

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT ALBANY
TUESDAY, 21 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 10.10 am**WEEKES, MISS JOANNE****Local Manager, Albany State Emergency Service, examined:****FRANCIS, MR NOEL CHARLES****President, Albany Volunteer Marine Rescue, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: I thank you for both attending this morning to give us the benefit of your knowledge and experience and helping us out with our inquiry.

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?

Ms Weekes: Yes,

Mr Francis: 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 giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

We have not received a submission from you. Do you have any opening comments to make?

Mr Francis: Not really. I was involved when the legislation was first made available to us and first created some time ago; we had our say on it then. There are still some matters that remain an issue for us. Remember that the legislation itself is at a very high level, and we come from the sea rescue groups themselves - we are more involved in the operational aspects rather than the high-level legislation. There is not a lot to be said about our involvement with it.

The CHAIRMAN: Joanne, do you have any comments?

Ms Weekes: Yes. I am a bit like Noel: reading the legislation, it was sort of above the level that we deal with a lot of the time, so, to be honest, I am not sure what you want from us today. I am sure you will explain.

The CHAIRMAN: We will have some direct questions and maybe as we go through, you may wish to provide additional information. I ask the first question to Joanne. How long has your SES unit been established? How many members do you have? What emergency service roles do you perform?

Ms Weekes: The unit has been around for 20-odd years. Currently we have about 50 members, including support members. Our main roles are with storms and searches, and we also have a cliff rescue team, which is specialised and covers quite a large area of the south coast. We also have a dog tracking team, which is under training at the moment. We also have support roles for fire and for sea rescue.

The CHAIRMAN: Noel, I ask you the same question - when were you formed as a sea rescue unit?

Mr Francis: We were formed about 1975, and the group was incorporated about 1985. We have in the order of 60 volunteers, but we have a membership status that goes out to about 450 members. Our business basically extends to radio monitoring, which is 24 hours. We have a number of sub-bases for that as well as our main base. We also provide a marine rescue service and also get involved in areas such as marine recovery - towing and recovering vessels. We have a role to play in training in the community in boat safety and boat handling. We support the other emergency services groups such as the SES. Also, we get involved in the promotion of safety issues in the community as well.

The CHAIRMAN: You said that you have 60 volunteers and your membership is 450. Can you explain the difference?

Mr Francis: The difference is that a volunteer is somebody who actually comes and helps out in the operations. For instance, they man the radio and the boats - that is the skippers and crews - and even help down to sweeping the floors and making cups of tea. Membership is basically people who pay a fee each year to be part of our organisation, and that contributes to our infrastructure and the running of the organisation. Members are given a marina number with that fee which means that we are able to get their details pretty quickly and locate them and contact them as soon as we can. They are basically a customer-type membership.

The CHAIRMAN: So do these people quite regularly check with you before they go out and give the details of the trip and that kind of thing?

Mr Francis: That is correct. There is a log on, log off process. Going back to the roots of where Albany Sea Rescue came from, we had different roots from the SES of course. We come from a self-maintaining group of people. That is basically where the membership business comes from. We have a central core of volunteers and everybody else was the recipient of that service. We have maintained that.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Mr Francis, can you tell us how many times you have been called out to rescue people? You obviously keep statistics and things like that.

Mr Francis: Yes, the official records show that last year there were in the order of 40 rescues. They were basic rescues of going out and assisting people. Of course, we maintain a pretty good regime of training once a month and we get involved in public events and public occasions. That involves training and just showing the flag; that sort of thing.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: My colleague beside me said that you have your own boat.

Mr Francis: Yes, we have three vessels. We have a 20-foot zodiac, a 30-foot, or 8.5 metre, Naiad, which is a specialised rescue craft, and also have a 43-foot ex-fishing vessel that is used for rescue as well.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Is the Naiad one of the rubber-hulled vessels?

Mr Francis: Yes, that is right. It is one of the new ones.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you actually patrol as well, or do you strictly respond to calls?

Mr Francis: No, we consider our training as patrol really. We do not patrol; we do not have the resources for that.

The CHAIRMAN: But you actually go out for training, and that -

Mr Francis: That is right. It is once a month.

The CHAIRMAN: Prior to the establishment of FESA, BRMS was part of the water police. Has there been a significant change to your operation since the administration support of the BRMS was transferred from the police to FESA?

