

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT KUNUNURRA
TUESDAY, 4 JULY 2006**

SESSION ONE

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)
Mr S.R. Hill
Ms K. Hodson-Thomas
Mrs J. Hughes

Hearing commenced at 9.01 am

STUBBS, MR PETER CHARLES

Chief Executive Officer, Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley, examined:

KING, MR GARY THOMAS

Ranger and Chief Bushfire Controller, Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: First of all, thanks for coming in this morning and giving us the benefit of your knowledge about this area. Before we start I will introduce the committee and then I have some official stuff to read. I will do that and then we can get into the questions. Murray Cowper is on my extreme left. He is the deputy chair of the committee. Then there is Shane Hill, member for Geraldton and committee member; Judith Hughes, member for Kingsley and committee member; Katie Hodson-Thomas, member for Carine and committee member; and me, Tony O’Gorman, the chair of the committee. Kath Galvin is the principal research officer and Dawn Dickinson is the research officer and, of course, we have the two Hansard ladies, who will record everything that is said here this morning.

I will just go through now and read the official bit. There are a couple of questions in there and I ask that you respond verbally rather than give a nod or a shake because Hansard do not hear the nod and shake on the recording.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

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

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: We have not received a submission from you but we would like to give you an opportunity to make some opening comments if you wish. If not, we can just get straight into questions.

Mr King: I do not need to make any comment.

The CHAIRMAN: First of all, would you mind giving us a brief overview of the local government area in terms of emergency services? What are your high-risk emergencies - bushfires, cyclones, floods; whichever it happens to be - and what types of brigade units do you have operating within the local government area?

Mr Stubbs: I might kick off with that. Certainly we live in a fairly remote part of the world obviously and bushfires are a major concern, particularly in rangelands. We have a vast area, much of it inaccessible, much of it with a sparse population, but those people who do live in rangeland areas can be potentially exposed to dangers through bushfires, and that presents a particular challenge to us. In our town sites, where the concentration of life, people and property is greater,

we are probably much better equipped to manage emergencies from bushfires through the volunteer network. The network is quite vibrant and the volunteers are pretty well resourced and trained. It is in the rangelands that we probably feel we are under-resourced to deal with that issue. In terms of cyclones, this area is relatively well off. Although we are cyclone rated, as are other cyclone-prone areas in Australia, we do not have the strong winds typically associated with cyclones. Flooding is more of an issue for us. Cyclones breaking up as they cross the coast into rain-bearing depressions and the flooding issues that come with that are more of an issue.

There is the tendency for isolated communities to become further isolated through floodwaters, and often the need to evacuate communities presents a particular hazard. We must have a response capability for contingencies. I guess other emergencies relate to just the isolation of the place and accidents and things like that that may occur from time to time. We do not regard ourselves as particularly at risk from cyclones; it is mostly from floodwaters.

Mr M.J. COWPER: What is the ratepayer base for the shire?

Mr Stubbs: In dollar terms?

Mr M.J. COWPER: No, approximately the number.

Mr Stubbs: There are around 7 000 people. A lot of those would not be ratepayers. It is more likely that around half that number are ratepayers.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Can you just give us an outline of where they are geographically situated within the shire?

Mr Stubbs: The greatest concentration of people, about 80 per cent, would probably be situated in Kununurra. Wyndham has about 900 people. Kalumburu and Oombulgurri are substantial communities. Kalumburu probably has 700 or 800 people, none of whom is a ratepayer. Oombulgurri has about 400 people, none of whom is a ratepayer. There is a smattering of small indigenous communities throughout the shire. Eighty per cent of the population would be in Kununurra.

The CHAIRMAN: We can go through and ask some particular questions that we have asked most of the councils and we would like to get your comments on them as well. The coroner and the Auditor General have both expressed concern at the current fire control arrangements in Western Australia. Both have criticised the fact that local government, CALM and FESA could all be in control of a fire at the same time, particularly when the fire is crossing different land tenures. It has been suggested that FESA be empowered to take control of a fire from local government or CALM when FESA considers this to be necessary. It is anticipated that the power would only ever be needed to be used two or three times a year. CALM and some local governments oppose FESA being given this power. We would just like to know what your views are on that particular suggestion.

[9.10 am]

Mr Stubbs: The council supports the notion that FESA should be able to assume control of a fire. In fact, council would go further and suggest that, certainly in this environment and rangelands, FESA ought to be in control of a fire.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there a particular reason you have that view?

