

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE STATE'S PREPAREDNESS  
FOR THIS YEAR'S FIRE SEASON**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE  
TAKEN AT PERTH  
FRIDAY, 2 NOVEMBER 2012**

**SESSION TWO**

**Members**

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)**  
**Mr R.F. Johnson (Deputy Chairman)**  
**Ms M.M. Quirk**  
**Mr I.M. Britza**  
**Mr T.G. Stephens**

---

**Hearing commenced at 11.07 am**

**HUNTER, MR TERRENCE**

**President, Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades of WA (Inc), examined:**

**GOSSAGE, MR DAVID GEORGE**

**Committee Member, Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades of WA (Inc), examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Good morning, gentlemen. I will start so we can get you out of here at a half reasonable time! If I can read the official bit first, then I will introduce the Committee. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings of 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 the Parliament. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

**Mr Hunter:** Is that what we signed when we came in?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Yes.

**Mr Hunter:** That is the one!

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

**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:** I will introduce the Committee. Rob Johnson is the member for Hillarys and is the Deputy Chair; Margaret Quirk is the member for Girrawheen; Ian Britza is the member for Morley; and I am Tony O’Gorman, member for Joondalup and chair of the committee. Before we start, do you have any opening comments you would like to make or any additions to the submission you have provided us?

**The Witnesses:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Happy for us to just throw questions?

**The Witnesses:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can I just ask you how well you think the State is prepared for this year’s bushfire season?

**Mr Hunter:** I would say it is no better prepared than it has been in past years at this stage.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is there a particular reason why you do not think it is any better prepared?

**Mr Hunter:** Mitigation; the amount of controlled burning that has been carried out over the last number of years has fallen behind and consequently is leading to a build-up around the communities of unacceptable levels of vegetation.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** We are advised that this bushfire season could be the worst one we have ever seen because of the climatic conditions we have experienced. Obviously, if that eventuates, that is going to put an enormous amount of pressure on particularly, I believe, our volunteer firefighters, like yourselves, your organisations and your members. Do you feel confident that you will be able to cope with it, regarding the fact that there has not been the amount of prescribed burning? That is one issue, obviously, that you have highlighted, but are there other issues? Do you believe you have enough equipment, for instance, supplied to you? Do you believe you have enough personnel—

enough volunteers—who are the backbone of our organisations in fighting fires? Can you expand on that a bit for us?

**Mr Gossage:** I think it is like everything with risk, which is that the more fuel you have, the greater the risk; the less fuel you have, the less risk. So if you get a fire, the amount of time it takes to get that fire under control is a lot less with lower fuel loading. All through my years I have always been told that eight tonnes to the hectare is a good medium average to go for that we can adequately suppress a fire. I am concerned that this threshold is no longer down there anymore, because over the years the amount of prescribed burning that has happened on all lands—not just one agency's land, but all lands—has put that average threshold up. I can quote that the average around one of the Kalamunda areas is between 18 and 32 tonnes to the hectare, and it really is a scary feeling.

What that does is when we as volunteers go out into the field, that makes the actual threat to us as volunteers far greater. The radiant heat is higher and the heated threshold is higher, and so the potential for things going wrong is higher. So you are always putting people's lives—whether they are career or volunteers—at risk with the heavier fuel loadings. Sadly, with the embargo being put in, that seems to have actually made that worse this year. I have just come from the state conference, where it was highlighted that at the same time last year 19,000 hectares were done, and this year only 7,000 hectares have been done. That is a huge difference across the State, and that is a huge threat to our volunteers.

From a volunteer's perspective, we can never have enough equipment. But there are a lot of concerns that the type of equipment we are getting is so electronic and fancy that it is susceptible to failure because radiant heat melts electronics. We want simple things we can turn on and off with valves and stuff, to make it safer for our guys. There is a lot of work to be done in that area. I feel confident—I was at a state meeting the previous Saturday—that that is being, at long last, listened to. So it is very positive in that regard, but we have a long way to go.

