

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT ESPERANCE
FRIDAY, 9 JUNE 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 10.06 am

ROWE, MR KEITH

Local Manager, State Emergency Service, examined:

TAYLOR, MR STUART ALAN

Chief Executive Officer, Shire of Ravensthorpe, examined:

DAW, MR RODNEY CLARENCE

Chief Bushfire Control Officer, Shire of Ravensthorpe, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house 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" forms and 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 evidence before parliamentary committees?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, you have not given us a submission. Are there any opening comments you would like to make?

Mr Taylor: Not at this stage.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you like us to get in and ask you questions?

Mr Taylor: Can we wait until the end to make a statement?

The CHAIRMAN: We give you an opportunity at the end, unless we feel like we do not want to give it to you! Stuart, would you mind giving us a brief overview of the emergency services in your local government area? What are the high-risk emergencies in your area, and what kinds of brigades and units operate within the Ravensthorpe area?

Mr Taylor: The Shire of Ravensthorpe used to be about 12 500 square kilometres. We have just had a boundary change, which I think has reduced that area to about 9 000 square kilometres. Sixty-two per cent of that was unallocated crown land or reserves, either CALM, government or ours. Our principal issues with emergency services are flooding through the Phillips, Oldfield and West Rivers, and bushfire. We have a new \$5.6 million airport as a result of the BHP-Billiton development, with six or seven jet services a week, so there is a capacity for an aircraft issue, not that that is likely, but we have to plan for it. We have 10 brigades. One of those, Ravensthorpe, has only two members - Keith and me. We have one 5.4 unit and one 2.4 unit at Hopetoun, which deals with structural fires as well as bushfires, and we have three 3.4 units. We have 15 trailers, as opposed to normal units, and we have 415 registered members.

[10.10 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: How many of those are active?

Mr Taylor: I would say predominantly all of them.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the population of the shire?

Mr Taylor: For BHP Billiton and its construction, there are around 1 360. In the construction camp at the moment at Dandalup there are 1 400 people. I would suggest that an additional 600 people are living in the communities of Hopetoun and Ravensthorpe as a result of infrastructure development and LandCorp's land release development.

The CHAIRMAN: So you have virtually doubled in population?

Mr Taylor: Yes - more than doubled.

The CHAIRMAN: Has that caused you any issues?

Mr Taylor: Specifically - yes, definitely. We spent four years planning for the onset of a residential work force. We would have to say that the government has been very supportive of the shire and developing infrastructure and looking after its assets. One of the issues that we raised was a co-location facility for Hopetoun to house the VMR, the bush fire brigade and St John's Ambulance. FESA, I think, within its ESL funding, allocated \$210 000 to assist us to develop that. The Shire of Ravensthorpe was fortunate in enabling them to find \$600 000 through federal funding, which removed FESA from the funding requirement. We went to FESA and said that our resource risk plan indicates that as a result of BHP Billiton and other mining development, there is a need for a heavy duty unit at the Dandalup brigade. We went up there and negotiated that we did not want capital funding in terms of the co-location and that we would be better served if they put \$20 000 into a heavy-duty unit. I thought we had in-principle agreement to that. When last year's funding round came along, they declined to fund the unit and gave us \$50 000 for the co-location facility. We had discussions with the regional management office and the Esperance office, and they agreed in principle that what we were advocating was a good case and was probably a clever idea in terms of releasing FESA from its funding requirement in asking only \$20 000 for a unit. At that meeting we highlighted that under the Bush Fires Act it is the shire's responsibility to look after fire and risk, and that we had identified that this was our responsibility, and that FESA was there only to provide funding.

This year we have tried to negotiate again by saying, "We will give you back the \$50 000. We do not need it. We have federal funding. We want the Dandalup unit. It is only going to cost you \$20 000. Will you do it?" This year's letter, which came last week, has declined to give us the \$20 000 for the unit. The shire's point of view on this is that when the ESL came in, it was principally to release the funding requirement from local government and put it onto landowners to support the bush fire units, in that they would be a funding body only and not the people who are going around and directing that we can or cannot have equipment. We have been told that if we wish to buy the vehicle ourselves, we may, but the maintenance and operating costs will not be funded under the FESA levy, and nor will the replacement. In my view, what is the point of the ESL, if that is going to be the case in terms of capital equipment and that type of thing?

I understand that there is a probably a need for rationalisation in some of the bigger shires that have many brigades and many vehicles, but when we are talking about an area of 9 000 square kilometres, with mining industries, particularly one as large as BHP Billiton, and they are on pristine bush, then there is a danger that a fire could run from where the mine is - it is 40 kilometres east of Ravensthorpe - all the way down to Hopetoun and create an issue for the community down there. So, from our perspective, we believe the resource is required and needs to be put in place, but we have this issue where the hierarchy of FESA is saying no, we cannot have it.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you taken that up with the minister?

Mr Taylor: No, we have not. We thought we would do the right thing, and rather than keep running to the minister all the time and whinging, like they seem to think local government does all the time, we would try to negotiate our way through this, and that commonsense would prevail, but unfortunately at this point it has not.

The CHAIRMAN: I think you probably need that one resolved sooner rather than later. Our committee will not be reporting until 31 August. I hope you have it resolved well before then. That in a sense is a straight-out, practical example of some of the things that have been brought to the committee's attention with regard to FESA and the bureaucracy and the risk to local governments and volunteers. That is a prime example of it.

Mr Taylor: That is right.

Mr Daw: Can I add to that in relation to the brigade units and the ESL. The ESL largely was designed to get money out of St Georges Terrace and into the bush, because there was no requirement to insure, and a lot of people were insuring overseas anyway, but they were all getting the FRS if their house caught fire; whether they were insured or not, they were still getting that protection. The ESL caught those people, supposedly to give us more money to distribute across the state. As you know, it is a big state. However, what has happened is that the ESL has also picked up FESA's wages costs, and the whole packet, which was a government responsibility beforehand anyway. That means little funding is getting out to what we thought would be a program of getting trucks out into the bush and into the brigades. Trucks can cost up to \$280 000. We are saying to them, "We do not want bells and whistles on it. We just want a truck. For goodness sake, go to the supermarket and get an eight-tonne truck and put a tanker on it, and we will operate it. Just give it to us." I firmly believe it would be a good thing if they put someone on a plane and sent them around the world to check out the second-hand market in China, or Japan, or Brazil, or Yankee land or Pommyland, or wherever. Some of the units we have are ex CALM units that cost the shire \$20 000. They are still operating very well. That is all we need. We just need the function. The brigades basically are farmer response brigades. This is before all this mining thing started. They are farmer response brigades, and they get together to help each other if there is a fire on a property.

[10.20 am]

However, because the shire is two-thirds bush, there is the threat of the bush. They have their own private utes and things and we help them out. We formed boundaries and so those guys would look after the area between Springdale Road and Jerdacuttup Road, as an example, and other guys would look after another area. We formed a brigade and the shire would help them with supplying equipment. Of course, that became too much for the shire. The shire was right on track with providing us with 10 trucks for the region. We were given three or four and then the emergency services levy was introduced. We thought, "Beaut, we're all going to get trucks now and there will be no problem. The brigades will get them all." However, since then, because the ESL picked up the contribution that the shire was making to fire control, the percentage of the dollar that was going to fire control now goes to parks and gardens and roads. I have taken this up with the shire president, who has told me that the priority of the shire is roads. People must be able to get around. Until the ESL can give us what we require and get the farmer response brigades up and running and supplied with equipment, we will be left stranded. If a lightning strike occurs at Paddy Rose's place or whoever it might be, we would eliminate the threat to that farm and then those guys want to get back on their headers. These days they have big machines and have big bills to pay. We are on the south coast and we have moisture problems with the grain. Those headers must be kept going as much as possible. The farmers are happy to fight the fire while the fire is threatening someone but if it is burning in the bush, it is up to us - basically the shire - through the chief to negotiate with the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority and whoever else is around. Some guys might give us a hand for just a couple of days if the fire is not threatening farmland. Sometimes we can chase the fires for three weeks. That is three weeks out of our time. Keith has had to come in and help with his troops to bring us tucker and stuff. It is just not on. I have been at it for 45 years; we are just getting older and older. We need some support. To that end, the ESL has let us down.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Of the 415 active members, how many are farmers?

Mr Daw: We are forced into a registration for insurance purposes. The ESL picked that up also. The shire used to pay for our insurance. The wives who bring out the meals need to be insured. A lot of the fire brigade numbers include wives and family members.

Mrs J. HUGHES: All volunteers.

Mr Daw: And it needs to be.

The CHAIRMAN: It is not just the firefighters; it is the support staff also.