Mr Francis: Yes, there has been a significant change. A lot of that was brought about by the additional funding that allowed us to get the faster boat, the Naiad, which basically changed the volunteer structure of our squad as well, as we are now required to get younger, fitter volunteers to try to manage the new boat. They must be more skilled. That is where we have trouble getting the new volunteers and getting the skills to our group to deal with the new vessel and its capabilities, but we are managing.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there a particular reason for requiring younger and fitter volunteers, or does it just involve the stability of the boat?

Mr Francis: Yes. It is the nature of the boat. Our boats before would be steady fishing vessels which would do 14 knots maximum and cruise around. The smaller boat, although it was fast, was easy to handle. This new boat cruises at 50 knots. It is very fast and travels at 80 kilometres an hour. And over rough seas, it can do 30 knots. So, it is a very specialised vehicle for water, which means we have to have young, fit people who are well trained for it. Otherwise, it becomes dangerous. I think you said you would almost get to Mt Barker before you realised what was going on! Getting the skills is where we struggle a little. It is the same with any volunteer group in this day and age: it just so happens that people are busy. People with those skills have work to do. I think the roots of sea rescue were that it was always something for semi-retired people - those people who had plenty of time on their hands to assist others. It is changing. We now lean on people in the work force, and specialist people in the work force - that is, those on boats who know their way around boats. I guess that is where we are having a bit of a hard time at the moment.

[10.30 am]

The CHAIRMAN: The police and Fire and Emergency Services Authority are sharing responsibility for the volunteer sea rescue groups with FESA providing the administrative support and the police providing operational support. Is this working out, or is it a difficulty?

Mr Francis: It is working out very well. We are still forming relationships with the two organisations. There is no doubt that, coming from where we came from, there was a little bit of adverse reaction at the start. We actually lost members. This thing of saying, "Oh, the bureaucracy's taking us over and it will never be the same," and all this kind of stuff, yes, it is true, but we certainly needed it. The people who are in now in the system are a whole new generation. We still maintained a number of the old people who knew the history, and that carried that on with us, which was what we needed. We are still forming relationships, as I said. It is working well, but there is no doubt it could work a lot better. Communications, both within the organisations and the communications during incidents, need a lot of work still.

The CHAIRMAN: What's the issue with communications? Is it radios?

Mr Francis: There are two sides to it. There are the communications between the police and groups like State Emergency Services and us, at a management level, and how we operate, and there is also physical communication capacity. For instance, the SES does not share the same radio frequencies as us, nor the same radios for that matter, and neither do the police. It was only two or three weeks ago that we had an incident with a boat around The Gap area, and we could not talk to them simply because the radio relay facilities were not out there. A policeman was up on the hill pointing, and it was basically by hand directions. That put our people at risk and put at risk the person in the water. As it turned out, that person was deceased anyway. But basically, everyone just had a real hard time. The problem we have with it is that that situation has existed for 20 years, that we have known of, and we have never been able to resolve it.

The CHAIRMAN: What do you see as the solution to that problem?

Mr Francis: I think, certainly, there is not one single organisation that can resolve it. Even though we have tried, as we have filled in as many gaps as we can, we need some kind of common radio communications. That is what it comes down to: common radio communications, and something that people are familiar with. We have tried in the past to give police our radios, but, of course, they are not trained in our radios. So as soon as there is an incident, and a new policeman comes along, they have lost that. So we need some kind of common radio service between the lot of us, and common training. I think that would go a long way. Also, we need the physical infrastructure to allow that to happen; for instance, relay stations in the most dangerous area that we have on the south coast, which is The Gap in the Torndirrup National Park. Coincidentally, our most dangerous part of the coastline has the least amount of communications available to it.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that the single issue that would most help your organisations to deliver your services - the communications?

Mr Francis: It is communications and training.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Joanne, do you have the same situation with the police as well?

Ms Weekes: Yes, we have the same problems. We spent our own funds getting fire radios in our vehicles, so that we could communicate or listen to the fires when we were supporting them. We went out on our own bat and did that. In our budget, we are going out and, again, purchasing sea rescue radios so that we can communicate.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you have a whole bank of them?

