

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT KUNUNURRA
TUESDAY, 4 JULY 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

Hearing commenced at 10.13 am

OGILVIE, MR ANDREW WILLIAM

Captain, Kununurra Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, examined:

HEADING, MR LINCOLN GEORGE

Manager, Kununurra State Emergency Service, examined:

DOWN, MR GRAEME JONES

District Manager, Fire and Emergency Services Authority, examined:

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

Mr Heading: As much as I have read, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You need to read all of it. Do you understand the notes attached to the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Ogilvie: Yes.

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

Mr Ogilvie: I did, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Heading: Yes.

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

Mr Heading: Yes.

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

Mr Heading: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: You have not given us a submission. Would you like to make any opening comments before we launch into questions?

Mr Heading: My preference is to give comment subject to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN: When was your fire and rescue services brigade established, how many members does it have and what emergency service roles does your organisation perform?

Mr Ogilvie: It was established in 1973. At the moment we have about 14 or 15 members on the books; we are down a little bit and need some more. Basically, we deal with scrub fires within the town gazetted area and structural fires within the town area. We deal with road accidents. We can go anything up to 110 kilometres either side of town, including into the Northern Territory. We deal with HAZMAT. We have just recently been given a role of confined-space rescue.

The CHAIRMAN: That is particularly mine site rescue, is it?

Mr Ogilvie: Confined space? Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Lincoln, when was your SES unit established? How many members do you have and what service roles do you perform?

Mr Heading: The State Emergency Service unit in Kununurra was formally incorporated in 1992 but had been active in various guises since 1968 as the civil defence, and then when civil defence was wound up it became the State Emergency Service unit of Kununurra. It was formally incorporated in 1992. There are 18 members on the books, of whom 12 are active. We have principal roles in supporting the police in a cyclone, earthquake, storm or tsunami - that is relevant, of course. We have support roles with the Western Australian police department for search, both air and sea. We also support the police in land search. There are other areas but, unfortunately, I do not have my notes here; they are not up to scratch. We also deal with communications within the region in various emergencies. We deal with cliff or vertical rescue activities. They are probably our principal responsibilities in support of the Western Australian police department.

The CHAIRMAN: We are checking with Graeme whether we should bring him to the table. Technically, we cannot get his comments because he is not at the table.

Mr Heading: Yes. That is all right. Just in reference to the sorts of responsibilities that we have, rather than to give them off the top of our head, we can give an accurate response relative to the State Emergency Service.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you happy to be sworn in?

Mr Down: Yes.

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

Mr Down: Yes.

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

Mr Down: Yes.

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

Mr Down: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Gentlemen, I think you have touched on some of the key emergency risks in the community. Between the two of you, would you like to expand on those risks? I think you mentioned flood, storm, road rescue and mine rescue or confined-space rescue?

Mr Ogilvie: Confined space is probably not a high risk. It is not something that we have had a lot of; more so road accidents and HAZCHEM.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you interact with any other brigades or emergency service units?

Mr Heading: The State Emergency Service unit and the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service have joint memberships where there are cooperative arrangements. For example, Andrew has a qualification in cliff rescue and comes to support us. There are land search and our flood boat rescue commitments, certainly for the riverine environment, that we have from time to time when called upon to do searches; and, certainly, rescues. We often call upon Wyndham units. Better put, the operation or exercise can become regional, and it is not unusual to call in Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Wyndham or Broome to assist. Bearing in mind the area of the region, we have been called upon to conduct rescues, particularly cliff rescue-based and land search-based rescues. There

could be anything up to 30 to 40 people flown into an area like the Mitchell Plateau to conduct the search or to conduct the repatriation of a deceased person from those regions. Yes, we do interact a lot with other units of the State Emergency Service, FESA units, emergency service units and the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service here in Kununurra.

Mr Ogilvie: Basically, we can assist some of the bushfire brigades in the outer areas of town and, likewise, if we need assistance with one in town, they can help us there. Our only back-up really comes from Wyndham for road rescue. Quite often we can both attend the same accident, or if there is something major like a HAZCHEM, which needs extra people, it is usually a long, drawn-out event.