Mr Taylor: From a fire perspective, if the fire is located at one portion of the shire, it is a case of all hands on deck. The workers, the farmers themselves and sometimes the wives bring in equipment, food or whatever. They are on the ground. The way we understand it is that any volunteer who is on the fire ground must be insured.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Sure. Often towns have urban units and the guys are out on the land.

Mr Daw: In town we have the Fire and Rescue Service. It has a role in conjunction with the SES to attend highway fires etc. They attend to structural fires because they have been trained to do the structural side of it. Members might be aware of the state debate about structural fires and the fact that some firefighters have not been equipped with level 2 equipment and they are expected to put out fires in farm sheds and things, which could be unsafe. To get back to the question on the number of brigade members, that is the number we have registered. Some of those ladies hop on the fire truck and some of them are excellent firefighters. However, I would not really know what the true figure is, and I am the chief bush fire control officer.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The predominant number of volunteers would be off the land.

Mr Taylor: They are farmers. We have a joint bush fire structural unit in Hopetoun and there may be some town members who are volunteers to that unit. However, predominantly they are farmers. I did not answer a previous question properly about what emergency services we have. Ravensthorpe is unique in that it effectively has three town sites. We have a St John Ambulance system that has one management committee. It has three sub-centres, one of which is in Munglinup, one in Ravensthorpe and one in Hopetoun. They pool their resources, which include plant equipment and management, but they are independent. We also have marine rescue at Hopetoun. The population of Hopetoun before the mine started was probably only 340 or 350 and they are manning the bush fire structure as well as St John Ambulance and Hopetoun north. We have only one SES unit, which is based at Ravensthorpe, but that virtually covers the whole shire.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA does not seem to be flexible enough to change its standard or status of equipment. That is the response we have heard from across the state in most places we have been. FESA has put in place a standard; it is providing trucks, which cost about \$280 000 in some instances. People are saying that they do not need a truck of that standard. They need a truck that is a step down, which would release funding to put more in the field. Some second-hand trucks from CALM cost \$20 000. They work and are adaptable. For \$280 000, 10 of those trucks could be put in the field. There is an issue regarding the rigidity of what FESA provides. On the issue of the ESL funding - I will stand to be corrected - my understanding is that the ESL funding was above and beyond what was already provided to FESA. The general government revenue is still allocated to FESA and the ESL is additional funding to purchase trucks and other bits and pieces.

Mr Daw: I have not seen any figures. I will explain about the wheatbelt conversion. We formed a committee. I am on the state consultative committee to FESA. I represent about 30-odd shires along the south coast and up as far as Narrogin and Wannanup. I have been doing that for a number of years. Before that I was also involved with it. I always try to make our position felt. Resulting from a motion that came out of the Albany district operation advisory committee, which was moved by Tom Brown, the chief from Esperance, we were sick of the price tag and we wanted a cheaper

version of a fire truck that we called a wheatbelt version of a fire truck. That wiped about \$60 000 off the price tag. A few bells dropped off and a few whistles were taken away, but it is still ridiculous. We put these fire trucks in the bush. Basically the farmers, unless it is a roaring great fire, can handle the stubble fires and that type of thing, apart from real bad days like we have had at Kukerin and those types of fires. The onset of the fire on to the property is the problem. It is the bush. Because these trucks have a high-water carrying capacity and what is called a knockdown capacity, because they have big pumps, a big hose and a cannon on them, the fire can be hit really hard. That is why we need the heavy duty gear. I am trying to say that FESA has listened to us and tried get the price down but it is not listening hard enough about the second-hand stuff.

Mr Daw: They have also put trucks out in the field. I have been there when the plastic doorhandle melted and we could not get into the truck.

Mr Rowe: That is true. I will back that up.

Mr Taylor: Dealing with flexibility, working in local government and I guess being classed as public servants, we do tend to try to find things in the legislation or whatever to push a point to suit us. We are fortunate from our perspective in that if Rod has an issue and does not agree with the bureaucracy, in this instance me, he has free and unrestricted access to the council. He is an appointed officer of the council. He can represent the interests of the Bush Fire Service to the council. They can overturn their bureaucracy in a blink. In FESA that is not the case. The more and more things become centralised, the harder and harder it becomes to get commonsense to play a part in what happens. The council is predominantly farmers, businesspeople and residents of the district, who have a knowledge and a history of what has transpired before, as opposed to people like me who come in on five-year contracts and are there to do the right thing, meet compliance obligations and try to move the community forward but sometimes get bogged down in the blue book that says "thou shalt". Local government is unique in that it is that close to the people, that the people can go and talk to their government and that the government can instantly make a decision based on commonsense and practicability. The more FESA is centralised and pushed up top, the more and more is removed. Although ministers do their best to look after the state as a whole, they are not always interested in a small shire or a chief fire control officer stating, "This is not commonsense." They have many things to deal with. It does not always come through that way either. FESA was set up initially to just merge the administration of the Bush Fire Service, as it was then, and the Fire and Rescue Service, which was a great idea, into one administration rather than two or three. There would be cost savings to the government, it would make it more efficient and all those sorts of things. However, as these things go, bureaucracy has grown, with more plans, more this and more that and has eaten up more resources. The bureaucracy has become bigger. It is harder for people, even for local government, as I demonstrated with the practicality of a truck, to get through all that bureaucracy. That seems to be the single, biggest issue in all this. As bureaucracy grows, it gets harder.

The CHAIRMAN: And commonsense goes out the window.

Mr Taylor: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Obviously, you do not like the idea of bureaucracy getting tighter, but there is talk of the authority becoming a department of emergency services. I guess your last answer probably answers that quite well. Just in plain speak, as it were, is the authority becoming a department?

Mr Taylor: Emergency services can encompass VMR right through to everything. Where is the expertise at the moment? They do not have expertise within the current structure. I am quite sure that Keith would like to make a comment on the SES. I think I read somewhere about a secession plan. I do not believe that is an issue in local government, but when you look at FESA's on-ground knowledge of the districts where it will operate, where is that? There is none. They are still going to have to rely on people like Rod and our deputies to turn around and manage the fires. They have

local knowledge, know where everything is and how to access it. That is not going to occur with a big bureaucracy. They cannot hold that knowledge. If it is anything like the DPI or any other department where people are rotating faster than a turnstile at Perth Royal Show, how is this going to work? I would have to say that I have had different thoughts. Their support to us is great. Incident control for big fires and all that sort of stuff could probably be looked at. I probably do not have an issue with that, but in trying to manage so many diverse areas and also organisations, such as VMR, fire and rescue services and bush fire brigades, which are specialists, they cannot have all that level of expertise up here to manage all this. I just cannot see how they could make it work appropriately without destroying the volunteer system.

The CHAIRMAN: I think the biggest issue that the committee is conscious of is that the regional areas of the state are totally reliant on volunteers. The metropolitan area has career firefighters, but even the people in the SES and VMR service in the metropolitan area are all volunteers. We are facing a huge risk. If we put the volunteers offside, we will be left in a situation where we have little, if any, emergency services across the state.

Mr Rowe: I think that a couple of things here get to the crux of the matter; volunteerism is one of them, obviously. If you consider that in the beginning, I suppose - I include Gary in this as well - whether Gary or Rod, any volunteer moving into an emergency service is doing it for two reasons, I guess. The main one is community support. Some people do not like fighting fires and some people do not like spending time in the bush searching for people etc, so they might move to something else, but the people in the organisations are there because they really want to support the community, more than anything else. I firmly believe that. I have been in the SES for a long time, and that is what I am told. That is my studied opinion, if you like, of people who have been through the organisation; they really want to be involved on a community basis rather than for the glory of being involved in an emergency service. We mentioned bells and whistles before, and certainly there is a bit of that involved in it. There is an adrenalin rush on various occasions, but that is not the issue; the issue is that you are there because you want to do something. You are basically trained to do something that will help the community, whereas someone else cannot do that. Whether it be the VMR, SES or FRS, I feel that the volunteer side of it is so important. That at the moment is what is being squashed, if you like, by the FESA bureaucracy. They do not understand at this level what it is all about. I really believe that. People at the next level up have been in the organisations for some years, who are regional managers etc, who understand what it is all about. You go up to the next level, and I have my doubts. You go up above that again, and I have talked to many of them over the years, and it is quite interesting.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are you finding at all that bureaucratic paperwork is becoming onerous for your volunteers?

Mr Rowe: I knew that would come up as a question because it has come up many, many times in many forms. The answer is: yes, of course. The comment was made to me only yesterday by someone else who works in the SES organisation, "I work my 15 hours a week and I am expected to do about 20 hours' paperwork every week as well, just to keep the unit going." That is an exaggeration, of course, but that is the perception these days.