As for the number of volunteers, I think you have to understand that the bush fire brigade volunteers are local government, local community, and a lot of people, and everything you see in the media, relates to city career people all the time. There are 28,000 of us in the broader state of Western Australia, versus a couple of thousand career people, and that is a frustration that we get as an association when we go around the State. They get very frustrated with that lack of understanding. Another concern in regards to the legislation proposals is the effect of that on volunteerism is that the more legislation you have, the harder it is for you to volunteer because of all the rules and regulations you have to apply and follow.

So the effect on volunteerism is that you get a lot of people saying, "What's the point? It's too hard." The legislation we should be pulling in should be legislation that focuses on supporting and empowering communities and volunteers, not disempowering them. That seems to be the trend we have seen over recent years; all the legislation gets rushed through Parliament, but nobody has actually asked the questions: what is the consequence of this on our community? What is the consequence on our volunteerism? Nobody has ever asked that question, and that is, from our association's point of view, something that gets brought to our attention regularly, and they get frustrated. This is the first opportunity this association has had to come to any standing committee, and yet we represent the biggest firefighting force in WA.

**Mr Hunter:** There are 26,000 bush fire volunteers at the moment—there are quite possibly more out there who are not in there. There are 2,000 SES; 1,000 VMRS volunteers—the volunteer emergency service ones, who are a combination of SES bush fire fighters and fire and rescue; and then there is volunteer fire and rescue. Out of that, there are 27,400 who are not fire and rescue people or attached to FESA, in the old term.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** That is why we invited you along. We thought you were an important part of our bush firefighting force—I would say our forefront. You are the front-line service.

---

**Mr Hunter:** We cover more than 80%, or provide better than 80% of the firefighting services for the State.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** To get back to your point, Dave: do you think that with the way things are operating now there is a lack of autonomy available to individual brigades, which is a cause of frustration? In other words, doing things to suit local conditions.

**Mr Gossage:** Yes, I suppose with the legislation changes we have seen over the years—I will use the example of the HMA status; there used to be DEC, FESA and local government, which are the key three fire agencies for Western Australia. The other point we want to stress is fire is not fire—okay? There are different types of fire. Career fire and rescue are the chemical dangerous fires with all the very high-tech stuff that they need to deal with that nasty stuff. But bushfires are a different fire because they actually move rather rapidly, and if you look over history, most damage has been done as a consequence of a bushfire not a structural fire, in the context of what has happened around Australia.

I personally was over there on the front line as a level 3 IMT with the Black Saturday fires, and I understand this stuff. I have been around a very long time, as has Terry, and been on the front line for a very long time; long enough to know that what helps you through those circumstances is an empowered and resilient community—okay? The more you bring in legislation, which is what we are seeing now, that is making control centrally controlled out of the city, that disempowers people to volunteer. Taking the HMA status away and giving it to one agency now says, “That’s their problem; they have to deal with it now. It is not our problem anymore.” It is a perception thing.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** You are critical of the legislation that has been brought in over the last couple of years, and you have given reasons why. A lot of the legislation that has been brought in, as I understand it, has been at the suggestion of the Keelty inquiry and of Keelty himself. From the sounds of it, you do not agree with Keelty’s recommendations in relation to those aspects of his report—that is, the legislation or what has been contained in that legislation. Is that fair to say?

**Mr Gossage:** It is not that we disagree with him. There are elements of it that we, in context, agree with him, but the context of what he intended versus what is actually being rolled out seems to have changed. The understanding we have in regards to cultural change was within the agency, but what we have seen is a cultural change in legislation that takes power away from the community and puts a more centralised command and control focus on everything. Look, we have no issue with it being said that when you get up to major issues you need core state coordination. We have always supported that; we have never not supported that intent, which is what Keelty was referring to. But the word is “coordination”, not “command and control”, because if you start barking and pointing your finger and saying, “You will go and do this—X, Y and Z—my way”, to a community and a volunteer, you know what going to happen—they do not; they will do their own thing. I have seen it happen time and time again.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** Can I ask you about the two major fires? Sorry, Margaret, you can have the floor in a second, I just want to get this bit over with.

We have had two major inquiries—the Keelty inquiry into the Margaret River bushfires, the most recent one; and the Keelty inquiry into the Kelmscott–Roleystone fires. Many people would say that in relation to the Margaret River bushfires, the cause of that was the fact that DEC lit seven fires in one go, basically.