Mr Stubbs: The council's view is that local government is not well resourced to deal with fires in rangelands. We do not have access immediately to satellite imagery; the state does through FESA. We do not have access to aircraft and things of that nature, whereas the state does. Because of the vastness of the area and the strategies that might be needed to get intelligence around fires and things like that, it best sits with the state, and for the state to request assistance from local government when it needs it.

The CHAIRMAN: What about local knowledge and things like that? Your people would obviously have more local knowledge.

Mr Stubbs: I do not necessarily agree with that. The turnover of the staff in the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley last calendar year was 37 out of 55, so with local knowledge, I do not know that that is true within the actual local government itself. I think that FESA officers on the ground have as much ability to tap into local knowledge through pastoralists and community people as local government does. FESA regularly attends the land care district committee meetings, for example, along the Gibb River Road, as do local government staff. I do not know that it quite holds up that the industry and local government have more knowledge. In our particular case, we are fortunate that our chief bushfire controller, Gary King, does, and a number of the volunteers certainly do. The actual staff within local government may not have any more local knowledge than FESA staff may have.

The CHAIRMAN: Gary, do you have an opinion on that?

Mr King: We would not have anything without FESA, like with training. Parts of our trips - we go out to the station areas with FESA to meetings. I have been to probably six meetings over the years with pastoralists and graziers, and with FESA being in control it makes it better. You want to do aerial burning to control these wildfires in December. If we can have the resources through FESA with a plane and aerial burnings - yesterday, I was out fighting, and if we had not had early burns through that area, I would still be out there today. The aerial burn breaks it all up, with the aerial burning that FESA and CALM do. Have FESA as the control, but you still have to have the ground crew and the equipment. You cannot control any fire from the air or from a computer; there have got to be staff on the ground. Those staff on the ground have to be better equipped than they are now. That has a lot to do with the volunteers. If you have not got decent equipment, volunteers are just going to say, "Well, fight the bloody thing yourself." That is what actually does happen sometimes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: We have travelled all round the state and one of the things that we have found that is available to a number of other locations is access to heavy machinery - dozers, loaders, that sort of stuff. How does accessing equipment sit in this part of the world, whether it be a shire resource or private?

Mr King: Just in this town there are about 27 graders that are available. We have our own grader, but if our grader is not there, I just go and get another grader. The shire has been paying for that, but now that FESA is back in, FESA pays for some of it, as when we chase up fires around Aboriginal communities, like we did at Molly Springs a couple of years ago. That took us 10 hours, just the two of us - one unit and a grader. We chased that fire up on our own, but FESA paid for the grader hire. I think another thing is that it all depends on somebody in FESA; that you have somebody there that understands this country. You could not have anybody there that did not know this country. Whoever is running it has got to know what is going on in the country.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA has also suggested that it be empowered to request the development of fire management plans from landowners when the land is either CALM managed, plantation land or land used for pastoral or grazing purposes. A fire management plan would only be requested if FESA considered this to be necessary to mitigate the risk of fire to life and property, for instance, in areas of high risk. Do you have a comment on this proposal?

Mr Stubbs: Yes, we do. Council would support the idea of fire management plans. We know that up to 40 per cent of the Kimberley region burns each year, some through prescribed burning and much through wildfires, so it is a major issue in terms of property risk and life risk. It impacts on the economy quite significantly and on biodiversity. It seems to the council that it is a good idea that there be fire management plans.

The CHAIRMAN: Okay. FESA has been undertaking some of those fire management plans in the Kimberley with some pastoralists, but we are not sure how long this has been happening. Have you noticed any impact from those fire management plans? Is there an improvement?

Mr Stubbs: No, I have not noticed any impact at this stage.

The CHAIRMAN: It is too small yet?

Mr Stubbs: Yes.

Mr M.J. COWPER: The Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia believes the current legislative arrangement in relation to firebreaks to be impractical; however, it argues that the fire management plan be voluntary because it is concerned that compulsory mandatory fire management plans would result in increased litigation. The committee is interested in your comments regarding the concept of voluntary plans for pastoralists.