[10.40 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Is some of this paperwork just red tape and bureaucracy gone mad or is it needed to be accountable for spending taxpayer funds, for liability issues and all of those things, protecting the volunteers themselves?

Mr Rowe: That is a very fair question. From FESA's point of view, it is necessary because that is how it has to operate under the act. I could give one example from the volunteers' point of view. A circular came around some months ago that laid out how we were supposed to reverse a vehicle. I could probably think of quite a few more examples. It is just unnecessary.

Mr Daw: There are some things that are applicable. We are no different from you people living in the city. We are the same people but you are in a different environment. I believe that there are some things that need to be taught in the bigger brigades in the hills. Out here in farmer-response brigades, where they know what a six-inch crescent is and they all know how to change a tyre, some of these things, as Keith said, are not necessary. We need a parent body but we do not need to go through all this stuff. The shire is quite capable of managing finances. Those finances need to come to the shire in the form of a cheque and be distributed amongst the brigades and then everyone would be happy.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So the preference is for local government to be the predominant body through which you operate?

Mr Daw: Yes, for sure. Local government has to be responsible for what is happening in the district. There is no doubt about that.

The CHAIRMAN: I think I know the answer to the next question but I will ask it anyway. It relates to the coroner and the Auditor General. They both express concerns about the current fire control arrangements in Western Australia. Both criticise the fact that local government, CALM and FESA could all be in control of a fire at the same time, particularly when the fire crosses different land tenures. It has been suggested that FESA be empowered to take control of fires from local government or CALM when FESA considers this to be necessary. It is anticipated that the power would only ever need to be used two or three times a year. CALM and some local governments oppose FESA being given this power. Can I ask for your view on this issue?

Mr Daw: I have written down my answer so it is not misquoted. It is something we could debate for quite some time. I want to get it off my shoulders and say what I have to say. As much as possible, local governments should have control, with maximum legislative support from CALM and FESA. For instance, if Keith, who is in charge of the SES, is looking for a guy at the bottom of a cliff and he sends two guys over and gets into trouble, he needs legislative support. It is the same with Gary. If a gas bottle falls on one of his blokes, that is when he needs support. Local government should be organising these events.

The CHAIRMAN: Stuart, do you have a comment?

Mr Taylor: I was new to the shire on 9 December 2002. In February 2003 a huge fire came down from Lake Taylor across crown land.

Mr Daw: It covered 304 000 hectares. It was the largest fire in the south west of Western Australia. I was in charge of the bloody thing!

Mr Taylor: That descended on us. I believe that the level of cooperation between CALM and FESA and the shire - I include Rod as the shire in terms of bush fire service - was outstanding. They worked together. It was tackled well. There was community support in terms of food and logistics. It worked extremely well. The fire was turned. There was a danger of it running all the way down to Hopetoun, as well as taking out Ravensthorpe. Resources were made available from across the whole of the south west to provide support to Ravensthorpe.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Who was in control of that fire?

Mr Taylor: In effect, the shire, through Rod. There was discussion afterwards about how some things could have been done better. I have read all your stuff and you do not need to hear any more about communications. I think you all have the picture. In my view, CALM is responsible on CALM or crown land. That is fine. It uses us as a resource. If it does not want to manage it, it can turn to Rod, because the Bush Fires Act allows it to, and say, "You manage it. If you need us, come. We are caught up elsewhere." There is that flexibility. I do not think FESA can control a fire. It is a resource, an advisory. That is all it has ever been. At the end of the day, if a fire is in a shire, on private property, it falls within the domain of local government. If we want to call in FESA and hand over incident control or whatever, we have that option. The shire has been

approached and has agreed, although I do not think all fire control officers agreed, to hand over control at a designated point.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If FESA was empowered to take control of an incident, do you think that would affect response times and working compatibilities?

Mr Taylor: In truth, yes, I do. I would have to be honest and say in front of my colleagues, who will probably shudder and shiver, that not long ago I was of the view that maybe FESA should run it all. After this debacle of grants and that sort of stuff, I have come away with a totally different view. This can only get worse. If we have FESA coming in, it has the power or the authority and control to say, "You can't come on the fire ground unless you've done this level of training. You can't be a fire control officer unless you've done this level of training. You can't have these vehicles on a fire ground because of this, this and this and you must do it this particular way." Meanwhile, 15 000 acres of wheat crop has gone up. Why? Because the guy with 400 litres of water on an old Land Cruiser could not get in there and put out the fire before it got away.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Rod, do you have the same view?

Mr Daw: I have worked with FESA guys. They have helped me on fires. I have worked with CALM guys. I have probably worked more with CALM guys now that CALM has a bigger role in bush preparation and that sort of stuff. Some of them are excellent, but every fire is different. It is not just me. I am on the microphone issuing orders. I know every man out there. When a new guy comes in, those volunteers just go back home.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So you know your men's capabilities as well?

Mr Daw: It is a personality thing. They have nothing against them. But they need to be in support, not take control.

The CHAIRMAN: From your point of view, it is starting to appear that FESA could be its own worst enemy in terms of enforcing bureaucracy on volunteers and local governments.

Mr Taylor: Rod and I both deal with the likes of Stuart McIntyre and Russell Gould all the time. We would have to agree that they are good people. They have a high degree of local knowledge.

Mr Daw: They are paid to be liaison officers and they liaise very well.

The CHAIRMAN: With your local people, that seems to be fine but when we get the bureaucracy from Perth -

Mrs J. HUGHES: What if you have a guy from Perth?

Mr Daw: I put on a performance like a trained seal a few years ago to get Stuart's job in Esperance because Esperance was being covered from Albany. That was ridiculous. I was responsible for getting Stuart's position here in Esperance. He is flat out servicing Esperance, which goes all the way to the border, and Ravensthorpe. His job is warranted and he is doing it well. The Albany boys all do a good job. Then we lose contact and, as Stuart says, it gets higher and higher. I fly to these committee meetings in Perth four times a year and I am introduced to somebody else every time. FESA says it has a new media liaison person, and it is somebody new every time. I get the feeling that it is just rolling along like a big snowball, picking up new jobs as it goes along.

[10.50 am]

The CHAIRMAN: It is called empire building.

Mr Daw: I do not know. We do not really want to know. We have enough to do!

Mrs J. HUGHES: You just want to do your stuff.

The CHAIRMAN: With emergency services, can you tell us how long your unit in particular has been established, the membership, and the particular roles that your unit might perform?

Mr Rowe: We started in the mid-1970s as an SES unit in Ravensthorpe. It was a local volunteer emergency service in those days - an old BES - before SES came into being. We have at the moment, I think, 12 active members; 15 on the books. Our main roles and responsibilities, as you would find with any SES unit, are probably predominantly support roles for bushfires. We are involved with floods, which never happen in Ravensthorpe, so everyone tells us. On a lighter note, we had two 100-year floods three weeks apart a few years ago. We have an interesting situation because of the way Ravensthorpe is geographically. We do actually have bridges all around us. At one stage for nearly three days, I think it was, we were literally cut off completely from everywhere because the bridges in turn went out one after the other. However, that is another issue. We do run an emergency operation centre, which is our SES headquarters. For the fire that was talked about before, it was decided that would be used as an EOC for the duration of that fire. We have since upgraded it again to be even more capable next time, because there certainly will be a next time. I guess with a lot of emergency situations that are discussed, maybe question-mark planned at different levels, nothing frequently happens until the chips are really down and you have to do something about it.

I would just like to relate again the Lake Tay fire. At two o'clock in the morning I was standing at the bottom of the road in Sulph Hill, which you guys probably do not know anyway, with a police sergeant and a few other people. We were looking to the north east. The whole sky was aglow and we had a north easterly blowing into our faces. We were saying that this was just going to happen. This was still probably some 50 to 60 kilometres away. It was quite interesting, to say the least, but suddenly we were collectively in the hot seat and we wondered what the hell we were going to do about it. Fortunately, there was a wind change, which frequently happens with bushfires, as any bushfire control officer will tell you. It is something that sometimes can be predicted and sometimes it cannot. In this particular case it virtually surrounded and perhaps would have burnt out a mine site. It took out part of the country that is near the Ravensthorpe Nickel Operations, jumped Coolgardie Esperance Highway and, what, 350 000-something hectares -

Mr Daw: It was 304 000.

Mr Rowe: I am sorry, 304 000 hectares. If you think about that in terms of Perth metro area etc, that is a huge fire. I will reinforce what was said before: if it is something that comes out of the bush into a paddock, it can be handled relatively easily. If you have wind changes etc, it is a major problem. It comes back again to equipment, availability etc. Enough of that. I notice your next question asks what other brigades or emergency service units -

Mrs J. HUGHES: You have done your homework!

