?

Ms Thompson: You may have to ask the directors of the appropriate planning department about that, but it should be part of the conditions of approval for subdivisions. The local government should tick it off, but the developers should be involved in that process. Is that what you are getting at?

Mr S.R. HILL: Yes, and following on from that, sometimes the developer comes in and says that the showroom development cost, say, \$2.2 million and then the local authority says it will put on this other condition that will cost another \$350 000 to comply with. They will normally just grizzle to the local authority, and then come and grizzle to other elected members.

Ms Thompson: Yes, that should be part of it.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: That just about wraps it up, then. Are there any other comments you would like to make about management arrangements here in the Murray district, and how they could be improved on a state level?

Mr Camplin: I think they are pretty well covered at the moment. We have a good liaison with FESA through the bush fire service at Bunbury, and I would assume that that would continue.

Ms Thompson: Once the emergency management legislation comes into force - I know it has an operational date, but I do not know when it will come in - local government will have to stand up and be made more aware of its responsibilities. That will have a big bearing on local government and what is required to meet the needs of what it must do. Because we have not had any emergency management legislation before, a lot of local governments have not taken it on board as much as they should. With this happening, it will be a good thing for local governments to have to stand up and be a bit more active.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: There is a suggestion that, with a number of different acts - the Bush Fires Act, the Fire Brigades Act and the Emergency Management Act- there may be some duplication, and maybe there should be an opportunity to amalgamate those acts. Do you see a benefit in that, or are you quite happy with the arrangements as they are?

Mr Camplin: There obviously is some duplication in the acts, and I think that probably one piece of emergency services legislation encompassing the whole lot is the best way to go.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much for being so candid, and thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors, or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced and the sense of the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should make a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed correct. Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 11. 44am