Mr Stubbs: I think that fire management plans for pastoralists, as I said before, are a very useful tool, and a good idea for pastoralists managing vast tracts of land often with high fuel loads. particularly, I think, since there is much better management of animals and stock and therefore there is more vegetation covered than there was, say, in the 1970s. The amount of fuel load has probably increased, so we are more predisposed to fire because of that. We have some concerns about firebreaks - the adequacy of them and the techniques used to create them. Graders, in particular, bare the ground and expose it to erosion. We are seeing evidence of quite a bit of erosion. That is causing a lot of other impacts - silting of drains and flooding, and things like that. We have to do reparative work around that, so we are quite keen to look at chemical firebreaks in a lot of situations. Gary might want to comment on strategic firebreaks that we are looking at in some locations where it is shown there has been a strong history of fire year in, year out. Putting in decent strategic firebreaks to enable access and to slow down fire is seen to be of strategic value for the region.

Mr King: We have one firebreak that is 70 kilometres long that goes from Drysdale River right through to the Home River, way out in that back country. Last year the break did not get done because of a bit too much of a hurry when the fire came. The fire last year went through from the King Edward River station right through to Derby - well, a bit out of Derby, but it may have gone through to Derby if they had not pulled it up at Mt Barnett. That is a long way for a fire to travel. The firebreak is a five-width-grader-blade wide, but to maintain that it has to be graded every year. We are trying to get away from grading it every year by using chemical spray. We are trying to get a spray rig through FESA to spray every year. I do not know whether you know this country very well, but you can cut a sucker down and it will be about that big, and the following year you go out and that sucker will be that big. It just grows. Ask the sandalwood mob; they got a big shock by how quickly it grows. The country just grows that quickly. By using chemicals we are not going to have erosion; the biggest problem here with the grader is the erosion. This year we have got wash-outs. I should have brought some photographs. Some of these wash-outs would be eight-foot deep where we have been grading firebreaks for five years. All of a sudden we got a helluva big, normal wet and, bang, away went the soil. All that soil came out here onto Weaber Plains Road. If we can get onto chemical usage for firebreaks - but that break out there does save some country. Yes.

[9.20 am]

The CHAIRMAN: What is the different effect of the chemical clearing? Are the roots still left in the ground and is the hole still there?

Mr King: Exactly. When grading it, a windrow is always left, which cannot be helped. If the country could be flattened out completely so that the water ran off - it is just impossible with cane grass as high as this roof; that just lays it up and it rolls up in a big ball. It just cannot be graded at all.

The CHAIRMAN: What about contamination from the chemicals into surrounding areas?

Mr King: You can drink Roundup. That is how the Yanks sold it. There is other stuff to kill the suckers. If you get them when they are young, it is not going to hurt any of the country. It would not matter anyway because it would only kill the cane toads.

The CHAIRMAN: A city dweller would not have a clue about that stuff.

Mr Stubbs: Certainly chemical contamination is an issue for the region. The region prides itself on being a clean, green environment and it is marketed that way from a tourism perspective, but we have to think about what is the lesser of two evils. We are seeing a lot of damage to the environment caused by erosion, and the rainfall events can be quite severe. Two hundred millimetres of rain can fall within two or three hours. We see severe thunderstorm activity and if we have exposed ground to that, we are wholly exposed to erosion. It seems that the root mass that is left behind with the chemical application helps hold the country together, so we are keen to move in that direction.

Mr King: I am working very closely with Ralph Smith. I have a lot of phone calls with Ralph. He is sort of in FESA and does studies on those sorts of things. We are working in that way with the chemical part of it.

The CHAIRMAN: Just before we leave the fire management plan, does some sort of a hierarchy need to be put in place? For instance, if a pastoralist has leaves, would he pass on that information up the line to local government, FESA or whoever so that a coordinated fire management plan could apply across the whole of the region?

Mr King: The pastoralists?

The CHAIRMAN: Yes. For example, if a mandatory fire management plan were enforced. It is not good enough for a pastoralist to have a fire management plan in his hand if nobody else knows what is happening. Is some sort of a hierarchy required whereby the emergency management plan is directed through either local government or FESA so that the plan is able to be coordinated across the whole region?

Mr Stubbs: Ideally, yes. This year FESA supplied a document that outlined procedures on prescribed burning and other things that would occur station by station. That was a pretty useful communication tool. However, the general public does not differentiate between what is a wildfire and what is a prescribed burn. When the public sees a fire in the landscape, they are not aware whether it is a wildfire or a prescribed burn by the shire, the government or pastoralists. There is a need to better communicate to the public matters regarding fire generally, including what is a bushfire and what is not. We need to find a way of communicating our prescribed burn strategies as a way of reducing fuel loads.