Mr Rowe: You did ask whether we had read it!

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes.

Mr Rowe: We have a strong LEMC committee. We meet as is necessary, obviously, but also on a regular basis throughout the year. We solve, I guess, probably practically all the problems that we come at as a community issue in terms of emergency services. So, yes, the SES works with everyone and everyone else works with the SES. I had the pleasure of being woken up at 11 o'clock, or something, last night by someone saying, "We are responding to a vehicle accident up at Lake King road, we may not need you but I'll keep you informed."

Mr Daw: We had a triple 0 call prior to that.

The CHAIRMAN: I think we might skip our next question, which is about the ESL process, because I think we can guess the answer to that. However, Keith, from your point of view, how has the emergency services levy impacted on your unit?

Mr Rowe: I will not say dramatically, but it certainly has taken all the fundraising aspects out of running an SES unit. That has been on occasions onerous, not necessarily standing somewhere waving a hat and saying, "Support us", but the actual chasing of funds around the place, whether it

be federal, state or what have you. At the moment the strict answer to the question is we do not have a problem with ESL funding to the Ravensthorpe unit. It does come through the shire; we do not have a problem with that. I do understand this year that there have been some quite dramatic cuts in ESL funding to SES units around the state, but I have no direct knowledge of what we are actually going to get this year. I do have a problem with the overall approach of ESL funding two units in terms of carryover funds, which is accepted as a no-no for various reasons, but from the point of an SES unit, we do not know until 29 June what we will be hit with operationally. Forget about the operational side of things, we are looking, for instance, at \$1 000 to take people away to a training weekend somewhere etc. I am sure this could be changed from various points of view, and I will not go into any recommendations I might have, except the fact that there should be some facility for carryover funding from one year to the next without it impinging on next year's budget.

The CHAIRMAN: The Shire of Esperance has given us a very strong example of that yesterday.

Mr Rowe: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: So that is something we will have to consider.

Mr Rowe: I can give you another example too on the intractability, if you like, of FESA funding for vehicles. This concerns a trailer, which is of relatively small proportions compared to a fire truck. We have had, since the unit has been operational, a four-wheel trailer, which was built to the standard that SES, or LVS in those days, insisted on, which has been kept in the shed all its life. It is in perfect condition but it is over 15 years old, so therefore it must be changed. We argued at various levels about the fact that if you want to spend money on this thing, give us \$1 000 and we will have the thing sandblasted and painted and new tyres etc, but no, it has to be changed.

The CHAIRMAN: That is about \$5 000 or \$6 000-plus?

Mr Rowe: It is a \$10 000 job. This went on literally for months - us saying we do not want it and them saying, "It's on your list, you've got to have it." We said, "We don't want it." They said, "You've got to have it." We asked, "What are you going to do with the old trailer?" They said, "It'll go back into consolidated revenue." We asked, "Which means exactly what?" They said, "It means that you lose it, all right?" I argued long and hard and we finally got - in writing I might add - the fact that we could retain the trailer as long as we removed the state's licence plates off it, which is pretty obvious, and we could do what we like with it. Okay, then we have two trailers. We only want one trailer really. I understand now that the latest thing is, "Your new trailer is ready but we need your old one." This has, as I say, been going on now for nine months, something of that nature. We have not got room to store two trailers anyway. That is not the issue. The issue is that for 10 per cent of the cost of a new trailer, the old trailer could have been renovated so easily and it would do everything that we needed to do.

[11.00 am]

The CHAIRMAN: And has done.

Mr Rowe: That is right. It is a general purpose trailer that is built like a Sherman tank. It will last for ever, but we are told, "Sorry, it's more than 15 years old; you have to change it." I can sense almost a power-type scenario in that we are being told, "This is what we are doing for you, whether you want it or not." Do you understand? Of course you do?

Mrs J. HUGHES: There are anomalies in the way they administer their assistance.

Mr Rowe: That is very nicely put.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have a view on how we can improve emergency services in WA and in your local area? We are obviously not perfect but we are close!

Mr Rowe: I heard a comment from one of our local policemen the other day along the lines that if it is not broken why try to fix it? I asked him as a general run-of-the-mill matter, given we were

going to make a submission to this committee whether he would like any input through me. He said that he had been around the state a bit and this is the best community he had ever been involved with for emergency services; every one gets in and does something. They pull their weight; it is fine. He is quite happy. If you like, that is an unofficial, but pretty close to the mark, police comment on how we manage the Ravensthorpe community. I think it relates to the original comment I made. As far as we are concerned, the whole emergency service is a local community effort. We need help, not "thou shalt do". We need the support at every level.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Regarding young people in your town, when we were in Esperance the other day we were told that 20 juniors are with the SES. That is great and it is not something we have heard about in many other regions. Has Ravensthorpe been as fortunate in bringing on board its young people?

Mr Rowe: Ravensthorpe has an emergency services cadet unit. Esperance's population comprises a few more people than does Ravensthorpe's population. It is a different ball game. The cadet unit is run by the school and the police. One policeman and the school are involved, as you will fully appreciate. We interact with them a couple of times a year. I believe they are also involved with Fire and Rescue occasionally. They are certainly involved with St John Ambulance etc. We have never received a member from the cadets in the past into the SES unit. The point is that a lot of kids of that age leave school and go to university or whatever. They might join another unit or another emergency service somewhere else but they do not necessarily come back to Ravensthorpe again. It is important that emergency service cadet units stay as they are. Any involvement of young kids in emergency services at any level will make them a reasonably good target for emergency service work later on, perhaps after they are married, 10, 15 or 20 years down the track. They do not lose the actual ethic, if you like, of being involved in an emergency service. The kids have a ball. Good on them.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Do you have any specific programs for trying to recruit people? I imagine that you have a very active community that pitches in whenever there is an emergency.

Mr Rowe: That is right.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: One of the biggest concerns we have heard while we have been travelling is the loss of volunteers. We need to ensure that whatever we recommend, we do not have an adverse impact on that.

Mr Rowe: I appreciate that.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Is there anything in place such as an active recruitment drive?

Mr Rowe: No. Membership comes about through word of mouth. We need to attract the right sort of person. If someone approaches an SES member with the idea of possibly being interested, that is a totally different ball game, and we go out of our way to attract that person. Of course, also, we all talk to people. As I think I said earlier, some people are not made for that sort of thing at all, even though they might be the right age group etc. The other thing to bear in mind is that there is a large mining venture on Ravensthorpe's doorstep. A lot of people are working in the construction phase of the minesite, but they all work 12-hour days, three weeks on and one week off or whatever. On their week off they go home, which could be anywhere in Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the council in any position to request or demand from BHP Billiton that it implement emergency management plans that interact with the councils? Do they do it as a matter of form?

Mr Taylor: The answer to both questions is yes. We think council has a position to force the issue. Having said that, BHP Billiton, the big Australian, is very community minded. Its people have said to us that it will be part of anything we wish it to be part of in terms of the mine and the community. Rod has had a lot to do with BHP Billiton in terms of the fire issue. It is prepared to talk to Rod and to the council. If it wanted to push certain aspects hard, BHP Billiton would be

involved. It has a standing invitation to our LMAC. It chooses when it will attend. BHP Billiton is prepared to have input and does have, and is prepared to listen to what people have to say. From that perspective, there is good integration.

Mr Daw: BHP Billiton has been very cooperative. Stuart is trying to say that it can handle any event on the minesite. It has its own ambulances and trained crews and it has shown me all the fire setup. I have a slight problem that I am trying to sort out with BHP Billiton that probably relates to a question you will ask later about the Bush Fires Act. I do not think that act has enough teeth. It is subservient to the Conservation and Land Management Act. The shire took a landowner to court to do his fire breaks. The shire had the fire breaks done, and then received a bill because of the erosion that occurred on his farm. The Bush Fires Act is subservient to the Conservation and Land Management Act and the Mining Act. I received a letter from BHP Billiton saying that when a fire is on its land it will be in charge. I have been out to see BHP Billiton on that score and we have spoken about it. If it gets down to tin tacks I am not sure whether the Mining Act or the Bush Fires Act will be the stronger. On many occasions I feel as though I have been hit out of the ring because the Bush Fires Act does not have enough teeth. I guess that is something I must live with.

The CHAIRMAN: Unless the legislation changes.

Mr Daw: I am confident about what R&D is doing. It is fully supportive of the council.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA is suggesting that it be empowered to request the development of fire management plans from landowners, whether it is CALM-managed land, plantation land or land used for pastoral or grazier purposes. Fire management plans would be requested only if FESA considered it necessary to mitigate the risk of fire to life and property; for instance, in areas of high risk where CALM land abuts private land or where a eucalypt plantation is located near a housing development. Do you have a comment on that?