The CHAIRMAN: What about the Northern Territory? You said you go into the Northern Territory.

Mr Ogilvie: We do.

The CHAIRMAN: Do they also have rescue facilities

Mr Ogilvie: As far as I am aware, they have a road rescue trailer at Timber Creek. From my understanding, it is a fairly basic one and there are a very small number of people there who actually know what is in it and how to use it. The next back-up on that side is in Katherine, which is 500-and-something kilometres from us.

Mr Heading: Previously, the Kununurra State Emergency Service unit had been tasked to support the Northern Territory State Emergency Service in the evacuation of various communities, which were obviously much closer to helicopter access from Kununurra than Katherine. We have also assisted in air search operations, but, again, that is a Civil Aviation Safety Authority support requirement.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Talking about going into the Territory and servicing the community over there, do you get any assistance at all from the Territory in that regard or is it just reliant on FESA fundraising efforts on this side of the border?

Mr Heading: If I could refer to Graeme regarding the regional support that Kununurra State Emergency Service unit would receive in facilitating the Northern Territory's evacuation requirements, remembering that the Aboriginal population, let us call it, family relationship is very closely aligned to Kununurra as opposed to further east; when people are repatriated or evacuated to Kununurra, they are often coming into a family environment, not necessarily being removed from it, and that is often the purpose of evacuating to Kununurra. I will ask Graeme to enlarge on the regional support capacity.

Mr Down: I think the role of the local unit and the State Emergency Service in Western Australia in evacuating indigenous people out of remote communities in the Northern Territory is basically a coordination role. In the past, Northern Territory police generally paid for the helicopters or the aircraft that were used, but the State Emergency Service in Western Australia has just taken on a coordination role and provides volunteers to go to those communities to help get people organised and get them removed.

Mr M.J. COWPER: For a number of reasons, FESA is proposing that FESA be renamed as the department of emergency services. This will mean the removal of "fire" from within the corporate name. FESA's argument is that the removal is appropriate because fire is just one of the many emergencies that volunteers attend to. There has been an objection to this on a number of different levels, based on a claim of loss of identity. Should the authority be re-established as a department, and do you have any view on the name that should be adopted?

Mr Ogilvie: I think it is more that it confuses the community. That was shown to us last Friday when we had an incident when somebody contacted the wrong number to contact us; they rang FESA instead of the fire brigade. Tony would have got a message on his phone and he was out of

town somewhere. At the end of the day, whatever you call it, I do not think we have a real point of view, but, yes, that is my main concern with the community knowing who to call.

Mr Heading: I certainly support Andrew. I think that with fire - to this community anyway, be it bushfire or certainly residential-type fire - there needs to be a distinction between that and other emergency services that might be required.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Do you think there is a perception in the community that they are unclear as to the demarcation and the roles that they play?

Mr Heading: I am not sure about the perception but, ultimately, it would be to exclude any perception. If it was a fireman that they wanted or a fire service that they required, they would look for "fire".

The CHAIRMAN: Can we talk about the emergency services levy? Currently, the ESL process calls for local government to complete an ESL grant scheme application, for SES unit funding. The ESL grants scheme committee must then approve or reject the application for funding. If the committee approves the amount requested, the funding is provided to local government, and the local government forwards it on to the SES unit. FESA is recommending that local government be taken out of the ESL application process and for the SES unit to deal directly with FESA in relation to ESL funding; that is, the SES unit would advise FESA directly of its funding requirements. I am just wondering what your opinion is on that. Do you have a comment?

[10.30 am]

Mr Heading: The current management of our funds is very good. We manage our own funds. We invoice the shire on a quarterly basis for our allocation and then manage our funds according to an acquittals program. I do not have handy with me the exact name of the acquittals; however, we acquit those funds accordingly. We have some grace within those funds to top up our equipment requirements, as has been necessary in this year, during which there have been some considered advancements in our vertical rescue equipment. We have been able to take those up to satisfy the upgraded vertical rescue requirements. My concerns are that we might lose control of those funds or the relationship we have with the shire in the distribution of those funds. We have shown that we are able to acquit those funds very responsibly. In the initial stages of ESL we had a budget and continually worked within the confines of that budget. This year we will be lowering our budget requirements. I believe that is because of our responsible usage of ESL funds and because we have not abused that privilege. I think that the ESL is probably the greatest thing that has ever happened to volunteer emergency services organisations, quite simply because we are now properly funded and do not have to do chook raffles or go out on grand parades. We can concentrate on the service the community expects of us.