Mr King: I know that it is very hard, but every time a cane fire gets lit up we know all about it because we get a phone call straight from the guy who lit the fire at the right time, so that is a communication thing that maybe we should try somehow with aerial burning and prescribed burning. With most fires we know what is going on because of permits around here, but we work pretty well with FESA. It is like Pete said, when most of the fires are conducted through aerial burning, a big map of all the areas that are going to be burnt is sent out, but then the station owner is supposed to let the neighbour know and sometimes that does not happen. However, 90 per cent of the time it does happen.

Mr Stubbs: The Kimberley would benefit from regular announcements on the radio each morning during the weather report on where prescribed burnings and bushfires are occurring. The report could include regular reports about the response to the fire so that the public at large would have a much greater understanding of what was going on. The indigenous community in particular would have a much greater awareness. I think radio is the way to do that.

The CHAIRMAN: That could be done through the ABC or one of the local stations.

Mr Stubbs: Yes.

Mr King: A lot of times when people see smoke, they think, "Oh, gee, fire's coming, so I will light up a bit more."

Mrs J. HUGHES: One of the submissions states that if the firebreaks and those types of things are not maintained for three or four years, they become obsolete and non-user friendly. Who currently funds those types of strategic firebreaks? Are they paid for by the landowners, FESA or local government?

Mr King: Here we work with FESA. If we create a firebreak on unallocated crown land, FESA gets a bill for that and then the shire foots the bill for about 60 per cent of it. CALM has helped out only over the past two years and FESA has helped out over the past three years. I did not know that the shire was doing all the breaks, but now it is shared with FESA and some with CALM.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You talked about the costs associated with using a plane for controlled aerial burning and things like that. Is the landowner the primary contributor to the cost of those burns?

Mr King: I think it is mainly FESA and CALM; the landowner pays for the hire of the plane. Somebody else would have to answer that question. If we had a wildfire out here like we had last year, I might want to hire a helicopter. I would hand the fire over to FESA. I would ring and tell FESA that I needed a helicopter to check out where we were going to put in the break with the grader. While we were in the helicopter, I would guide the grader to where it should go, because in that country it is easy to have no idea where you are when you are on the ground in a vehicle while trying to chase a fire. FESA pays for the hire of the helicopter while we check where the break will go. That is out in rangelands country. That has been working really well.

Mr M.J. COWPER: How has the ESL impacted on this shire?

Mr Stubbs: Very positively. The introduction of the ESL has helped to provide better resources for volunteers, which is crucial to maintaining the enthusiasm of the volunteer network. Volunteerism in society generally is under pressure. If we are unable to resource people appropriately, that will drive volunteers away and be a disincentive. The ESL has been the major beneficiary to updating and improving response capability and in helping to assist in keeping an active volunteer engagement.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You have mentioned the high turnover of the transient population. How do you maintain that level of volunteerism to support the SES and fire brigade units?

Mr King: To be honest, that is pretty easy at Packsaddle because somebody goes around and tells people that if they do not become a member of the bushfire brigade, their place will just burn. I know it is not the right way to say it, but it does happen. This shire had nothing until the ESL came along. It had no equipment. All it had was one slip-on unit on the back of a ute. Now we have two fast attacks, and one shed has been constructed, because of the ESL. It would be a lot better if the government had not taken money off another government and pinched \$12 500 to put the power onto the shed. Then the government wanted a little bit more.

[9.30 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Can you give us more detail on one government department taking from another government department?

Mr King: Well, that is what it sounds like.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you tell us exactly what happened?

Mr King: We were allotted \$85 000 to build the shed. We went ahead and started to build and then got onto Western Power to put the power on. It wanted \$12 100 at first, so we gave that a miss for a little while - we thought it might get a bit better. We argued with it and told it that we were a volunteer bush fire brigade and that we thought we should at least get the power for nothing, seeing

that Western Power was starting all the fires down south. At any rate, it still would not come to the party. After leaving it for the three months that Western Power had given us, it added another \$600 on to hit a heavier nail into the coffin. We had to cough up another \$600. It ended up being \$12 570, or something like that, from Western Power.

The CHAIRMAN: In your opinion, could that money have been better spent on the volunteers?

Mr King: You are not wrong; yes. We could have had shade cloth put over that pad out there for the women and the kids.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the suggestion that government departments should help each other out when it comes to volunteers?

Mr King: I would say so; yes - especially to come 150 metres to a fire station/shed for a volunteer bush fire brigade.