Mr Daw: Of course there should be fire management plans. I very strongly believe, as I have said at state consultative committee meetings and at DOACs and wherever else, every piece of bush in Western Australia should have a management plan. Those management plans should have a name and a number and they should be visited at least every 10 years to see what the build-up of fuel is, whether it is being properly managed and so on. If that were in place, many of these wild fires would be done away with. We have done it successfully. I am the chairman of the Fitzgerald River National Park Advisory Committee and I have been heavily involved with that park for a long time. [11.10 am]

When we had the disastrous fire - we have had two big ones over 100 000 hectares - we decided to split the park into 32 cells. So if we wanted to protect a certain piece of scrub, we would put a break around it. It is like a bruise on an apple; it does not mean the rest of the apple is no good just because it has a bruise on it. We have had a lot of criticism about our firebreak methods and other things, but we have done that and it has been successful. In the Ravensthorpe shire, we have been knitting together a whole lot of strategic breaks, which members might see if they get up in an aeroplane and look down. They will see how we are knitting them together in different cells. We have fuel in the Ravensthorpe Range that is 80 years old, and it is a real worry. For every cell, we try to get 10-year-old fuel alongside 30-year-old fuel, alongside 15-year-old fuel, alongside five-year-old fuel. So there will be reduction burns in a cell, say here, alongside one that is 20 years old, so that when a big fire comes it will not run -

Mrs J. HUGHES: It slows it down.

Mr Daw: That is right. That is what we are doing in our shire. We all lean on each other. I believe thoroughly in what Stuart is doing; I believe thoroughly in what Keith is doing. We do not get in each other's way. I believe in what Gary is doing with the FRS. It is fantastic. We all have our individual ideas about how things will work and we will talk about it and get on with it. We do not hinder each other, and it is working very well. I cannot see why similar things could not be

done on a statewide basis. Every piece of bush, as the member suggested, should have a plan, in my opinion.

Mrs J. HUGHES: On the same question, before we branch out and bring Gary in, the fire management plans would be empowered by FESA; who should make sure those plans are in place? You were suggesting they should be re-assessed 10 years later. Should they stay with local government, who are the guys fighting the fires, or should they go to FESA?

Mr Daw: FESA does not actually do any firefighting.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Or management, or policing?

Mr Daw: CALM -

Mrs J. HUGHES: At the moment councils police firebreaks. It is a difficult question.

Mr Taylor: Not necessarily. As Rod said before, we are very fortunate in that we have a CALM officer in Ravensthorpe because of all the land, and Rod and Mal work very closely together to create these strategic firebreaks. There is a level of integration and discussion in terms of how these things are going to be managed. I would suggest legislation be put in place that says a fire management plan is required. The legislation should also state that the people who are responsible for that land are responsible for the preparation of the management of that land. Then if you want to put in a policing system, put one in. The truth is we already have one in place under the Bush Fires Act, and that is the fire control officers. They go out. We as a shire say, "You shall inspect. You shall do this; you shall do that." That is our responsibility. So, there is already a policing mechanism in place. All that is needed is to expand it. It does not necessarily have to be one person who has this power to come over and go smack. The law is already in place. Utilise the legislation you have.

Mrs J. HUGHES: As is.

The CHAIRMAN: For everyone's benefit, we have run over the time we had allocated, but we have brought Keith in and there is still quite a bit to go. I would like to bring Gary in as well, but I have to read the official bit from the opening of the session.

WEBSTER, Mr GARY

Ravensthorpe Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: The committee proceeding is a hearing 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 Webster: Yes.

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

Mr Webster: Yes.

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

Mr Webster: Yes, I did.

The CHAIRMAN: I will give you the opportunity to make some opening comments, if you would like to do so.

Mr Webster: It is good to be here today. I had a phone call to ask me along and I did not actually know what it was all about. I am overawed to come down and meet a group of people like this in

this situation - giving information about our community and how emergency services are responding to our community and how we interact with each other. I think it is quite pertinent that we have this discussion as there have been a lot of changes. I think what you are doing is probably a good thing. It is a good avenue for people like us to have a say.

The CHAIRMAN: As you have seen while you have been sitting there, we are fairly relaxed. We want to get your views on record so we can hopefully go away and come up with a report and recommendations that the minister can endorse and put through, and also make sure we maintain the volunteers and the spirit that we have across the state in emergency services. I think it is at the forefront of our minds - certainly mine. We have some more questions. We have touched on firebreaks. I want to talk about binding the Crown. Currently the Bush Fires Act empowers local government to order private landowners to install firebreaks. The provision does not apply to state government-owned land. Should the act bind the Crown so the state government is bound by the same provisions as private landowners?

Mr Daw: Yes!

The CHAIRMAN: That is definite! Do you want to add to that?

Mr Daw: No, my views are well known. I have been saying that for a long time. We have been fortunate, I must say, that the state government has a bucket of money for wildfire and it has helped us out from time to time when the fire has been on government land. But we have to have a wildfire first, and that is not what we like to have. Therefore, if the government could be made responsible for fire management on its land before the event, such as I was mentioning in regard to plans for each piece of bush - give it a name and a number - a team of experts can come around and in conjunction with the local people have a look at that piece of land every 10 years and say, "Okay, it's time we put an aerial burn into this." We are getting very good at that now, working with CALM on this sort of thing, taking out the hot spots - a piece of bush that is 50 years old, or something. If we can get that into place, it will be a big step forward in reducing the number of fires in WA.

Mrs J. HUGHES: CALM says it already does the slashing where the land abuts private landowners' land. I think CALM interfaces with over 600 landowners.

Mr Daw: With CALM-managed land, you are talking about national parks and things.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes. We have been talking about the fact that firebreaks often create more degrading. CALM manages its land as far as biodiversity and those types of things are concerned. Do you believe a firebreak or a fire management plan would be adequate, over the need for a break?

Mr Daw: There are different ways of doing it and every piece of land is different. You can travel from Ravensthorpe and over the hill you will be in salmon gums, and over the next hill is tea-tree, and over the next hill is scrub that high from the ground. We have to be flexible in all of this.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It does not necessarily need to be a blanket firebreak policy as such?

Mr Daw: No.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It could be a management plan policy.

Mr Daw: Stuart wants to say differently.

Mr Taylor: No, I do not. I just want to support what Rod is saying. The Hopetoun-Ravensthorpe road is vacant crown land, the majority of it, and they went through with bulldozers and knocked out a 50-metre wide break, but within six months it was back this high.

[11.20 am]

From a local government perspective, a fire break is something that is chemically cleaned or ploughed and there is no need for three or five metres of cleared land. CALM and Rod are slashing in Ravensthorpe; they are reducing the fuel. The 50 metres between where the bush is at full height

to the next piece is a reduced burn area. That would be sufficient and adequate to give firefighters an area to control, slow down and gain control of the fire. At the moment we are just dealing with 300 000 square kilometres of bush.

Mr Daw: We call it scrub modification. Occasionally we get an odd complaint that we are knocking down too much scrub. But as I said before, if there is a bruise on an apple, it does not mean that the rest of the apple is no good. We are trying to protect the bush as much as we are trying to protect private property owners. Recently we put in place an urgent program to protect Kundip where Tectonic Resources has a new exploration program. Tectonic has put some money towards this program to help us with our fire break. That was an urgent program. It is what we call scrub modification. Sometimes we just have to do things. We try to put the breaks where they are visually acceptable but we cannot always hide them. A break is most effective along a road because there is already 40 feet of space. We have had no hassles from the shire.

Mr Taylor: It is an acceptable practice and one that CALM endorses. If it is acceptable to local government and CALM, it can be used and is viable in other areas and districts so therefore it should be supported.

The CHAIRMAN: Gary, can you give us a rundown on the fire and rescue service that you are captain of? How long has it been established, how many members do you have and what is your role? We know you have been out to a car crash this morning.

Mr Webster: I am not sure of exactly when the brigade was established but I would guess that it was back in the 1960s. It had very humble beginnings. We have had a name change to become a fire and rescue service. We currently have 12 very active members. Nine members turned out last night, which was excellent. We are very fortunate to be associated with the Fire and Rescue Service, working with the local government. We do not have to fundraise like the bushfire brigades, the SES or the ambulance service, in particular. There is already a budget in place for our service. We are very fortunate and well looked after. Our volunteers are very well supported by the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association. It does keep the bastards honest, to be blunt. It is looking out for us. It is always on FESA's doorstep, sticking up for us. We are very, very fortunate.