Ms Weekes: At this stage we are only going to get a couple, because there is a process going at the moment. There is a review taking place within FESA itself to get a common radio going. From what I can gather, they are trying to make it a dual radio so that if we are using UHF, it can also do VHF, with which they can communicate. But that is in the process, so I am not sure how long that will take. So at this gap, we will at least get some communications going between the agencies. We are building up a communication between the agencies that has not been there before, especially down here. We are trying to communicate more with each other so that these problems can be solved, instead of coming away each time going, "We could not communicate."

The CHAIRMAN: People from one of the other local government areas that spoke to us yesterday had an issue with a new radio system being imposed because there are so many of the older style out there that everyone has used it. Will it cause you a problem if a new regime is imposed? Are you going to lose people from the system - that type of thing? That was certainly indicated to us yesterday.

Ms Weekes: Speaking from my unit's point of view, I do not believe so. A bit like Noel, our volunteer base has changed in the past couple of years in the sense that they are younger and more used to change; they can see these problems themselves and bring them up. The instance Noel was talking about, we were out on top of the cliff, we had a team out there and we did not know what was going on. The police had lost their satellite phone connection, so they had absolutely nothing - that sort of thing. We had no idea what was going on - it was the same with them. If the volunteer base is willing to make the change, I really do not believe that there should be a problem at all, because from what I can gather, we will still be keeping our base system. It is only when we go into a dual exercise that we will actually be using that system.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Could that person have died as a result of not having an appropriate communications system?

Ms Weekes: They were already.

Mr Francis: It is a difficult statement for me to make. We were there and I believe that that person went under the water and we were five minutes too late, basically. We went very, very fast - as fast as we could go there. The crew were not devastated, but it was a really emotional issue for the

crew. Being a relatively small community, there is always a risk that you are going to go out and find someone that you know. Getting there five minutes too late is a big issue.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How far did you have to travel?

Mr Francis: Probably about 10 nautical miles. We got there in about 30 minutes in the Naiad, which is very fast. The boat went around to The Gap and stopped and waited for communications about what to do. It was only the policeman's skill that enabled him to guide them in the right direction, and they were directed straight to the person. It could be said that it was perhaps just luck that they found the person, because when you are in the water, you cannot see people from a boat, particularly when they are underwater. There is just no way. We have searched around for days looking for people there, and they have still been in the water. You have to be up above seeing down - that is, either from an aircraft or above. That is where we have the great difficulties. Your questions are very difficult for me to answer.

Mrs J. HUGHES: That actually raises the whole facet of counselling services for your volunteers. Does anything like that exist for your volunteers to access?

Ms Weekes: : Yes, we have peer support. Basically, they are not counsellors, but they are trained to come in after an incident. Including the one that Noel had, we had two suicides in two weeks, and we had a body recovery late last year. So we have a counselling service there; it is peer support by other members, and it is usually by other members of FESA itself. They have access to counsellors if people require it.

[10.40 am]

Mr Francis: We have three levels. First, we have the peer support. Basically that peer support extends down to our skippers, who actually go around and visit the crews during the following week, and that is exactly what happens. We stay close to the crews. The second level, really, is the chaplain in town who is connected to the FESA service. We have his phone number and we contact him if we want to. Also, the police have offered their service if we believe we need it. It is a funny thing that in the rescue services, even at my level - I am a skipper - we do it all. It is very hard to suddenly say that we all need counselling. I do not think it works like that. When you come back from an incident, you are pretty low and you probably lose sleep for a couple of nights, but you honestly believe that you are okay. It is only after a month when you go back and talk to each other and someone says he has not been sleeping that you know -

Mrs J. HUGHES: You are troubled.

Mr Francis: Someone has to take the initiative and say, "Look, we have got to do something about this."

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you think that type of thing could be taken up at a much higher level rather than at your level, such as by an overarching body?

Ms Weekes: I think one of the points that has come out just from talking to the members and everything is that they talk best to their peers, to be honest, because they have been through it. As a skipper, team leader or manager, we basically just keep an eye on them. You know -

Mrs J. HUGHES: When somebody is having a problem.

Ms Weekes: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Who keeps an eye on you?