Mr Stubbs: Gary King is being a bit modest about how you maintain volunteerism. The Packsaddle shed is a fantastic model for how to run a volunteer fire brigade. A social life has been created around that shed. There are regular sausage sizzles and barbecues every Friday night. The community goes there and uses that as a de facto club, in essence. The camaraderie that has developed there is what holds the volunteers together. That does not happen all over the state, but that is a particular success story. It is helped by FESA regularly attending those social functions. The former FESA managing director, Bob Mitchell, has been to that fire station several times; he recognises the input of volunteers and presents awards and certificates and things on a regular basis. That is what keeps that group of volunteers together.

The CHAIRMAN: It is not just about firefighting; it is about the community.

Mr Stubbs: Yes, it is.

Mr King: The other part of it is that since that shed has gone up we have put about 80 people through one, three and eight modules of wild bush fire awareness, which is all you actually need to fight a fire in this country. None of the guys is going to pull anybody out of a burning motor car or anything like that - well, they would, but they are not trained for it. That is the sort of that that shed has allowed; we can organise with whomever is here running FESA to organise a course. That many people have gone through that shed already.

The CHAIRMAN: Eighty people have gone through?

Mr King: No. Eighty people have gone through, including CALM people, local shire people, a couple of Aboriginal guys and the Ivanhoe bush fire brigade. It does not involve only people from the Packsaddle bush fire brigade. We used to have to go out to the Department of Agriculture or find a shed somewhere else that we could use. Most of the time we had to pay for the facilities. We have found out that 24 people are too many for the room, but we had 24 in there for one training.

The CHAIRMAN: It is a huge resource for the community as well as anything else.

Mr King: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: You talked about the emergency services levy bringing in two fast-attack units. Obviously, if you have a large wildfire, two fast-attacks are not necessarily going to do the job. Do you then rely on the pastoralists and the landowners to bring in their units?

Mr King: Yes, we do. We have another slip-on unit in the shed that people put on to take to the fire and then farmers -

Mrs J. HUGHES: There is talk about slip-ons no longer being funded by FESA. Can you comment on that?

Mr King: They will never, ever stop us using them in this country, no matter what the coroner says. That is all we have in this country to use. We would have better slip-on units if we could get

them through the ESL. We make many of those units ourselves - buy a pump, a tank, and make them ourselves. Most of the time they are a lot better than the other ones. You can get those compact units now that are not as high. I could call in all the units at Packsaddle and Ivanhoe. Some of them should not be taken to a fire, but we take them, and we end up getting the fire under control.

Mrs J. HUGHES: There are differences in liability for guys going out to a fire with slip-ons and things like that. Are any of your people concerned about liability if they were to use those appliances in a fire, and, God forbid, something untoward happened?

Mr King: Nobody as yet has mentioned anything like that out there.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: For clarification, I understand that the coroner referred to a slip-on, and it was a different slip-on from what you are using -

Mr King: Yes.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Can you give some background on the difference in the slip-on to which the coroner referred?

Mr King: I think it was that one at Gingin. I am pretty sure it was a 2 000-litre tank, which is a lot different from a 500 or 600-litre tank. Am I right in saying it was 2 000 litres?

Mr M.J. COWPER: A thousand.

Mr King: A thousand. Gallons or litres?

Mr M.J. COWPER: Litres.

Mr King: A thousand litres. That is a lot more weight than we carry.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is a tonne of water, plus the weight of the appliance.

Mr King: It would be more than a tonne. It would have to be, would it not?

The CHAIRMAN: The water weighs a tonne.

Mr King: There is a lot of difference between that and a 400 to 600-litre tank. I do not think they had it chained on. It was just sitting. Most of the units here are all bolted on, or chained.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If the slip-ons were removed from the firefighting capacity for Kununurra, what would you see?

Mr King: Ten guys would turn up at the bush fire shed, and two would go in one unit and that would be it; the rest would sit back and watch the fire go. I will say that with these fast-attack units, we could have a backup vehicle such as a two-four or a three-four. I can use yesterday once again as an example. We were coming 15 to 20 kilometres back to town to get water, whereas if we had a four-two or four-three in the shire itself, it would be one the biggest help we could ever get out of the ESL.

Mr M.J. COWPER: How would you go with a four-two, say in December, if there was a bit of rain around? We know that when this country gets a bit wet, it is pretty ordinary. You put a four-two and -

Mr King: December would still be all right.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Yes, but in January or December you might get the odd bit of rain.