We meet with FESA a couple of times a year and it is working very well. We sort out issues. The biggest issue was purely our name change. FESA wanted us to become a FESA unit. Like every brigade in the state, we are a fire and rescue brigade, nothing else. There is no need to fix something that is not broken. It also wanted to change the colour of our trucks from red to white because it was cheaper to have a white truck and put some stickers on it. Traditionally, the truck has always been red. Call us pig-headed, but every child is brought up knowing that a fire truck is red. That is not to be confused; it has to be red. We have battled through these things. FESA is seeing things our way and seeing commonsense, which is great. Just because a new organisation is established does not mean that everything has to change. It is a good thing that people on the ground are respected and have input into how things are currently running.

The CHAIRMAN: You said nine members out of 12 turned up last night. Was that because nine were needed or do you call out all 12 or the number that you think you are going to need when you get to the accident?

Mr Webster: The call goes through to our group call system. The FRS has a very good response turnout. Members' home phone numbers ring. When they pick up, they are connected to a conference call. They are told, for instance, that there is a truck accident on Newdegate Road and are asked to turn up. If no-one picks up, pagers are activated. We can use SMS on mobile phones and the siren in town gets activated as well. Through these avenues, everyone gets notified, they go straight to the station and the captain decides if there are enough for a crew and then heads out.

The CHAIRMAN: I was interested in whether you rang the first three on the list.

Mr Webster: We do not have time for that.

The CHAIRMAN: Obviously road crashes are an issue. Are there other risks that you deal with?

Mr Webster: We have expertise in structural fires, Hazmat and air/road rescues. Ravensthorpe is quite unique in that it is isolated. We really do feel isolated at times, to a point where we feel we are being ignored. For instance, our brigade has switched between the goldfields region and the Albany region. It has happened several times. We have been kicked around. We have been serviced by the Albany region for the past several years. We had a particular district manager and were getting very good service so it was our decision to stay in the Albany region. We have also been serviced from Esperance, with the establishment of this position here in Esperance. Now we are being looked after very well.

The CHAIRMAN: Because you turn out to road accidents, I know you get fatalities, injuries and other emergencies. You get quite a few fatalities with road accidents. What sort of support do you get? Do you get counselling? How is the trauma dealt with within the group when you see people who are badly injured? How do you cope with the trauma when you are called out to a particularly bad crash?

Mr Webster: We had a particularly bad fatality not so long ago, involving a car crashing into a tree. The person who was first on the scene was one of our members. He knew the guy involved. He was only talking to him 10 minutes earlier. They both got in their respective cars and drove off. This person discovered the accident. He was fairly traumatised. It is just a case of looking after your mates.

[11.29 am]

I could see that this person would be going through a bit, so I protected him as much as I could. What is to be done at the scene while waiting for someone? "Let's cover the car up; let's cover the person up." No need to look anymore. It is self-preservation. From there, it is a matter of getting the job done. When the job is done, we return to the station and talk about it. This would also involve the district manager - or area manager as he is now known - to let him know what is going on. We then straightaway got hold of support and received phone calls asking if everything was okay and if there was anything we needed. The following week we organised a simple gathering back at the station - an excuse for a busy-bee, to have a barbecue, sit down and have another chat and just get through it together, which we have, and I think we have done it quite successfully.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I have a general question. St John Ambulance has been mentioned a couple of times by members of the panel. It does not come under any of the umbrellas of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority or whatever. It is a completely separate organisation. Do you believe it should come under the same umbrella so that it is more compatible to services?

Mr Webster: I think so. My wife is an ambulance officer. They had a fundraiser last night out at the mine to try and raise money. They held a pool competition. They are buying their own uniforms, band-aids, bandages - anything that is in the ambulance, they have to pay for. That is how their organisation runs. I understand it is a private organisation. As part of the Fire and Rescue Service, I will not join the ambulance service for the reason that they do not get financial support. Volunteers are expected to do a huge amount of work.

Mrs J. HUGHES: What about communications? You are married to an ambulance volunteer, so that makes it easier to communicate, I suppose. However, if you were not, would it be an issue to get communications - radios and that sort of thing - on the scene?

Mr Webster: They have a group call out through conference call. They communicate with each other quite well. For communication outside their service, they could possibly buy a UHF radio, or one of our services could give them a radio so they can communicate with us. That could probably be looked at.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So FESA has not ever looked at creating a compatible communications link with St John Ambulance?

Mr Webster: Not to my understanding.

Mr Rowe: There is a bit of history. Many years ago I was involved with the Fire and Rescue Service as a volunteer Fire Brigade member. We had the opportunity of using a bush fire brigade radio, which we put into the fire truck we had, because at that time we worked closely with the bush fire guys. This took place long before Gary was involved. It was a very definite, absolute directive from the West Australian Fire Brigades Board that nothing would be put into that fire truck that was not supplied by us. Again, this comes back to the scenario I am talking about. This is a community-type approach to emergency services. A lot of that attitude is, I think, still there; not as blatant as that, perhaps, but still there. It is an attitude of "We're telling you what to do". Over the years we have modified that in various ways, most of it unofficial. We have a State Emergency Service repeater station on the Ravensthorpe Range, which gives us excellent coverage of the immediate Ravensthorpe area, and to a reasonable extent, right down to the coast, to Munglup and Fitzgerald River etc.

We have given the SES frequency to the ambulance people, the police, and the fire brigade, albeit through FESA now. It was a no-no for a long time, and this was SES as well - "You will not give our frequency to anyone else without our permission". We got someone's permission on that, and it has become the greatest way of actually communicating between the lot of us.

The CHAIRMAN: The FESA network being put in now should cover all except St John Ambulance?

Mr Rowe: Which one are you talking about when you say FESA network?

The CHAIRMAN: The new one that is about to be put into place.

Mr Daw: We know little about it.

Mr Rowe: Yes, exactly.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The linking between the two bands.

Mr Rowe: I know. The problem when running any sort of operation is that two frequencies cannot be run at once. That is the bottom line. It is a great concept, but operationally, it is not going to work, because there needs to be people operating bush fires, for instance; there needs to be people running an ambulance system and people running fire and rescue; the shire needs to be doing its own thing. To swap from one frequency to another during an operational situation is just not on. Someone needs to be running each particular organisation or each particular frequency. To be able to - dare I say it - drive down the freeway and swap from St John Ambulance to police, or from police to whatever is fine; however, once there is a genuine situation, for instance a fire that requires logistic support, it is going to come through a system to some sort of incident control person - I use that term very loosely - back out to an organisation that is doing that, whatever "that" might be. It might be supplying a water tank or a low-loader or something of that nature. It cannot happen with one guy sitting there, swapping from one frequency to another. I am sorry; that is my considered opinion, but it is not only my opinion. It is a great concept, but in operational terms, it is just not going to work. People will still use what they have at the moment.

Mr Taylor: To return to the issue of St John Ambulance, Ravensthorpe is quite unique, or was until just recently; I suppose that is the fault of the shire. St John Ambulance works on a membership basis in country towns. If someone wants coverage, they become a member and pay the money. That is the sole source of operational funding for St John. They must pay for uniforms, drugs and whatever else, and also capital replacement. Ravensthorpe was different. They did not have a membership program; council actually pulled \$15 000 a year from its ratepayers' funds, and that, along with St John's own fundraising activities, funded the service. I raised the issue that that

was impractical because it could not generate sufficient funding to replace its capital equipment, and council should not be responsible for funding it. Over a period of time, St John has now reverted to the membership system; it is doing that in addition to fundraising. Council last committed to paying \$15 000 towards the capital replacement program; this year, St John has asked council for only \$7 500. I have indicated that it should either ask for the full \$15 000 or for \$10 000, because its reserves still have to be brought up. What is happening today in its ability to generate income is the result of the mine, which is going to stop. St John needs to build its reserves. The changeover of ambulances came about through a great deal of lobbying from within the membership, and therefore the Minister for Health has made a very generous funding offer, which has benefited us. However, in truth, if there was a way St John could be supported financially as FRS, bush fire brigades or SES, that would take a lot of pressure off the volunteers. They already have enough to deal with, having to go out to trauma incidents and having to deal with patients, restocking the vans, maintenance and running the organisation, without having to spend their weekends fundraising to provide a critical service to the community. It is very unfair that they are required to do that.

[11.40 am]

Mrs J. HUGHES: Of course, a lot of your services are not necessarily for the townspeople, because often people pass through this region.

Mr Taylor: We have an issue at the moment because of the mine and the construction people in the area. They have paramedics on-site. They bring patients into the hospital, dump them there and then leave. The patients then have to be transported to Esperance because of Department of Health protocols in terms of hours. They call in our volunteers - call them out of work or off the farm and sometimes in the middle of the night - to drive two hours to Esperance to transport a patient and then they have to drive all the way back. That is the job, I understand that, but there is no support. Then they have to get up the next day and fundraise to feed that machine.