Ms Weekes: We keep an eye on each other. We have a very good support crew at our place. Nobody is left high and dry. Everybody feels able to talk. I do not believe it would be appropriate to make it mandatory that after an incident somebody from outside comes in and assesses.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It has been understood for many years that, generally speaking, a debriefing around a carton of beer is probably the best form of counselling one can get. Someone coming from outside that circle who was not involved is -

Mrs J. HUGHES: An invasion.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Yes, very much.

Mr Francis: However, we do need to stimulate that culture of knowing that we should do something about it, as opposed to the older culture of, "I know he is going through a bit of a hard time but I am not going to interfere with him." This culture is growing. After the last incident I was quite pleased with how things were moving along.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Mr Francis, you talked about your membership. You have 450 members and that provides you with some funding. I wonder if you could provide us with a general idea and breakdown of the source of your funding.

Mr Francis: Yes, this year is a good example. Funding from those particular members came up to \$10 000, give or take a couple of hundred.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Membership fees?

Mr Francis: Membership fees, yes. We get \$20 000 from FESA as an operational grant. FESA contributed 50 per cent of capital equipment that we needed this year, and in this year we spent in the order of \$20 000 in capital. That is spent on replacing outboard motors and getting safety gear. Just one of our safety jackets is worth \$1 000. A Naiad can use up 140 litres of fuel an hour. It is a very expensive business; there is no doubt about it. There are membership fees, operational grants, operational fees and, of course, fundraising, which is left up to us. Last year we received about \$7 000 or \$8 000 from fundraising and donations.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You get 50 per cent for capital equipment from FESA. Where does the other 50 per cent come? Is it from fundraising?

Mr Francis: Fundraising, and what is left over from our operational budget.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Do you generally have a set target for fundraising or is it subject to whatever your shortfall is in any given year?

Mr Francis: Yes. The targets are set when we need to get a particular item of equipment; for example, we need to replace our smaller vessel. That will cost us \$100 000. We anticipate a 50 per cent grant from FESA or the Lotteries Commission. That means we have to raise \$50 000 in two years. We know that. We have \$20 000 put aside, so we have a target of trying to raise - we have to pull our fingers out in these next two years - \$30 000 as a group. As all volunteer groups know, the rattling of tins does not work anymore. The older guys talk of going out and shovelling sheep manure and selling it on corners. It does not work. We have to do something different. Sometimes, when you are trying to fundraise, it is a risk; for instance raffles and things like that. The larger raffles are a big risk to us, so we try to avoid those. We have to use our imaginations for fundraising.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Your membership fees must be quite steep. Does that cause you a significant problem in retaining your membership base?

Mr Francis: The cost of membership is \$40. We have kept that at \$40 for the past five or six years. We believe that if we start to put it up, people will walk away. We are fortunate that we have a significant membership catchment area. We have members in Corrigin, Narrogin, Mt Barker, Cranbrook, Wellstead and I think we have one or two members in Northam. All these people come down for holidays. We have a good catchment area of members.

The CHAIRMAN: Can we ask the same questions of the SES group? What do you do with your fundraising and how do you fund yourself?

Ms Weekes: Since the ESL has come in, we have put a budget in every year and hopefully it is approved. Our operating budget is about \$40 000. We have spent the past couple of years catching up on buildings etc. That covers registration for all our vehicles, our insurance, our running costs, our training and anything we wish to purchase. That all comes out of that operating budget.

The CHAIRMAN: Capital equipment?

Ms Weekes: Capital equipment is a separate issue. We have to apply for capital equipment. At this stage, approval for our vehicles and bus has been put back so it will be another so many years before we can get them changed over. We have just had a shed built this year for our trailers. That was a capital grant. The previous year we replaced a very old roof on a building, which we had to patch up every time we came back following a storm, which was good! Now we do not have to do that. We also do our local fundraising for issues outside that. For instance, we have a trailer that we are turning into a welfare trailer so that we can take it out on site - some of our operations cover a number of days. We are fundraising to do that ourselves.

The CHAIRMAN: Does your application for ESL funding go through local government or do you do that directly with FESA?

Ms Weekes: Regional helps me out and then it is submitted to the local government. We go through the local government.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it an unnecessary step to go through local government?

Ms Weekes: It is probably not a necessary step, but it just came with the evolution of the ESL because they take care of all the local bush fire brigades. We are the only SES unit in this community.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: They also raise and handle the money, do they not?