There is some argument that they left them burning overnight and went home, and they spread enormously and caused the devastation that they did. So, the cause of that fire was quite clear. I think that the efforts on behalf of the DEC firefighters and, certainly, people in your organisation—your volunteer firefighters, the bush fire brigades did a tremendous job, and so did the career ones that came down as well. I mean, when there is a bad fire, everybody lends a hand, and that is the way it has always been and the way it should be, I think.

---

In relation to the Kelmscott–Roleystone fire, what happened there, basically, which caused the huge amount devastation, we know it started from an angle grinder, but also, I think most people who have travelled round there know, the devastation was also due to the fact that many people left trees hanging over their homes; they had vegetation right up to their front doors. With the winds on the day, from what I heard from your colleagues who were on the ground, nothing could have stopped that fire from continuing and causing the devastation that it did. There was nothing that any firefighters could have done or any organisation could have done; it was the dreadful events and the fact that people did have huge amounts of vegetation around them. I travelled all round there, as you are probably aware, at the time and I could see it firsthand. It just amazed me the number of people who lived in that location and had trees hanging over their homes; they had vegetation up to their front doors and had done nothing to try and mitigate any bushfire consequences on their own property.

Certainly, somebody told me that—I will not mention the name of that person—they do not want to clear around their house. They are prepared to lose their house if necessary because that is the way they want to live. They are quite happy to put a notice on their front gate saying, “In the event of a bushfire, please don’t bother with my house, go onto the next one”. That is somebody that holds a high position in this community, I can tell you, who said that. You may know the person I am talking about. That is their choice, but the problem is by doing that I think they are putting their neighbours at risk; they really are.

So, I was obviously a bit disappointed with the Keelty inquiry in relation to the Kelmscott–Roleystone one because everybody told me on the day, and after that, that you could have had double, treble, the number of firefighters—volunteer firefighters, career firefighters—there and it would not have made a great deal of difference because the fire was of such ferocity, the winds were so great, the heat was so great, but the—

**The CHAIRMAN:** Is this a question or statement?

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** Hey! There is no media here, so it is okay.

So, obviously, I felt that everybody did everything they could and that there was some unfair criticism, quite frankly. Do you believe that there was unfair criticism of certain individuals, groups and whatever in relation to the Kelmscott–Roleystone fire and, perhaps, also in relation to the Margaret River one?

**Mr Gossage:** I would agree with that statement because I have not in my lifetime seen any volunteer or career person from any agency deliberately go out to do the wrong thing, because people seem to forget that we are called in to help and yet they want to point the finger at us all the time. It is very disheartening, especially for volunteers, to see who is going to be the political scapegoat at this inquiry, and it is just wrong. With all the inquiries that have happened and how the media try and persecute an individual is something that really scares volunteerists from actually standing up and being volunteers. This is why we expect bipartisan support across all Government agencies to ensure that that sort of thing does not happen to anybody who is a responder, because nobody, no matter what agency you belong to or volunteer, even a good Samaritan doing the right thing on the day, is there to do the wrong thing. They are all doing the best they can with what they have got at the time.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** You mean, they are there to do the right thing.

**Mr Gossage:** They are there to do the right thing. I said they are not there to do the wrong thing; they are there to do the right thing.

The fundamental issue about the fire behaviour in Roleystone and any of the major fires is the fuel loading and mitigation work that people do. It is a bugbear for us.

---

**Mr Hunter:** That expands out into the fact that planning has let us down; the actual planning department has overridden quite a few local governments when it comes to, you know, you have got your green local governments who will not allow clearing —

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** There is a real sticking point in terms of the Keelty recommendations for planning issues, and that is true.

Can I just ask you a bit about appliances and the allocation of appliances? Are you able to say whether the appliances that the brigades have have got burn-over protection?

**Mr Hunter:** No, they have not.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** No, they have not; is that a concern to—

**Mr Hunter:** That is definitely a concern. That has been something that we have been discussing for 18 months now, I would suggest; that is, just getting blankets into the bushfire appliances and we have not got them. The money was allocated before last fire season for that and it never happened.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** What is the hold-up?

**Mr Hunter:** The hold-up was, “We are trying to find out which is the best blanket for the job.”

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Some would say any blanket is better than none.