The CHAIRMAN: I come back to what was said earlier about the mine's emergency plan. They should not be dumping onto the volunteers; they need to extend a bit.

Mr Taylor: Their job is like mine or anybody else's. If somebody at my work has an accident, I am best placed to pick them up. Some of the staff are trained in first aid. We use the first aid kit and take them to the hospital. That is the end of our responsibility because we have put them into the state health-care system. The doctor says that he cannot deal with the patient at that hospital and the patient then has to be transported by the Royal Flying Doctor Service to the metropolitan area or transported by road to Esperance. It is at that time that the protocols are called into play. The protocol is St John. That is what we do. The community would agree that it is possibly the responsibility of the mine. The community gets a bit confused as well. It is no different from RBS or a Hyatt Hotel that may be built on the foreshore. They are businesses and if they have a client who becomes sick, they are entitled to use the facilities that are provided in the community. Just because they belong to the Hyatt Hotel makes it no different from Stuart Taylor, Rod Daw or anybody else. Although they do have some responsibility, they are not the fixer of all our problems and we should see them in that light. There are structural problems within the setup of the system and those problems need to be addressed.

The CHAIRMAN: Certainly the ambulance issue regionally - in the rural areas - is a big issue. Our ambulance service in the metropolitan area -

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is an issue as well, but not as bad as the regions.

The CHAIRMAN: It is paid for through St John, grants from the government, recoups, health funds and all those sorts of things. Clearly, in the rural areas it is an issue. I think it is disgraceful that the volunteers have to fundraise for their own equipment - bandages, drugs and all those sorts of things.

Mr Webster: The unit here had to change its ambulance from a petrol to a diesel vehicle so it could go onto a mine site.

Mrs J. HUGHES: And it had to raise the funds? So St John provides them with no assistance whatsoever?

Mr Taylor: I used to be a member of St John a few years ago. My understanding is that in the old days we had to pay for half. Therefore, the community was raising tens of thousands of dollars, up to \$100 000, to be in a position to get a new ambulance. There would be a grant through lotteries and St John would pay the other half and we would get a brand-new ambulance. There are three communities - Ravensthorpe, we will take as the centre, Hopetoun, which is 50 kilometres south, and Munglinup, which is 80 kilometres east. Therefore, we need three independent centres and three independent ambulances to cover the district in between. Even if we have to replace those three ambulances on a rotational basis, it is a huge capital cost for the community to meet. These poor few volunteers carry the workload. Not only do they have to run the system, train the system and meet the requirements, but also they have to raise the money.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Of course ambulances are an integral part of any emergency service.

Mr Taylor: It is the backbone of the community. Fire, okay, but when we look at the aged population, children, schools, farm accidents and normal work accidents, these are the people they rely on to come and get them to ease the pain, stop the bleeding and make them instantly feel that they will get something done and then they are taken to the hospital. It is such an important service.

The CHAIRMAN: When we came into this inquiry, I do not think we anticipated the impact of rural ambulance services. We had a bit of an idea about the metropolitan area and areas that are serviced by courier ambulance officers and the like. It is something we will have to get our head around to determine how we deal with that. St John is also a private organisation, which sets it apart from the State Emergency Service, fire and rescue, bush fire brigades and a range of things. It is an issue that we have to seriously deal with.

Mrs J. HUGHES: We have to look at the Queensland model.

Mr Rowe: There is another issue here too. The committee will find that there are bushfire control officers, certain bush fire brigade members and SES people who are ambulance officers. We have two very capable ambulance officers in our SES unit. One of them works out of Munglinup, because that is where he lives, and the other works out of Ravensthorpe. I can tell the committee that these guys are called out on a regular basis and they front up for SES work as well.

The CHAIRMAN: We have the risk of burnout as well.

Mr Rowe: That is absolutely right. Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN: We are almost at the end. I will give each of you an opportunity to make some closing remarks. We may have missed something that you thought we would have raised or there may be something that you have not had an opportunity to raise.

Mr Webster: I refer to the communications issue. Our fire and rescue service communications system was previously through the Telstra system. If we went five kilometres out of town, we lost all communications. That is the reason we had to go to a bush fire radio with the bush fire, CALM and SES frequency. We funded that radio out of our own brigade funds; however, we had to buy a Fire and Emergency Services Authority approved radio. FESA did fit the radio for us, but we had to fund it. We put in two vehicles.

With regard to our isolation, we are a 200-kilometre radius from any other brigades - Esperance and Lake Grace are the closest towns with fire brigades. There are communities in the wheatbelt area and their distance from Ravensthorpe is probably 50 kilometres. Therefore, we have a huge amount of road network to look after - bitumen and gravel. The number of vehicles we currently have is not adequate. We have a light pump, which is a Mazda, that has all our rescue gear on it to handle

vehicle rescue - breathing apparatus and hazardous materials - and also structural fires. We have a fast attack unit - a light tanker that is a Land Cruiser that carries 400 litres of water. It is not adequate for what we do. When we turn out, both vehicles go out and it leaves the town unprotected. Through the Local Emergency Management Committee, we have an understanding that when we turn out and it looks as though something will happen in town, we notify Rod and he will arrange for a bushfires unit to be on stand-by while we are out of town. We need to get the road rescue gear off the light pump and get a trailer onto the Land Cruiser so that we have fire protection plus all the rescue gear.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are your vehicles able to carry a crew?

Mr Webster: Our light pump is; it is a crew-cab Mazda, but the Land Cruiser is a single cab. That is something we need to look at. I guess committee members flew down and did not drive down. With the increased traffic, especially trucks, on the road - it will get heavier - there is a huge need for a heavy rescue team. We feel that if it were based in Esperance, it would service this area quite well. Ravensthorpe is the hub of it all and it will not be long before something serious will happen. We had an incident last night involving a truck. It was amazing to note how many trucks actually pulled up and passed through. There were probably at least 10. There are a lot of trucks on the road and they are a potential hazard. To tell you the truth, we are not adequately equipped to deal with any major accident.

The CHAIRMAN: Is this as a result of the increased mine activity? Was what you had five years ago adequate?

Mr Webster: Yes and no. Definitely yes. The construction of the mine will mean a huge increase in traffic on the roads.

Mr Taylor: Just the operation of the mine itself after construction. There will be an additional 52 truck movements between Ravensthorpe mine and Esperance port.

The CHAIRMAN: That is 200 a day?

Mr Taylor: Daily

The CHAIRMAN: Fifty-two trucks daily.

Mr Webster: That is the mine only. That is not offloading at CBH server points.

The CHAIRMAN: So we are victims of our own boom.

Mr Webster: That is the situation we are in. We've just heard that the Bush Fires Service of WA has been knocked back for a vehicle that it really need. To be honest I do not think FRS has been addressed. I mention things to our area manager. He knows our problems - he knows what we need, as does the hierarchy in Albany. It is just getting things to happen. We have been expected to do quite a bit. If I may bring up another point, Hopetoun had no structural firefighting ability. They have bush firefighting ability there with an urban tank, but with structural firefighting, there is no BA - that is a problem waiting to happen down there.

Mrs J. HUGHES: BA - what is that?

Mr Webster: Breathing apparatus; it enables people to go into a burning structure or anything hazardous with a lot of smoke. That needs serious attention down there.

Mr Daw: Most of them are old people - retired people.

The CHAIRMAN: I understand the whole town is one of those that have been seachanged.

Mr Webster: The population is growing and is probably double that of Ravensthorpe now.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Just on that point, is there training for the brigades down there to be able to take on that type of situation? Is training not offered to brigades -

Mr Daw: Training is always available; they only have to ask for it. In the past down there we seem to have had more oldies than youngies. I think some of the bush fire brigade members there are getting on a bit. Some of them have done structural training so they know what to do, but there is no BA so they are not allowed to enter a building without BA.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It is a matter of FESA being able to support them.

Mr Taylor: Again, it comes down to the ESL. At the end of the day it is the shire's responsibility to ensure that they have that equipment because it is not a gazetted fire district, so it falls to the shire. We need to access that funding and we are at the whim of those who control the funding.

Mr Daw: When we have a house fire down there, Gary has to tear down there and leave Ravensthorpe empty.

Mr Webster: And with 50 kilometres distance, it is all over - the house is gone.

The CHAIRMAN: Your response time for 50 kilometres would be a significant amount of time.

Mr Webster: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: I think the standard is seven minutes in an urban area.

Mr Webster: With a light pump we might get there in 50 minutes, with just the load on it.

The CHAIRMAN: If you are lucky. I will give you the opportunity to make a closing comment.