Ms Weekes: They do. They issue us a quarterly instalment. We do not get all our money at once. We have to reconcile that at the end of each year.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Does getting it quarterly sometimes go against your needs?

Ms Weekes: No. The only time we are caught out with our operating budget is when there is a large exercise, but then regional takes that up. It fills that gap for us if necessary. In actual fact, it works quite well. Our local government is very good. It just pays us the money quarterly into our bank account, and we manage it, which is excellent compared with some other units. I know some other units are having problems but our local government representative, Steve Gray, who was here previously is very good. He lets us manage ourselves.

[10.50 am]

The CHAIRMAN: While we are on that, FESA is proposing that it be re-established as the department of emergency services. This will mean removal of "Fire" from the corporate name. FESA's argument is that this removal is appropriate because fire is just one of the many emergencies that volunteers attend to. There has been some objection to this proposal on the basis of a claim of loss of identity. Do you believe this is an issue?

Ms Weekes: We have already gone through this by losing the SES as such. We are now part of FESA. I think the fight was done then from the SES point of view. Some of the older members did not want to change our emblems from SES to FESA. I really do not care, to be honest.

The CHAIRMAN: It is just a name.

Ms Weekes: Yes, it is. It does not change what we do. I do not believe it should matter. That is my personal opinion. We are still an emergency service. However, we have just had our sign put up on our building, and now they want to change it!

The CHAIRMAN: Noel, is the situation the same for you?

Mr Francis: It is the same for us, yes. We have gone through the growing pains of changing over to FESA and we have thrashed all that out. I do not think it will make one iota of difference.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Roughly how many incidents do you attend a year?

Ms Weekes: It would range between 50 and 75 call-outs as such. For instance, in one call-out last year we had 160 calls in 24 hours. That was quite a major incident - 10 inches of rain in three days - so we were under the pump a bit there. If you are talking about generic call-outs, it is probably between 50 and 75, as I have said. Our situation is a bit like Noel's. Some of those call-outs can be over three or four weekends. Again, last year, other than that one, we had the one with the young boy. We were out three weekends in a row looking for him. When I say 50 to 75, included in that could be a number of weekends.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Because Albany is a large regional city in this part of the great southern, obviously if an incident were to occur in one of the provincial areas the units in that area might call upon you to assist. Do you have the capacity to do that? You have said you have 50 members.

Ms Weekes: We have 50 members, so yes. Gnowangerup always loves to call us when someone is stuck on Bluff Knoll! We are often called in by Gnowangerup, Denmark or Mt Barker if they have any instances that they cannot handle. Sometimes it is a bit hard to respond in a storm because what hits Denmark hits us, but they came down on that weekend and helped us with the 160 calls, and they got here, did one thing and then had to turn around and go back because their church had lost its roof.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Does it leave you exposed on occasions when you get called out of the city?

Ms Weekes: It does. A lot of it comes down to vehicles. We can usually get more members. For a lot of things we do not require a large number of people, unless it is an extended operation. However, if we sent two vehicles to, say, Gnowangerup with our cliff rescue team, we would have no vehicle at the unit except the bus that we could use to respond to anything else.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I think the Albany unit of the SES is renowned for being pretty much around everywhere. Do you have any problem with attracting new volunteers?

Ms Weekes: No. We seem to be ticking over pretty well. We are actually getting a lot of volunteers who are in their late twenties-early thirties, which is ideal for us. We have three or four cadets going at the moment. When they get to 16, 17 or 18 they tend to disappear for a couple of years, but amazingly they come back to the unit. A lot of older people are volunteering as well. These are people out of the blue. We are registered with the Albany Volunteer Centre, and it has sent a few people to us. There is a range of things that people can do, as Noel was saying. It does not matter whether they are making the tea or the coffee for the people coming back. It is saving other people from having to do those jobs. It is fantastic. During the big storms, I sent people home after eight hours, and Jeff came back three hours later because it was the first time in the area that the bushies had come to help us - they came to help us with the floods - and he came back because he is also a member of the bush fire brigade.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you find that you have cross-memberships with sea rescue, the bush fire brigades and the SES?