**Mr Hunter:** Every other state has got some sort of blanket in them, DEC have got them in; surely to God, we could put them in, and if we find a better one, then you fund it. But the funding was made available 18 months ago and we still have not got blankets in bushfire appliances.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is the hold-up on that? Who is holding it?

**Mr Gossage:** The standard, I believe.

**Mr Hunter:** The standard; the actual standard of the blanket was the hold-up. I believe it is now happening, in light of, I think, unfortunately what has happened in the last few weeks.

**Mr Gossage:** But it will not happen until the new year, I do not think.

**Mr Hunter:** But it is going to take this fire season to roll it out.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** So, not everybody will have the benefit of it for the whole of this fire season?

**Mr Hunter:** Not necessarily.

**Mr Gossage:** No.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** And can you tell me: in terms of training about burn-over situations, I understand that is not in the sort of early stages—module 1, 2 or 3—but it is later; it is in what I call optional training, effectively?

**Mr Hunter:** There is actually a standalone burn-over procedure that has been put together and that. That has not been rolled out because no blankets have been distributed as yet. But that was prepared 12 months ago.

**Mr Gossage:** We are aware that some brigades do burn-over drills with what gear they have and that is setting up a monitor to protect the cab and that for the oncoming fire. But, once again, the issue there is if you get a bad fire and you are in the wrong spot at the wrong time, like has recently happened, there is very little you can do.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Yes, but it would be good if that training was rolled out as absolutely crucial rather than—

**Mr Hunter:** Of course, the next thing we need to look at, which is going to be an expense, is the dropdown curtains. The one thing that has come out in recent times is the amount of plastic on appliances. Now, it is no fault of the fire services; that is how the trucks come out now. But we do need to look at having them modified and putting metal parts where some of the plastics are; for

instance, the surrounds around the door handles warping so that you cannot open doors at times and that type of thing. So, that all needs to be reviewed and —

**The CHAIRMAN:** What opportunity do you have to have input into the appliances that you receive?

**Mr Hunter:** There is a vehicle and equipment committee and those items and concerns have been raised at those committee meetings.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** So, at those committee meetings you are represented on the committee with FESA, is that how it works?

**Mr Hunter:** That is correct.

**Mr Gossage:** The association is not, but bush fire brigade members are.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Just going on to the allocation of appliances, there was a recent example where fire brigades were literally expecting appliances to arrive and then they got a phone call saying, “They’re all going to Margaret River.” Can you explain to me what the process is that individual brigades get allocated appliances? What are the criteria? What is the priority? Is that something you know or understand?

**Mr Hunter:** That is theoretically worked on an age process; the age of the appliances becomes available for change out. That has been pushed out on occasions. The brigades I believe that were to get new appliances have not got the new appliances, so they have still got their old appliances, and those appliances they were going to get were directed down into the Margaret River area to boost it up.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** That must affect morale for your brigade members.

**Mr Gossage:** It does; it already has.

**Mr Hunter:** It does. They do understand what is happening, but it does not make them happy.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Doug, you were just shaking your head a bit then and rolling your eyes. Have you got anything to add to that?

**Mr Gossage:** I suppose my concern is that when we went down this path of the emergency services levy, which was going to help fund all this, it was promoted by Government that vehicles in high-use areas that are going to regular fires, every eight years the big trucks would be refurbished and recycled out to the bushfire remote areas that do not go to very many fires to keep the fleet to the level it should, and likewise with the light tankers—it was every five years; that is what we were promised—and every year the goalposts seem to get moved and we do not know why. Then in recent weeks we have found out it is now that you are going to have your truck for 20 years, but this is all stuff that comes out of the blue all the time. The goalposts keep getting moved.

**The CHAIRMAN:** But the purpose of the ESL, when it was brought out, was to make sure that the FESA units or FESA operations groups and yourselves had up-to-date equipment, and that worked for a while.