Mr Daw: Thanks. I guess you have fathomed out that I could talk forever about bush fires and stuff, but thank you for the invitation; I really appreciate it. I was going to ask you a question: I assume you will be making some sort of submission to somebody from your inquiry into the FESA act and FESA's performance over the last five years.

The CHAIRMAN: Our committee always tables a report to Parliament. We will be tabling it on 31 August; that is the intended tabling date. We are still working towards that time frame because it is necessary for us to get it completed and get it in so that the minister can respond and then the other various bodies that look at the legislation and how to change it can get to work. Legislation takes 12 months to get up and get through Parliament, so it is important the report goes in and is responded to and then whatever changes may happen are drafted into legislation and it gets up and running.

Mr Daw: Good. You would be aware that the Bush Fires Act is under review at the moment. Are you able to make recommendations to change -

The CHAIRMAN: We are reviewing the Bush Fires Act, the FESA legislation and any other related legislation.

Mr Daw: Excellent. Can I make a suggestion in relation to the Bush Fires Act? I have a big problem with the word "prohibited" in the act. There is a restricted period and a prohibited period. You can look up any Webster's Dictionary or Oxford Dictionary or whatever, and the word means you cannot do something. But you can. You can burn in any prohibited period. You can burn dead carcasses; skeleton weed; to protect a house, dwelling or structure; you can go out 200 metres into the bush and burn to protect crops from an oncoming fire; all sorts of burning can be done during the prohibited period. It causes confusion for people. They say, "Oh, Joe Bloggs was burning the other day. How come he can burn; it's a prohibited period?" They get confused by the difference between restricted and prohibited. I took it on myself to take it to the various districts, and I go to Narrogin for meetings as well, so I went up there and the Narrogin guys supported me in getting the word "prohibited" out of the Bush Fires Act and replaced with something like "fire danger period" so people know that is a danger period, but they can burn. Just get rid of "prohibited" and make it easier for everyone. Narrogin supported that. Albany did the time before and then they had a change of heart last meeting; they did not like the idea. CALM has supported me at the state meetings, so it wants to get rid of it because CALM thinks it is confusing as well. I just wanted you

to take on board how I feel about it. I am not saying you should support me or anything, but I think it is something that could be done.

The other thing I would like to say while I have the opportunity is to thank Stuart for his support to the brigades through local government since he has been here, and to Keith and Gary, it has been fantastic. I believe that our bush fire setup works well. I run a roll call at seven o'clock every morning, apart from the months of June, July and August. I have 19 fire control officers under me. They are all good friendly farmers, big strong men and they are great guys to work with. We get terrific support on radio maintenance through ESL - I guess ESL is picking that up.

Mr Taylor: Yes.

Mr Daw: But it is all organised by the shire, which is great. We know when we pick up a microphone it is going to work, which is terrific. I have grave concern that we have some brigades out there that are 45 years old, like mine, and I have lent two or three of my personal vehicles in my time as either control officer or chief bush fire control officer. Our brigade currently has nothing. We rolled our trailer unit in the Ravensthorpe ranges and it is not worth a cracker. We have a brigade that does not have a unit. There are other brigades in our shire that do not have units and I am afraid. I worry: my responsibility in my job is to my guys, and when they are out there and I know they have inferior equipment, or they are using their own equipment, a lot of that stuff - you have a look at some of the old Holden utes and some of the four-wheel drives getting around with no doors and that sort of thing. Guys are out there trying to fight fires with their own farming equipment. It is just not good enough. In my time I have had three deaths. One was a personal thing, and I do not like it. I hate it. That is one part of my job that I do not like. Apart from that, I share everyone else's concerns. Thanks very much for the opportunity.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks, Rod. Stuart?

[11:59 am]

Mr Taylor: I understand the review and I think it is a good idea. I think there should be greater focus on how to provide more support. At the end of the day, no matter which way this goes, if the Fire and Emergency Services Authority takes control of it, local government and communities will still be asked to provide fire management plans and all the garbage that they need underneath to make those things work. They are already doing it, and I do not see the need for change. I think the greatest support needs to come from the top down, but if they need to come in and say, "Okay, these are the coroner's concerns; these are the Auditor General's concerns; they want this in place," then give them the money to come in and do it. If they are the experts and they are the advisors, let them come to the local governments with the troops on the ground and say, "This is what we need; we have done it for you. Here it is. Let's make it fit your shire, while still fitting into the framework of what the state requires." That is what I think is needed, not the other way around. There is one provision in the Bush Fires Act that, in my belief, if it is to remain with local government in whatever form it may take, the power of delegation from council to its Chief Executive Officer needs to be put in there. Some decisions under the Bush Fires Act require the decision of council. That means council has to be pulled in, a special meeting held and the decision made. We have signed off on this you-beaut handover. It turns out that the Local Government Act says that the CEO is responsible for the carrying out of the decision, which is great. The minute that trigger point comes, the CEO has no choice by law but to enforce council's decision. It is a statutory requirement of the CEO. He cannot play with that. Rod may turn around to me and say, "Look, Stuart, it has just hit these trigger points, but in half an hour the fire will be out." I do not have the statutory authority to override a council decision. The minute that trigger point is hit, handover must be given. I am required by law to hand it over, because that was the council decision. We need a provision by which council can say to the CEO, "We have made this decision; we delegate this power to you with these conditions," and then there is flexibility for Rod to say to me, "We don't need to hand it over at this point. I can manage this; we've got the resources, we've got this."

However, at the moment, FESA wants this agreement, which council has reluctantly agreed to, but there is no flexibility because three acts are not necessarily compatible in operation.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks, Stuart. Keith, do you have a final word? Well, you do not, because I get the final word!

Mr Rowe: I cannot smell anything, so bad luck! There are a couple of things. Gary mentioned this changing from region to region. The State Emergency Services units in Ravensthorpe and Esperance, but specifically Ravensthorpe, were in Albany, went to the goldfields and are back in Albany again, and there was absolutely no consultation whatsoever with the Ravensthorpe unit about this. Absolutely none; it was a statement of fact. There were rumours flying around, but no-one actually came and discussed it with us. I am pretty sure the same thing happened in Esperance. It was a power play somewhere else; somebody said, "This is how it's going to happen." Bingo. We are now in a situation where we have Stuart MacIntyre - whose name has been mentioned many times - in Esperance, where he is responsible for fire and SES in the Esperance and Ravensthorpe shires. I have no problem with Stuart whatsoever; I consider him a personal friend and he is doing an extremely good job, but he is a fire-trained person. He is not an SES-trained person. There is a wide difference between the two. My argument - this is nothing personal against Stuart - is that we have enough trouble training our own unit members without training fire brigade people who are trying to be our managers. It is a crazy situation. I am sure this is not only Ravensthorpe. To get down to the nitty-gritty, this is happening all over the south of the state. I do not know about the northern part of the state. There are more and more fire-trained people trying to run SES units, and they just do not have the expertise to do it. Sure, they can learn, but who is teaching them? That brings up the next point on training generally. We are having a great deal of difficulty getting training at a local level. This has been the case ever since FESA moved into the scene.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you mean training locally, or any training?

Mr Rowe: No, I am talking specifically about training locally. I will throw in something here that might interest you. A couple of years ago we actually worked out that if every one of our members at that point hopped in their vehicles and drove into Ravensthorpe for a meeting one night and drove home again, they would have collectively travelled 903 kilometres. Our expertise is in the fact that we have people out in the regional areas who can respond quickly to an incident, get a situation report back to whoever is running it - whether it be police or whoever - and can actually have people on the ground very quickly. We have excellent communications amongst our members. Most of us carry radios or have access to our radios 24 hours a day, hence Gary's call last night at 11:00 pm. It is no problem. It is not unknown for a police car to be tearing down the road and it will actually be on the radio saying, "Ravensthorpe SES, I'm responding to what I think is a road accident. Can you put everyone on standby? I'll be back to you shortly." He is doing 290 kilometres an hour down the highway. That is an exaggeration. Collectively, we work well. The problem is that the SES has roles and responsibilities that are far more diversified than any other emergency organisation. We are just not getting the training, because under the system that is set up at the moment, there is no-one to train us. The official answer is that we have training weekends; we have a training weekend in Hyden, maybe. Not everyone can take the time off to go to Hyden. There should be people on the ground who are dedicated trainers within the SES organisation. I mean SES as opposed to FESA. Whether it is being run by FESA or whoever, the issue is exactly the same: people on the ground who are actually going out to units and teaching them at a local level. That will do, I think.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you, gentlemen, for your contribution to the committee of inquiry this morning. 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 and the sense of 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 to us within 10 days of receipt, we will deem it to be correct.

Hearing concluded at 12.07 pm