Mr King: Yes. James O'Kenny has gone one and it seems to be pretty good. It is not the wet here; it is the sand country that we go into. With the fast-attacks, if you had a four-three, you would use your noggin and not go into an area in which you might go out on the side. You would park it in an area that is only a kilometre away from the fire, then you race in and out with the little vehicles. If you empty one, by the time it gets back, there would be another vehicle there ready to

load. That is the number one thing with this fire control business: you need these little fast-attacks, but you need something to back them up.

[9.40 am]

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: The Conservation Council of Western Australia and the Environmental Defenders Office have discussed the concept of zoning as raised in the COAG report inquiry into bushfire mitigation and management. They spoke about this tool applying to fire management plans. In effect, they talk about the primary objectives of the first zone being protection of life and property, the second as being a balance between these components and biodiversity, and the third probably more of a wilderness area where there is significant focus on biodiversity. Would you have a perspective on this?

Mr Stubbs: I think that the concept of zoning academically sounds logical. It is all about any region's practical ability to do that and respond. I think, in essence, that is pretty much how things operate now; the areas where there is a high concentration of people, life and property at risk take a higher priority, and the more remote and sparse it gets, then the less would be the response intensity, and the primary purpose of going in there would be about biodiversity issues and trying to mitigate a fire in those circumstances. I think, almost by default, that is the way it is now.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Currently local government is in control of the bushfire brigades, is that right?

Mr Stubbs: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: There is an idea that FESA take control of the bushfire brigades in order to either set them up or shut them down, according to requirements that FESA set. It is, of course, up to the local government whether it chooses to hand over the control of the brigades to FESA or not. Do you have any comment?

Mr King: I have not heard anything of this.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA has dropped that.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Okay.

Mr Stubbs: I have not heard anything.

The CHAIRMAN: It is just the ability to establish bushfire brigades. FESA actually withdrew the recommendation that it be able to shut them down, but there is still a fair amount of concern about whether FESA should be involved in setting up bushfire brigades or nominating where they should be. FESA has the view that it is the funding authority and it should have some control rather than councils - obviously it does not happen up here - running around willy-nilly setting up bushfire brigades and then FESA having to try to backfill and fund those. The suggestion was that FESA have some significant say in whether bushfire brigades are set up by councils or not.

Mr Stubbs: The council here takes the view that, yes, FESA is the funding authority and, yes, it should have some other, wider control, and particularly it should be the hazard management agency in rangeland environments. I think the issue around volunteerism is whether volunteers will be overburdened with bureaucracy. I think my dealings with other bushfire brigades here in the wheatbelt suggest that volunteers are a bit anxious about that. They seemed to be closely aligned and managed by the state authority. There is a perception at least of bureaucracy. That is not what they are in the caper of being a volunteer for; they are in it to protect their community and their colleagues' and friends' properties. They are worried that if we shifted too far from where we are, they might be constrained and this would be a disincentive to volunteerism. That has been my experience, particularly in the wheatbelt.

Mr King: I think with the volunteers - it is pretty hard to say - what we have to do is try to get the younger generation more involved. For instance, I went to a conference down in Perth and there were 900 people there. It was at the Burswood Casino, and everywhere you went you would

probably be able to count the amount of people under 50 on your hand, and it was a volunteer's conference. What the government and everybody have to try to do is somehow think of something that is going to interest young fellows in the volunteer thing. It happens with the race club; it happens with everything - you just cannot get volunteers anymore. Everybody wants to be paid. Have a look at the ambulance in Wyndham; it is exactly the same thing - you cannot get volunteers. Somebody has to come up with some solution where volunteers - you cannot give them better equipment than we are trying to give them now - get the social part of it, like we have at Packsaddle; I do not know.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Gary, we heard when we were in Esperance that they have an initiative down there where they have cadets through the schools. Have any of the schools up here looked at that? From that cadet program they are feeding them in as volunteers into the organisations. Has anybody taken up that kind of initiative up here as well?

Mr King: You would not get me going to the school.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Why not?

Mr King: It has not happened as yet.

The CHAIRMAN: If I remember rightly from Esperance, they told us that they did not seek a direct flow into the volunteers but that on checking later on, they found that some of those cadets volunteered for other bushfire brigades or other organisations in different parts of the state, because they had the basis for it. They could not actually attract a huge influx from the school cadets into the local brigades.

Mr King: You have seen that little shed out at Packsaddle. Out there where we have all that sand, if the shade gets over the top of there and a security fence gets put there, which I am hoping will happen even if we pay for it ourselves - you have to keep the women involved in these sorts of things; you cannot leave women out of volunteer stuff. You leave them out and you may as well kiss all your volunteers goodbye.