**Mr Gossage:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** But now it is pushed out, back to 20 years again.

**Mr Gossage:** Yes, and no refurbishment of the vehicles half-life or anything. There is no funding or anything for that, so we have got trucks that are in very high risk and high use areas, especially around the urban metro fringe, that are literally falling apart.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** It has been put to me that with some local governments or some brigades, there are favourites played, or if the local governments are, shall we say, more compliant with what FESA wants to be done, they are more likely to get an appliance than maybe a local government area that is a bit more hostile, if you like. Is that —

---

**Mr Gossage:** The ones that stand up.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** What do you mean by that?

**Mr Gossage:** Well, there is a perception of that and, unfortunately, you cannot prove anything like that, but there are some perceptions that that does occur from time to time.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** So when appliances are supplied, are there certain conditions, or is there some memorandum or contract or something that needs to be signed, or what happens when you get an appliance?

**Mr Gossage:** It depends on what appliances they are, because if they are the light tanker and what we call the heavy-duty-type trucks, the system allows them to be swapped like for like. However, when the ESL was looking at what equipment was out there, there were not the resources to actually identify everything that was actually out there. There is a perception that that was not done properly, so hence a number of vehicles have been overlooked that had been in train for 20 or 30 years before that—so, light tankers and support vehicles and incident control vehicles and the like. So, in recent years there has been funding allocated to ICVs and bulk tankers, as they would say, but they have to sign an agreement, whereas if it is replacing an existing vehicle, why do they have to sign an agreement? This is a bit of a frustration.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Dave, are you saying that even today there is not a proper database of the firefighting resources that we have out there—a complete database?

**Mr Gossage:** I was at the State vehicle equipment committee a week or so ago, and that was the comment made by a number of volunteers out there—that it does not seem as though that has been done correctly. So there is that perception that the true database may not be reflective of what is actually out there, and the argument sometimes that is put, based on that contextual discussion that occurred, is, “Well, the ESL can only fund this much, so these are the only ones that we will fund under ESL.” What about community risk and need? You cannot make one glove fit all. That is what builds communities. Community risks and needs are diverse, and if you empower that community and give them what they need to look after themselves, they will look after themselves.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** So these agreements that are having to be signed when the trucks are handed over, what sort of stuff have they got in them? What is objectionable about, if you like, having to sign these agreements?

**Mr Gossage:** To be quite honest, I cannot recall because I have not seen one of recent times.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** All right; okay.

**Mr Gossage:** So I could not honestly answer that.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Maybe if you can get some additional information, that would be handy.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can we let Ian ask a question because he is about to run off?

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Yes.

**Mr I.M. BRITZA:** I, unfortunately, have to leave, but I do want to ask one question. But I also wanted to put on record that every time we have had an inquiry, when we have heard from the front-line service at all, it is the one that has actually made us feel like we have got down to the real issue of what we actually need to do. So I am very appreciative and I feel that I could listen to you for far longer than this time. I just want to put that on the record first. In a couple of our previous inquiries there have been problems with radios. We have heard that the new WAERN radios are in, and I wanted to know before I left: is that thing working? How do you deal with the communication issue?

**Mr Hunter:** Put it this way: it is working, but not to the standard of the old system. The mid band had better coverage than the high band has.

---



**Mr I.M. BRITZA:** I am sorry, but before you go into anything more specific, that sort of tells me that the authorities that be are really not listening to what is happening on the ground.

**Mr Hunter:** I have just been down through the lower Great Southern and that, which takes you from Esperance right out to basically Kalgoorlie, and all the end users are complaining about the coverage they are getting with the radios. There are not enough repeaters in the system to give them coverage. They have got less coverage now than what they had with the mid band.

**Mr Gossage:** And the other factor of this being the high-band system is that it is affected by smoke, terrain and moisture. Well, guess what? What do we do?

**Mr Hunter:** The technical people say it should not happen, but there are numerous accounts, when you are out there talking to people on the ground—the end users—that it is occurring.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** I understand there are some further areas that are being gazetted following, I think, the second Keelty report. What impact does that have on volunteer brigades?

**Mr Hunter:** Are you talking about down in the Margaret River region?

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Yes.

**Mr Hunter:** Well, the impact there was that it initially affected the bushfire volunteers. They felt that they were not really worthy of what they had done and being treated with respect as far as that goes.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** For the purpose of Hansard, can you just maybe explain what the legal implications are of gazettal? Are you able to do that?