The CHAIRMAN: I think you just headed into the area of my next question - you are pre-empting us! We would like to discuss how the emergency services levy has impacted on your unit, if it has. I think you have answered that. Do you want to tell us some more about the impacts of the ESL on your unit and also on Fire and Rescue?

Mr S.R. HILL: Does that assist with recruiting new members?

Mr Heading: Our system is unique. We often interact with other units, such as those in the Pilbara. We have been called out to jointly operate somewhere in the Kimberley or in the Pilbara. Those mining communities throughout the Pilbara have no trouble attracting members. They have a longer term turnover in the community. A lot of people in Kununurra are virtually itinerant. They are often public service-related, so we get a continual turnover of membership. Effectively we have a core membership. Our recruitment is by word of mouth and from either a commercial entity or a public service entity for which people come into town for a couple of years. We really have not had the need to recruit publicly. We are leading up to that now as the community has settled in for what

might be another couple of years of service to Kununurra. We are about to launch a public recruitment drive, and that will start occurring through the public newspapers.

Mr S.R. HILL: It must help if you are trying to recruit and people are not having to do cake stalls and things like that.

Mr Heading: Absolutely.

Mr S.R. HILL: They know that they can just go along, be trained and do what they have to do without any other commitment.

Mr Heading: That is correct.

Mr Ogilvie: ESL has not really affected us a great deal because, for our funding, we still go through our district manager to get what we need. We operate to a yearly budget. That is not usually presented to us. We do not have to apply for the funds; we just operate out of that budget. Now that the community is paying the ESL, it expects somebody to turn up if there is an incident, so it probably affects us that way. All in all, it is not a real issue.

The CHAIRMAN: I ask about the level of training. Are you happy with the training you are getting through FESA and is it appropriate to your needs? Could it be improved?

Mr Ogilvie: Our training is always ongoing. We have the same problem as Lincoln described with the itinerant population - that is, people coming and going. We have a core group of people who have been there for a number of years. Our training is ongoing. When we have the people to do the courses, courses are run. During the year we try to keep everybody up to a certain level.

Mr Heading: State Emergency Service training is adequate. Often it is punctuated by the ability to train. Several courses over the years have been stopped because of flooding, which is particularly relevant to flatboat rescues. We have had opportunities to go ahead with vertical rescue courses, but, again, they have been put off simply because it is not convenient - I do not suppose that is the right word because it suggests a degree of lethargy. However, it is more that the situation has not allowed that part of vertical rescue to carry on. We need three to four months' advance notice for a cliff rescue course, and in that three to four-month intervening period the situation might change and the course might be put off. When I refer to vertical rescue, I must add that we are very well catered for in that regard, which I suppose is one of our major roles here in Kununurra. I am very confident that the permanent FESA staff will continue to offer adequate training and resources; it is just that sometimes the situation prevents that training from going ahead.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that training generally delivered here in Kununurra or do you have to go to Broome or Perth?

Mr Ogilvie: Pretty much most of it is delivered here. From time to time there is a combined training course between here and Wyndham. Some members from Wyndham may come across; at other times some of our members will go over there. The training is pretty central. Once a year we do a training course in Perth. We get a couple of big launches prior to Easter, which is well worthwhile. That is held at Forrestfield. Other than that, we also from time to time have the opportunity to use the resources out at Argyle Diamonds mine. We can go out there. Apart from that, our training is basically done here.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I have been contemplating the comment you made earlier about the large changeover of itinerants in this town compared with in the Pilbara. They seem to hang on to theirs more. Do you think fly in, fly out has been to the detriment of the town? Do you think that if many of those mineworkers at Argyle in particular were living in the town, the situation would change?