Ms Weekes: Not too many. I think we have three bushies in our brigade, but when the weather is like it is today, I do not even bother calling them because they will be on standby. They cover different areas. The bushies tend to be farmers, who care about their properties and that sort of thing. We have a paid fire service in town. We also have the marine rescue service, and we have one member who is actually one of Noel's extended members, and that is quite good, because the other day, for instance, he could tell us what they were doing.

The CHAIRMAN: You seem to do a lot of joint operations as well.

Ms Weekes: Yes. We tend to turn up to the same sorts of incidents, but we have not done enough cross-training as such for that sort of situation.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you see that as a way of improving the service? You said earlier that communications need to improve.

Ms Weekes: Yes. I sent Noel a letter about three weeks ago asking -

The CHAIRMAN: Has he responded!

Mr Francis: She has not got my response yet!

Ms Weekes: It was to ask whether our unit could go down and check his boats and equipment and see how we can help him, and that sort of thing. We will be doing the same with the bush fire brigade. We have also lined up the local ambulance service this year so that we will know where things are located in the ambulance and they will not have to run 100 metres, because we will be able to do it for them and that sort of thing. It is developing slowly.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How many permanent full-time employees do you have?

Ms Weekes: It is totally volunteer staff.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How important is local knowledge? Are your members long-term residents who know the ocean and the terrain?

Ms Weekes: I have started to ask civilians in certain areas whether they would mind if we call on them if we are desperate, because Albany is becoming more of a transient-type city. We have an ex-member at Torbay, and we can call on him at any time. He knows that area like the back of his hand. We also have a gentleman - I used to work with him - who knows Little Grove like the back of his hand. So we are starting to develop those sources outside of the unit, and we can call on them if necessary.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that just to advise you on various rescues or emergencies?

Ms Weekes: Yes. For instance, we had a gentleman who fell off his mountain bike and had concussion and did not know where he was. It was night time by this time. From his description of the track - he said he was lying halfway across the track, and it was not six-feet wide - the gentleman with this knowledge was able to pinpoint him to within 100 metres.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: It was not Peter Watson, was it?

Ms Weekes: No, he is longer than that!

Mr M.J. COWPER: Do you have a succession plan for each of your organisations? Obviously, all groups go through changes from time to time. I am aware that Bunbury has SES cadets, and other areas have bush rangers and so on. These are virtually the breeding ground of young people for groups like yours. Do you have any local cadet systems down here, whether it be SES, bush fire brigades, bush rangers or whatever, and are you looking to tap into that source as a means of succession planning?

[11.00 am]

Ms Weekes: We actually have four cadets at the moment, and one of those is also a police ranger cadet. Two have just come out of their cadetship, one was with the Air Force cadets and one was with the Army cadets. There is a lot of cross referencing that way, because they chat to their mates and that sort of thing. We also go over and assist the PCYC with their map reading and things like that. Again, we are getting that cross-referencing. We also do school visits just to touch base, get us known, that sort of thing.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: I just wondered if it was changed to a department, how would you feel working for Des?

The CHAIRMAN: So it is not Big Brother any more, it is now Des.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: We should be a bit more imaginative. What do you do in your private lives?

Ms Weekes: I volunteer all day. I actually work full time for the local Telstra shop.

Mr Francis: I am full time at the Water Corporation.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you see any negative impacts for your individual organisations if they were taken over - I mean, we have talked about some of the good factors - but do you see any negatives on having to work under one boss?

Mr Francis: A bureaucrat?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes, basically a bureaucrat.

Ms Weekes: My only worry would be the loss of local understanding if that was the case. The regional headquarters that we have now - if you lost that level, so that you lost that touch in the middle, that would be an extreme worry. One of the reasons for that is that as the local manager it is hard enough as it is because we are volunteers and we get support from those people who know our people and our area and that sort of thing; that would worry me.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: It would have to be carefully managed.

Ms Weekes: Yes. Some of the stuff we physically receive in the mail is probably not really our area, to put it subtly; and they filter a lot of stuff for us that I do not believe the volunteers should do.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Should be bogged down with.

Ms Weekes: That is right. The duty of care has come forward extremely well, OH&S and all that sort of stuff. I fully understand that, but a lot of the other administrative-type stuff is, I believe, unnecessary for our level.