**Mr Gossage:** Yes. Once you gazette a fire district, the biggest impact it has for a bush fire brigade is that they cannot enter a building without permission, whereas under the Bush Fires Act we are empowered to. Because our title is “bush fire”, people in the general wider community have a misconception that we just fight grass fires and bushfires. The reality is that we have been fighting more than just bushfires since this country was settled, basically—since inception. We fight structure fires as well. The only difference is that we are not supplied with breathing apparatus. As an association, we did not agree with the need to gazette an area when it is going to be the same volunteers doing the job; all we needed was the equipment. This proviso that you have to have an area gazetted is rubbish, because it is still the same guys doing it. The other thing it does is that it takes control away from the local community and puts it back into centralised control, so wherever you have got a gazetted area, it is controlled by fire and rescue in the city.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** So for somewhere like Margaret River, would it mean that there is a VFRS unit there?

**Mr Gossage:** Yes.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** They would effectively be running the show, but it would not be career firefighters; is that right?

**Mr Hunter:** Yes. What has happened is that they have dual registered a number of brigades as fire and rescue and bushfire, and that allows them to have BA. There was no reason why it had to be gazetted or dual registered to have BA.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** But in terms of career response, is Bunbury the nearest station or —

**Mr Gossage:** Career, I think, is Bunbury.

**Mr Hunter:** Yes, it would be Bunbury.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** And people will be paying ESL, I gather, once it is gazetted.

**Mr Hunter:** You pay ESL either way, but a different level of ESL.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Yes, exactly.

---

**Mr Hunter:** But the actual service being provided to the general public down there will be no better than what they had before. It is the same people turning out. They have got a couple of extra appliances, but the gazettal has made no difference.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Those people in that area will actually pay more through their ESL —

**Mr Hunter:** That is correct.

**The CHAIRMAN:** — for no better service.

**Mr Hunter:** No better service. And, historically, they have not lost any homes in the area where they put the extra BAs in.

That is just house fires. On the day of the Margaret River fire, if we had another incident like that, you are not going to be using breathing apparatus because it is dynamic, it is fast moving and, to set up all the requirements to don BA, you would be barbecued doing it. It is just not going to happen.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can we ask about funding for staff and training. You said in your submission there is insufficient funding for training and staff. Can you expand a little bit on that for us, please.

**Mr Hunter:** The funding side of it has always been a problem for volunteers, and that is having sufficient funding to train volunteers when volunteers are available. To have volunteers trained at the training centre on a weekend is near impossible—courses are run during the week—or, if they do have training programs on the weekends out at the training centre, it is volunteers training volunteers. There has to be a career person available down there for the centre to be open. If there is not one available, the training does not go ahead. That was what was happening during last year.

**The CHAIRMAN:** That training comes through FESA?

**Mr Hunter:** Yes.

**Mr Gossage:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** They are not providing proper and appropriate training to the volunteers; you are providing it yourself?

**Mr Hunter:** It is proper and appropriate but not sufficient.

**Mr Gossage:** I suppose the context is FESA have got to look after their career people because they are employees. Naturally your priorities are to your employees, which it should be; there is no question about that. But the reality of the dynamics of Western Australia and the sheer vastness of it is that we need more resources to be able to train the broader community—bushfire volunteers—across the State. The physical manpower allocated for training bushfire people is very light on. We cannot get the exact figures, so we cannot be specific for you, but I do know—I am a volunteer trainer and I think Terry is one as well—we actually go out and do the training to the standards, but if we want other training, we have had to go elsewhere. I know a number of people, and even people who are in FESA, that have actually done DEC training courses to get the bushfire qualifications.

Also, in local government and bushfire land, people have gone to other agencies and other people to get their qualifications. I have gone and paid for my level 2 training myself so I can get it because you just cannot get any courses within the FESA system. There is that sort of thing happening out there. There is not enough physical manpower, and then the dollars that you need to go with the manpower, to be able to support the people on the ground who need the support. I cannot give you figures because we cannot get that sort of information, but that is the general —

**The CHAIRMAN:** You said you have 27,500 volunteers —

**Mr Hunter:** There are 26,000 bushfire volunteers. The other ones I was referring to that did not belong to FESA were made up of marine rescue.

**Mr Gossage:** And bush fire brigades.

---

**The CHAIRMAN:** They do not belong to FESA. You are not actually affiliated to FESA?

**Mr Hunter:** No; we belong to local government.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And your insurance is covered through FESA or local government?

