

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT FITZROY CROSSING
FRIDAY, 7 JULY 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 12.19 pm**ABBOTT, MR JOHN-KYM****Senior Ranger, Department of Environment and Conservation, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect as 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 Abbott: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you understand the notes attached?

Mr Abbott: Yes.

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

Mr Abbott: Yes.:

The CHAIRMAN: CALM has sent a submission from the head office, but we want to ask questions of local people. Do you have any comments before we start throwing questions at you?

Mr Abbott: No.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Can you give us a rundown of the local area, the amount of resources you have available to you and any significant incidents in recent times that have impacted on your ability to do your job?

Mr Abbott: The area that I am responsible for is Geikie Gorge National Park and Brooking Springs conservation park. That covers around 16 000 hectares. The resources that we have available from a fire perspective are, a fire trailer and a slip-on unit that can go onto our Landcruiser trayback.:

The CHAIRMAN: What about human resources?

Mr Abbott: From day-to-day we have up to five staff, and it varies from between three to five people working. Three other people besides me are trained for fires. For other emergency situations, two of my staff are trained for land search. I am a land search team leader. As you have probably gathered, I am also heavily involved with FESA. We work with the emergency services there. Two of my other staff are also involved with the unit here in Fitzroy Crossing.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you volunteers in the emergency services unit?

Mr Abbott: We are volunteers with the unit here in Fitzroy Crossing.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What significant issues or incidents have impacted on both the volunteer work and your job as the ranger?

Mr Abbott: I suppose we face situations involving people missing in the park, which has occurred on occasions; fires; and that sort of stuff. On all occasions we work with the relevant agencies.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Have you had any issues such as those that have occurred at Karijini involving any significant injury or the need to evacuate people?

Mr Abbott: A death occurred on park late last year. A woman went missing. Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Can you give background on how you handled that?

Mr Abbott: We contacted the hazard management authority, that being the police, and worked with the police and FESA to search for the woman for three days. She was found after the third day, deceased, unfortunately.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Do you have any idea of the cause of death? Was it natural causes?

Mr Abbott: I understand it was caused by dehydration. It was 45 degrees in Fitzroy that day and in the country she had been walking in it was about 50 degrees on the limestone. It was a very hot day.:

Mr M.J. COWPER: Have any new procedures been put in place to warn tourists of the consequences of wandering off in the park?

Mr Abbott: Yes, as part of that we are putting in place procedures.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA has recommended that it be empowered to request fire management plans in circumstances in which it is deemed inappropriate to install a firebreak on the land, and has said that a fire management plan will assist in mitigating the impact of a fire if FESA considers that the land in question is a high risk. FESA has asked that this be confined to land owned or managed by the Crown or used for pastoral, grazier or plantation purposes. Do you have a comment on that and fire management plans in general?

Mr Abbott: That is hard to comment on without knowing a bit more about it. Any sort of management plan would need to cover all aspects, and should cover things such as biodiversity, visitor management risk and anything like that.:

The CHAIRMAN: I think the main focus of it is that firebreaks in various places can have impacts such as causing huge erosion. It is probably not appropriate to have firebreaks in those areas but to have a fire management plan instead.

Mr Abbott: In a lot of the country up here, some of the boundaries go through escarpment country, where firebreaks should not be put in.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have fire management plans in place?

Mr Abbott: We do fire prescriptions for the land here, yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The Conservation Council of Western Australia and the Environmental Defender's Office have discussed the concept of zoning as raised in the COAG report, "National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management". They spoke about this tool applying to the fire management plans. In effect, they talk about the primary objectives of life, property and biodiversity. Do you feel that creating zones would be a useful tool?

The CHAIRMAN: The zones would include, for example, life, property, biodiversity and so on.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It would be a matter of grading which areas to protect first.

Mr Abbott: Within any sort of land management we certainly need to have plans in place for how we manage risk, whether it be with tourists, fire, weeds and all the other activities. CALM is part of that and at Geikie Gorge we are working on such plans.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you already have a tool that you use?

Mr Abbott: For things like risk management, yes, we do.

Mr S.R. HILL: Do you have a good working relationship with station owners and pastoralists in the area?