Mr Francis: We would struggle with that, I think. We still have a lot of older members who spoke of the thin edge of the wedge when we first came under the FESA umbrella. As you can see, I am the president of sea rescue, which means we have a committee that is basically a board of management, which means we are self-managing. We always have been self-managing and we have accepted the good things that have come from FESA, which have been terrific. Some of the things that we have accepted we have got to expect because we are now under a government body. It is easier for me. I have been in the bureaucracy for 30-odd years in the Water Corporation, but in sea rescue the members own the show and they call the shots. When you get coordinators who come down and say that we cannot do that, we have a huge adverse reaction. In fact it is quite unsettling sometimes.

[The committee took evidence in camera.]

The CHAIRMAN: Does that actually happen a bit?

Mr Francis: Yes.

A lot of our members are fishermen and boaties, and they are there because they have a strong opinion about anything and the skills that they bring with them are enormous. They are just that kind of people. Of course, a lot of them are ex-farmers who have spent their lives fighting bureaucracy. That is an awful thing to say, but we just seem to attract that kind of person. They are the type of people who get their hands dirty, they muck in and they do it. As I said, from my point of view, I have to be very careful because I am skewed this way because I am a management-type person in the group because that is where I come from with my work. It is very difficult to get skill sets. For instance, when you call for a volunteer for a training officer, you do not get trained people, you just get volunteers out of the community and you have to try to explain to them where you want to go and hopefully they will do the right thing. They are just well-meaning people. If you want a treasurer, quite often you will not get people with bookkeeping skills - they are just not there, so you have to do the best with what you have got.

The CHAIRMAN: That is similar to what we were told this morning by Mr Butcher - that there is a need for training for committee positions, as well as the hands on sea rescue personnel.

Ms Weekes: Even the managers and others, if they do not come from an area like Noel does, do not have any previous experience. The gentleman I took over from had been there for 15 years as the manager and all of a sudden he got hit with this whole change of administration and he just pulled out. It was such a pity because he had spent 15 years dedicated -

Mrs J. HUGHES: Doing a great job.

Ms Weekes: Yes; and all of a sudden all the paperwork and the rest of it got in the way.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What do you think would happen if people in a club or in a group were offered, say, a TAFE course on how to do it? As you say, when someone puts his or her hand up they generally do it out of sufferance because no one else wants to be the treasurer, but if there were a facility for them to undertake a TAFE course do you think they would take that up?

Ms Weekes: We have already instigated that this year. We are just taking it out of our training budget and we are sending the secretary to a course, and we are also looking at sending two people on a five-day course as well. We have started to look outside the unit. I am very lucky. The treasurer has accountancy skills and I do not have to worry about him, which is good, but our admin people definitely. We are also getting our members trained as instructors and everything as well.

Mr P.D. OMODEI: How are the members covered for public liability if they go out on a rescue search or whatever in the ocean? Given the importance of that local knowledge, the fishermen will tell you about the drift and where the body will appear and all those sorts of things. There seems to be a concern that if the bureaucracy is too overpowering you will lose those volunteers. Are you covered for public liability? Noel, how would you build into the new legislation a system whereby we do not disenfranchise volunteers? That is a good question from the Water Corporation.

Mr Francis: Yes, that is right. The shift in culture is very slow with our people and you have to do it very carefully. I have seen other organisations and rescue groups that have shattered and they have had to pick up the pieces. We have had to move very slowly with this and I have had to do a lot of fast talking. I have been wrong sometimes and very disappointed. I guess there are two parts to the question. I will move to the liability side of things. I have had a good look through the legislation and as far as we are concerned all the coordinators have come down and assured us that we are fully covered. They have put out a brochure that says yes, so all I can do is put my hand up and say that if we are doing the right thing and do not make a bad situation even worse we are fine, but we have to keep training. They have to know their first aid and know they are safe and all this kind of thing to make sure we do the right thing, because as soon as we do the wrong thing we could be in trouble. That is not to say someone will not have a shot at us. We pull in some funny people; you have no idea. You have to expect that every now and again you get abused because you are there and people are frustrated. In fact some of them are scared to death when we pick them up. All I can say to the people is that as far as we are concerned FESA has picked up the liability issue, but that is not to say that one day if someone wants to take a shot at us, we will not go through the trauma of having to go through that if we do the wrong thing. It could happen. I am not a great one on the law, but if someone wants to take us to the civil court or something like that, FESA will help out and will be right behind us, but that is not to say that one of us will not be exposed.