**Mr Gossage:** Local government.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Just on that: I think bush fire brigades take some pride in being separate from FESA. Can you explain in a nutshell why that is; that there are concerns, for example, about a FESA takeover?

**Mr Hunter:** From my perspective, again talking to the rural people out and about, that is the taking away of local resilience and the ability for them to run their own fires. They understand their country, they know the peculiarities of it and they are very concerned about somebody coming in from outside and making ill-founded decisions because they are taking the broad-brush effect rather than the local knowledge. They are also concerned that they will start losing volunteers because of that. If FESA bring in task forces or IMT teams and take over, for instance, people will say, “We’ll walk away. They can bring the trucks; they can bring everything and look after it. We’ll protect our house and stock and we’re not interested in anything else.”

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** Has that changed over the last couple of years?

**Mr Hunter:** There is definitely a groundswell there. At meetings I was at over the last couple of weeks, that came through—that people are very concerned about it.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** From my experience, when I was the Minister for Emergency Services, it was quite clear in relation to FESA that where you had a local bush fire brigade fighting a fire, who had their own incident controller, that that incident controller was acutely aware of what was needed and the best way to deal with that, and that when FESA came in to assist, they would leave that incident controller in charge unless it got to a stage where that incident controller felt they wanted FESA to take it over because it had got out of hand. That is how it was, as I recall, a couple of years ago—even a year or 18 months ago—which I thought was the best way to go. What you are saying is that that has changed since then?

**Mr Hunter:** It has got the potential to change. There have been indications that that is changing. They have probably —

**Mr Gossage:** If you look at the recent events even over the last fire season, if you have a look at how many people were deployed from FESA to actually become the incident controller, some recent fires north of Perth, you can just see that they walk in. Whilst they are there and they do work well—do not get me wrong, there are some great people within FESA who do understand that need but there are also the other ones that have not been exposed to it, that get set up to be in a position of IC or whatever, that have not had that exposure and rub people up the wrong way. There is a consequence to that. But also, what we were saying earlier about legislation is the implied requirements now to be “qualified” and “competent” to do the job as a consequence of all these inquiries and everything. It becomes, in a sense, very academic and there is no framework that we can see as an association that recognises the competency of a guy who has been at the forefront fighting fires for 30 to 40 years, who knows it like the back of their hand, to be recognised.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** I was going to say you guys have had the experience of fighting these fires since Adam was a boy. To move away from that, certainly you have some concerns in that area.

**Mr Hunter:** What the volunteers need is support; people coming in behind them, supporting them and being there, so if there is a glaring omission on their part on the way they are doing business, it is pointed out to them, but not just come in, take over and start running it. There has been criticism of the Lake Clifton fire about the person that was running that. There was criticism afterwards why that person was left to run that. The FESA person involved at the time stood behind his decision to leave that person in that position, but that has made it very uncomfortable for anybody who is

following now—that the bone, in old terms, is going to be pointed at you; the inference being made that you are not competent to run an incident although that person was the best person at the time to run that incident.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** How would you describe morale as volunteers? What strategies do we need to deploy to retain or recruit volunteers and how do we address the fact that many volunteers are getting on in years?

**Mr Hunter:** Building a structure where they are respected and supported would go a long way —

**Mr Gossage:** And acknowledged.

**Mr Hunter:** — and acknowledged, would go a long way to retention and certainly give us the opportunity to retain or gain volunteers with the view that there is a progression through the ranks if they so desire, which will give them the skills and support for them to keep moving forward.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** FESA put in place a number of positions at local shire level that were supposed to be a liaison effectively between FESA and the shire and, presumably, brigades—how is that working; is it working well?

**Mr Hunter:** I think there have been some cases where it has worked and there have been numerous cases where it has not worked.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** What have been the reasons it has not worked?