The CHAIRMAN: I think we had the exact same comment at Esperance.

Mr King: You have to actually have them involved. For example, we have garage sales out there. This Friday we are going to have a litter pick-up of the whole of Packsaddle, but everybody is going to be there because there is a sausage sizzle and stuff like that. I do not know if other communities can try to do the same thing. We have had a lot of trouble with Ivanhoe but we are hoping Ivanhoe will weigh in once we get this new building shifted out there and get another building for the Ivanhoe brigade. I am hoping the building will create more volunteers out there, but I have tried and tried to get other volunteers out there.

The CHAIRMAN: It is just really difficult.

Mr King: Okay, I live at Packsaddle, but that has nothing to do with me being chief bushfire control officer. I try to treat everybody the same. We got that out there because we had 60-odd members. All of them were paying members, but there were only 20 of us trained at first. Something has to happen with volunteers somehow.

Mr Stubbs: The Packsaddle community, as I said before, has integrated its volunteer bushfire brigade service into the community and, as Gary said, they have garage sales there; they have a whole range of community activities. If you go out there on a Friday night, there will be husband, wife and kids all out there having a barbecue and a few drinks. It becomes the social hub of the community. Where volunteer organisations do that I think they succeed and where they do not, where they remain disconnected and have not explored ways of thinking outside the square, they run into trouble eventually.

The CHAIRMAN: Can I just go through indigenous communities? The Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley seems to have a lot of indigenous communities within its local government area. Local

government has fire responsibilities under the Bush Fires Act. Is local government providing any service to these communities; and, if not, is there a particular reason? Is there something blocking that?

Mr King: At the moment we look after the close communities as well as we can. At Mud Springs, out there with a grader we would probably do two days, two and a half to three days' work. It depends on the wet. They get firebreaks put around as much as we can. It will not burn now because they burnt it not long ago. After that community we do what they call Mud Springs and Bell Springs. There are about four communities within that area.

[9.50 am]

The CHAIRMAN: Do you put firebreaks around the communities?

Mr King: Yes, we put firebreaks in at the shire's cost.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you put any fire protection equipment or fire combat equipment there?

Mr King: This is what we have been trying to work on, and it is very hard. To tell you the truth, if you shift a fire unit into an Aboriginal camp, you would need to put a new one in there every year because they use it for everything else. They do not just use it for a fire unit. They will use it for a garden hose. They start the pump all the time. If they have to spray something with chemicals, they will put chemicals in it and spray through it. That does not do a fire unit very good. If they want to pump out a sewage tank, they will use the fire unit. It is very hard to say that it is just there for bushfire use only unless there is somebody in the community who will grab hold of it and say that it is to be used only as bushfire equipment."

The CHAIRMAN: You have a couple of hundred communities, have you not?

Mr King: There are a lot, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any community that actually has its own firefighting capacity?

Mr King: Doon Doon had one, but then this mob went down and pinched it, and they have it out here now. It would not start the other day.

The CHAIRMAN: Do we actually train any indigenous people in firefighting?

Mr King: When John Winton was here, we started going out to the communities. Tony has been here nearly 12 months now. We have been out only twice. When John and I went out, it felt as if when you are talking to them, they all want to do it, but when we went to organise it, we would get out there and two people might turn up. Maybe we could train the two, but the hardest part is getting them to commit to saying what they will have. It is very hard. If you mention something, they go walkabout that day. If we decide to go there without telling them, we are probably better off.

Mr Stubbs: In the nine months that I have been working with this council, the issue has not been raised by indigenous communities at all. By a long way the issue they raise with the council is better access roads to their community. They have not once raised a perception about a lack of training, resourcing or protection from fire.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I suppose good access roads would be good exit roads as well.

Mr King: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: The council is picking up the cost of doing the firebreaking around the Aboriginal communities. Is that a significant cost to the council?

Mr King: Not at the moment, because we do not do a lot. There are only those four communities out there, and then there is Emu Creek. Last year, Molly Spring Creek was going to get burnt, but we cut the fire out before it got to the community. That was a cost to FESA - I bill FESA for that. It would be good if we could educate them to know that if they see a bit of smoke coming, they

should not start a fire. However, as soon as they see a bit of smoke coming, they think they are going to get burnt out, so they light it up, which leads to the whole of the Kimberley going “boof”.