[11.10 am]

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Are you au fait with all the ocean law, the international law, for taking things in tow and all that sort of thing?

Mr Francis: Yes, the very basic sort of maritime law in that situation - very basic. There are some subtleties which we are not confident about - for instance, who hands who the tow links - but usually, based on history, it has never been an issue. People are quite happy to take our towlines.

The issues come when you find abandoned vessels and things like this, which does happen - what do we do with it, and who, are issues?

Mr P.D. OMODEI: Claim it!

Mr Francis: Yes, I know - it sounds good, does it not - but the salvage laws are very complex unfortunately. There are other issues - things like when we have pulled up people, who have abused us. We have got the police involved. These kinds of things.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you explain that? You pull people up?

Mr Francis: Yes, they have had too much to drink - we have had that - and they are saying, "Why are you taking so long?" People honestly believe that we are a professional service that sit on our boats all the weekend waiting for someone to call us up; whereas, in effect, what has been happening in the background is that their call has gone via the police or someone, it has gone to radio operators, it has gone to a coordinator, who calls out a crew, and that person is probably sitting having their lunch or out doing something or other. We call them all in, they muster, we get the boats going and off we go. People do not realise that. That is where we struggle a bit, I think - education.

The CHAIRMAN: How quickly after receiving a call can you be in the water?

Mr Francis: We have had rescue 1, which is our fast response boat, in the water and away in 20 minutes, which is quite remarkable. If we keep our crews to the minimum and do not wait for that fourth crew member to come - and we have done that. I do not how consistently we would be able to do that; that was just a good day. The worst days are sunny weekend days when everyone is out doing the things that people do on weekends, and then we struggle a little a bit. We are fortunate in that we have been in a situation where we have never not been able to find a volunteer. What we do is we make a lot of contingencies. I am quite happy to call up the local dive shop and say, "Can we grab a few of your bodies?" We do second people quite easily. I am quite happy to go out. If somebody is coming up the launch ramp, I will just go up and say, "Excuse me, can you jump in the boat and go?" We will do that if we have to.

The CHAIRMAN: If I am a recreational boatie and I am out there on the water, if you deem that I am closer, would you actually use me?

Mr Francis: Exactly right, yes. The first thing we do is to get on the radio and find out if anybody is nearby, and we do use them, even if they only hold the situation.

The CHAIRMAN: Am I then covered for -

Mr Francis: I believe so. That is what I have been given to understand.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You are covered under the navigational waters act. If you fail to comply, you can be penalised for not complying.

Mr Francis: That is right. That is maritime law and also in FESA, from what I read, how I interpret it is that anyone who is used by the sea rescue is covered.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You say you have some problems there with trying to talk to police on cliffs etc. How do you go with EPIRB activations and how do you communicate with CASA when it comes to trying to track locations?

Mr Francis: Very good; it has been excellent actually. We have done very well and so have OSAR, as they call themselves now. We have a good relationship with them. It was only two weeks ago that we actually found an EPIRB set off in the middle of town - we actually do EPIRBs - and that is something I will be working with the SES on. "Sea rescue goes trundling off into the middle of the Albany, out into the bush finding EPIRB." We do it very well, because what they do is they locate an EPIRB within about 20 nautical miles, and we have got EPIRB detectors, which we have hunted all over the world for, and we can actually locate them.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You have your own one?

Mr Francis: Yes. They are still not wombat finders, you know. They are just direction finders.

The CHAIRMAN: How do you get your boats up the main street of Albany?

Mr Francis: That happens! People pick up these EPIRBs and set them off, and that fires up a blip in Canberra. They notify us and away we go. That has been very good.

The CHAIRMAN: Members, any further questions? We need to wrap up. May I just read the final official piece to close this up, which indicates what will happen from here on with Hansard and things like that. First of all, may I thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. 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 in the sense that the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct. You will get a full transcript of what has been said, and you can correct it and send it back to us, but you have to do it within 10 days, otherwise we will just deem that you are happy. Thanks very much for coming in and for your information.

Hearing concluded at 11.15 am