Mr Heading: Almost certainly, but again they are still limited to a two weeks on, two weeks off or a three on, one off rotation; therefore, they are here and they are not. A lot of what they do is when their off-time occurs. Generally, they either have it off or they consume themselves with other work-type activities. Locally, there is one chap who is a mineworker who comes in and gives me a

hand on his fortnight off, which is very convenient for me. My understanding is that Argyle has a policy of recruiting locally, but again it is still two weeks on, two weeks off. Only one mineworker is an SES volunteer who remains committed to his membership. He is on a three week on, one week off rotation. However, he visits town a little more frequently because of the position he holds with the company he works for. I am not sure if I have properly answered your question; however, I do not think Argyle's fly in, fly out service necessarily impacts on the State Emergency Service here in Kununurra.

[10.40 am]

The CHAIRMAN: I want to ask you about fire hydrants. How does that work in Kununurra?

Mr Ogilvie: Basically, we look after the hydrants within the town's visited area. That is basically where there are hydrants, apart from at the airport, which we also look after on behalf of the shire. We service them once a year and any faults found with them are reported. Tony will answer questions about their funding.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Currently, the legislation empowers three bodies - FESA, local government and CALM - to have control of a fire at any given time. The control of the fire is dependent on land tenures. The Auditor General and the coroner have both criticised this arrangement, claiming that one body must be made accountable and responsible for the control of a fire during a multi-agency incident. Both claim that anything less jeopardises the safety of the community in Western Australia. CALM is agreeable to FESA assuming control from local government but not from CALM. Do you have any opinion on that statement?

Mr Ogilvie: We have a national park in town that goes up every year and CALM is there to take control. We assist CALM with those fires. I am happy for that situation to continue as it is.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If FESA is going to take control of a multi-agency incident or a large fire, should CALM be -

Mr Ogilvie: If it is on CALM land in an area that is controlled by CALM, I think CALM should, yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: CALM should continue to be in control?

Mr Ogilvie: CALM tends to know the area best.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Mr Heading, do you have any comments?

Mr Heading: Not about fires. We generally have a communication role when fires occur, but that is not related to fighting them.

Mrs J. HUGHES: That brings me to another question regarding isolation and communications between different agencies. Is there a problem with communications?

Mr Ogilvie: It has always been a problem, particularly between the agencies. It is getting sorted out a bit, but there are still issues with it.

Mr Heading: It has been the bane of my life. Police can talk to the SES but not to the ambulance or fire services. For all the other problems that exist between agencies, the State Emergency Service, with a communications role, has radio equipment that can cross over, but, again, it is restrictive, and it lessens the ability for a truly coordinated capacity. Of course, we all look to the major emergency that might one day happen. Communication systems are most likely to fail when they are most needed. It would be really good to see a coordinated emergency services approach taken with communications.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If FESA were in control of a multi-agency incident, would it be FESA's responsibility to make sure that the communications were all in place? Should all of the services be involved?

Mr Ogilvie: Yes.

Mr Heading: The responsibility for a multi-agency approach would rest with FESA anyway. The relevant issue is the voice-type communication. Currently, there is the possibility of three or four different types of communications operating. In a remote area that would include satellite phones and HF, VHF and UHF radio. That is the broader end of it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: While the committee has been in Kununurra, it has heard of some incidents regarding the ambulance service. The emergency services would impact on the SES quite heavily, especially if SES personnel were attending a traffic accident or whatever. How does the communication system work with the ambulance service here if you do not have volunteers? I believe that some of the ambulance service is covered by the state. Can you give me a better view of how the SES interfaces with the ambulance service?

Mr Heading: The State Emergency Service does not necessarily interact directly with the ambulance service.

Mr Ogilvie: We do not have any radio contact with the ambulance service at all. We often work with the ambulance service at road accidents, and we work quite well with them. However, we do not communicate with the ambulance service en route to a scene.

The CHAIRMAN: How is an incident coordinated? Does the SES need to talk to the ambulance service? How much of an issue is it?