Mr Abbott: I do not know many of them, but I have a good working relationship with the ones I do know.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Putting on your volunteer hat in the absence of Mr Twaddle, obviously road rescue is an issue in these parts. There have been some nasty crashes in these parts in recent years. Are indigenous people attracted to the FESA here?

[12.30 pm]

Mr Abbott: It is difficult to do. Two Aboriginal members have joined our unit within the past six months. I think we are working on encouraging that sort of thing. A group at Noonkanbah feeds in through the Fitzroy Crossing unit. They assist us with major three-day, four-day or week-long fires. We will roster off on a break and they will come in and work with our teams. The Noonkanbah unit has also been involved in a lot of the training courses in Fitzroy Crossing.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there an emergency services unit at Noonkanbah or is it just a community?

Mr Abbott: It is a community, but some people there are members are fire and emergency services volunteers. They have some gear out there.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What sort of gear do they have?

Mr Abbott: I think they have a light tanker but I am not 100 per cent sure. There was talk of it.

The CHAIRMAN: Has equipment for the FESA unit been fairly well replaced and kept up to date? Is it proper personal fire protection equipment?

Mr Abbott: Yes; it has been very good.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have a three-four light tanker?

Mr Abbott: We have a light tanker and a two-four, a road rescue trailer and a troop carrier. Usually a bit later in the year, for the past two years FESA has brought up another light tanker for us because our fire season is starting.

The CHAIRMAN: How many members do you have at the ESU?

Mr Abbott: I think there are 30 to 40 on the books. There are probably about 15 to 20 who are active.

Mr M.J. COWPER: How many people have been given training in HAZMAT in light of the large trucks travelling through here north-south carrying volatile goods? How would your unit respond to HAZMAT incidents?

Mr Abbott: Currently two people are HAZMAT qualified. In a town like Fitzroy Crossing people are continually coming in, staying for a couple of years and moving on. It is a transitional northern town. Many of the people who have HAZMAT experience have left. A course will be run in, I think, the next month for HAZMAT, with I think 10 to 15 of the members being BA qualified, so it is taking that next step. In the past FESA has flown people in from Broome to handle HAZMAT incidents. It takes only an hour and a half to two hours before people get here.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you get to train with other units in the locality or do your SES people train with fires?

Mr Abbott: We do everything here. I have been up to Wyndham for training. Some of the guys from Halls Creek come across and the same from Derby or we go across to Derby or Broome.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If there was a major incident, you all pretty much know each other?

Mr Abbott: Yes. In the search we had last year I already knew about 50 per cent of the people who attended, for that very reason.

Mrs J. HUGHES: That works for a much better unit when you come together.

Mr Abbott: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: We are conscious of getting you back out there quickly. Thank you, John, for coming in and taking time off from the fire. Do you want to make a statement?

Mr Abbott: No, nothing.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Who is in charge of the fire out there now?

Mr Abbott: The station owner who is involved is pretty much running it. A bloke is flying over in a chopper and it is advising when there are jumps over the highway.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is the pastoralist in control? If it got any bigger, would he stay in control?

Mr Abbott: He is talking with the OIC at the Fitzroy unit. There is continual radio communication. If it gets bigger, it will probably go through to FESA.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is that standard practice?

Mr Abbott: Sometimes in the past the shire has come in. A couple of years ago during a major fire one of the blokes from the shire came across and they managed it from the Fitzroy office. It just depends. The shire might come in on this one; I do not know at the moment. I am not involved in that side of things; it is at a level above what I deal with.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If it happened in the Geikie park, would you remain in control?

Mr Abbott: It would depend on the experience of the FESA person. For example, the OIC in this area is very knowledgeable about the whole country, so I would certainly discuss anything with him. The minute it went off CALM country I would be leaving him to direct that sort of thing. It just depends on experience. I have been here for less than two years and I do not know the country well enough.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Commonsense prevails.

Mr Abbott: Commonsense prevails. In a small community like this we must work together; there is no other option.

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 others or errors of transcription of 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 we will deem it to be correct. Given that this is remote region we are flexible on the 10 days.

Hearing concluded at 12.36 pm