**Mr Gossage:** There are two models out there. There is the model where there is fifty-fifty shared by local government and the State and the model where the employer is FESA and the other one where it is local government. The issue that has been brought to our attention is that when you have a situation where there is a FESA-employed person, the volunteers said, “We want this, this and this”, the local government says it supports that this is the way we are going to move forward, but it goes against FESA’s corporate direction, and that person is put in a bad spot. They have to follow the corporate direction, which might not necessarily suit the community versus the local government—employed person, who is part of the community. So, the volunteers, the local government and all that are together and they are able to push the view that is not contrary. So, if there is a contrary view to the State position, that can still be heard.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** Is it your view that what happened in the past—I think it happened in the past—when FESA simply funded through local government, was a better system than what has been happening at the moment, because they were employed by the local government? That position may have been paid for by FESA or half of it might have been paid for by FESA, but the person was a local government employee and came within the local government and therefore was a bit more autonomous, are you saying, than a direct FESA employee?

**Mr Hunter:** That model seemed to work a lot better where local government had control of the person. The other way the person has two masters with one directing them and then they are working with local government, which is directing them as well, but they cannot actually necessarily do what local government requests.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Just getting back to the fire blankets, how many brigades are we talking about, in terms of the bushies, Statewide?

**Mr Hunter:** I think there are about 600 brigades all up, and not all necessarily needing fire blankets.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** No. How many of those would need fire blankets, do you think?

**Mr Hunter:** Off the top of my head I do not know, but I know that the \$500,000 at the time it was allocated covered all the ones —

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** So, it has been allocated and the money is there.

---

**Mr Hunter:** Yes.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** The blankets just have not been supplied?

**Mr Hunter:** As yet. It is supposed to be happening now, but when it actually rolls out I do not know.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Do you know whether tenders have gone out?

**Mr Hunter:** I believe the tenders have been done for it.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** When did that occur, do you recall?

**Mr Hunter:** I think in the last few weeks.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** The last few weeks, funny about that. So, \$500,000 will cover the actual supply of blankets—

**Mr Hunter:** That was 18 months ago.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Eighteen months ago. On top of that there would be some additional training that would need to be rolled out all before this fire season?

**Mr Hunter:** Yes.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Has there been any discussion of the cost of that training?

**Mr Hunter:** Not in the association. Most of that will actually be done at brigade level. It will be rolled out and issued, and I would suggest that will be done through the brigades and local governments.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** You will know that there are some efficiency dividends being rolled out in various Government departments. Has FESA told you about anything that is not possible because of financial constraints?

**Mr Hunter:** I have not been made aware of anything at this stage. I know there has been tightening of what has happened in FESA and probably a classic example is the training centre where they have dropped out a number of lower level employees or were going to. That is going to have an effect on volunteers, because they are the ones who do the data input and pull everything together for that side of it, unless they are going to get a uniformed person to do it, which is an expensive way to do it.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Is the data input for online training or is it for just keeping track of the level of training, of what people have done and what have you?

**Mr Hunter:** It is for keeping track of records, of what people have done, what requests go in for what has got to be done and that type of stuff.

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** So, you are saying you have had evidence that that area, for example, is —

**Mr Hunter:** Out of the training centre, the volunteer side of it has always been —

**Ms M.M. QUIRK:** Underdone.

**Mr Hunter:** — underdone; it has always only had one or two people at best, and that compared to what the career people have on their side of it.

**Mr R.F. JOHNSON:** I think we are going to finish it now and the chairman is going to say a few words. Can I just take this opportunity to say a couple of things? One is that, certainly, I have always acknowledged that we have 27,500 to 32,000, in total, volunteers throughout the whole of the State, and if we had to pay all of your volunteers, we would go bankrupt as a State; we just could not do it. Everybody I speak to, and certainly in my time as minister responsible for this, I hope that I let it be known, but if not, I let it be known now, because I have not had an opportunity since then, that I pass on to all your volunteers the grateful thanks of all Western Australians who are affected by bushfires and fires in those areas where your volunteers come into play. They do a

fantastic job and a very dangerous job. We have seen the tragic loss of one particular volunteer yesterday, as you would be aware, which I know everybody would feel very deeply saddened about. They do a wonderful job and I think it should be acknowledged by everybody in WA.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Gentlemen, I thank you for coming this morning. I will just read you the official bit. Thank you for your evidence before the Committee. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within seven days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, we will deem it to be correct. New material cannot be introduced via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Again, thank you very much for coming in.

**The Witnesses:** Thank you.

**Hearing concluded at 11.56 am**