Mr Ogilvie: It is probably not an issue. There have been a couple of incidents when we have arrived at a scene prior to the ambulance and have found that a person is deceased or is okay and does not need an ambulance, so that the ambulance can step down from its priority one response. Communication with the ambulance service en route to a scene is probably not a big issue because I am going through what I need to do when I get to the incident regarding planning and whatever else I need to do.

The CHAIRMAN: Lincoln, the committee is aware that you have a sandalwood plantation. I have a question regarding fire management plants etc. I will ask you the question and if you are not happy to answer it, that is fine. If you are happy to answer it, the committee would not mind hearing the opinion of someone who is involved in that industry. FESA suggested that it be empowered to request the development of fire management plans from landowners whether the land is CALM-managed land, plantation land or land used for pastoral or grazing purposes. A fire management plan would be requested only if FESA considered this to be necessary to mitigate the risk of fire to life and property in areas of high risk. Do you have a comment on the proposal for fire management plans?

Mr Heading: In my personal capacity as a manager of sandalwood developments, there has been a fire management plan, albeit it is set aside with the placement of irrigation channels and access infrastructure being in a uniform design that allows separation which, when a review of a south western shire requirement for alleyways and accessways is considered, comfortably consumes that six to eight per cent of total land area committed to the plantation. That is what sets aside a fire management plan in sandalwood plantations as against what might be expected for a blue gum plantation down south.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have the plans?

Mr Heading: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it correct to say that because of the roads, the channels and all those sorts of separations, that plan is sometimes set aside?

Mr Heading: I would not suggest that the plan is set aside. The responsibility for fire management plans is not diminished for one minute. However, considerations are made regarding the placement

of infrastructure so that the necessity to have a detailed fire management plan prior to the development of the plantation -

The CHAIRMAN: Is that fire management plan just for the plantation? Is the plan shared with anybody else? Is it passed up to local government and FESA?

Mr Heading: I cannot correctly tell the committee what is the interaction between Integrated Tree Cropping, Tropical Forestry Services and the local shire.

The CHAIRMAN: We have had information from ITC down south. It has substantial fire management plans that are well organised. Not only does it have them, but the plans are fed to the local council and FESA.

Mr Heading: To add to that, our local ITC manager is a lieutenant in the local Ivanhoe brigade.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for that. The committee thought it would be good to hear your comments because the committee has not heard from many people in the plantation industry.

Mrs J. HUGHES: A number of local governments are proposing that FESA take over part or all of the bushfire responsibilities of local government. These responsibilities include those related to supporting and administering the bush fire brigades. FESA has suggested that the legislation allow FESA to take over bushfire responsibilities only when the local government in the area wants that to occur. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr Ogilvie: FESA manages us in a way, but as for the bush fire brigades, it does not really affect us.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are the volunteers quite comfortable with that?

Mr Ogilvie: With FESA, yes. The local government has been managing the outer bush fire brigades.

Mr S.R. HILL: Lincoln, one of the SES units the committee has spoken to has said there has been an issue with administration and reporting procedures. Does that draw on the time of the SES volunteers? Is someone responsible for being the secretary or the treasurer and those types of positions?

Mr Heading: It has had a major impact on my life. It seems to fall back on the unit manager to be the secretary and treasurer. More recently, we have been able to displace a number of those activities. We have a treasurer/bookkeeper and some of the secretarial duties are now being handled once a week by a person who is effectively part of the community development employment projects program. That has taken a lot of that activity away. We are very well supported by the likes of Graeme and Tony, and on a regional basis from our regional offices in Broome and Karratha, and by the permanent FESA staff.

Mr S.R. HILL: It sounds like it is getting a bit better then.

Mr Heading: That is right, it continues to get better. However, it has been a burden when it is considered that the job has not been done properly. We have placed a great deal of importance on a true and correct appropriation of the ESL funding packages so that it all stands up and is well supported by a commercially available accounting package. We can deliver a very accurate assessment of our funding.

The CHAIRMAN: 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 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. Gentlemen, thank you once again for giving us the benefit of your time and knowledge this morning.

Hearing concluded at 10.52 am