The CHAIRMAN: That is their defence mechanism, is it?

Mr King: That is their defence. The other week a guy was burning stumps, and away went the fire. They rang us up and said the fire has got away. We were out all day fighting the fire because idiots lit up a few stumps. We go to fine them, but we cannot fine people because they just laugh at us.

The CHAIRMAN: The Environmental Protection Authority review of fire in the Kimberley cites requests for the establishment of a Kimberley bushfire advisory panel or Kimberley fire council to broker fire management arrangements between existing agencies. This is principally because people are arguing that there is a lack of coordination. Would you like to comment on that?

Mr Stubbs: Yes, the council is concerned about that suggestion in the EPA review. It is not clear, but we may have yet another structure. There has been a push from the Shire of Derby-West Kimberley to have a fire panel or fire board across the Kimberley. It is not something that this council supports. This council takes the view that FESA has professionally trained people and that if there is to be better coordination, it should be sought from FESA as a state lead agency with the capacity to do that.

The CHAIRMAN: There have been various comments about the success or otherwise of aerial controlled burning. Some pastoralists have requested that the subsidies be increased. Others, such as the North Kimberley Land Conservation District Committee, argue that to increase its efficiency, aerial controlled burning should be available at varying times, burning breaks should occur across the board and breaks should be tied into one another and results tracked. Do you have a comment on that?

Mr King: This year it was changed. We had done earlier burning in this country, but people at Drysdale Crossing and Mt Elizabeth wanted to sit back because that part of the Kimberley stays wetter than this part of the Kimberley. What they want is for the plane to be available when they want it, not when they are told to burn. I think that is what you are trying to ask, is it? It did happen this year, I am pretty sure. We burnt early in this country, but they did not burn out there. If I remember rightly, I wrote a permit out about a month or three weeks ago, which is a long time after we finished here, and they burnt Mitchell Plateau. It worked this year but it did not work in earlier years, and Drysdale Crossing got burnt out because it had not put in those breaks with aerial burning. I think they realised that they made a mistake and, by the sound of it, I reckon it will work if they do what they did this year and let the pastoralists out there have later burns and not burn when they want them to burn. The plane should be more available; there should be a plane up here instead of having one plane for the whole area.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Currently, the Bush Fires Act empowers local government to order private landowners to install firebreaks. However, this provision does not apply to state government-owned land. Should the act bind the Crown so that the state government is bound by the same provisions as private landholders, and do you believe that there would be any significant impact for the Kimberley if that were the case?

Mr King: That is a hard one. We are getting back to grading firebreaks, where you end up with wash-outs everywhere. I think the only way we can control this part of the Kimberley is with early burning from aerial burns. There is no way we could cut up the whole of the Kimberley with firebreaks and access roads. In some of this country - you should fly over it, or even go out and have a look at it - there are places you would not even put a D9. We have to wait over the other side for the fire to get into that valley before we can even attack it. By attacking it with a grader or dozer or anything like that, we create the same problem that we had this year with all the breakaways.

Mr Stubbs: I think one of the issues from a local government perspective is the requirement for private individuals to install firebreaks. Where that land adjoins or abuts government-owned lands, there is a tendency for the private individuals to ask, "Well, what about them? We have to do this, what about them?" There probably is a need for a greater amount of fire protection on government lands. I do not think you could expect that to reasonably apply to every piece of government land. It is about where the interface occurs between private and public lands. Where that interface occurs, there is probably a strong need, and argument, for greater emphasis on the government matching what is expected of the private landowner.

The CHAIRMAN: We are getting tight on time. There are two questions, in particular, that I want to ask. I will ask them and then we can move on. Under the current emergency service levy arrangements, local government must complete an ESL submission on behalf of the SES units in the local government area. Is it necessary for local government to perform this role, given that FESA ultimately decides on how much of the ESL grant money will be allocated to the SES unit? Would it be more appropriate for the SES unit to deal directly with FESA?

[10.00 am]

Mr Stubbs: One of the advantages of the current system is that the submission goes before the elected members of local government; therefore, the community is seen to have a much greater influence. We are very happy with the process for the ESL submissions and the liaison that occurs between local government and FESA. I do not think it is essential or necessary that FESA prepare it. There would be a real danger of the community becoming less engaged in the process. We are happy with the process as it is.

The CHAIRMAN: This question is completely different from the ESL.

Mr M.J. COWPER: The City of Geraldton added this one.

The CHAIRMAN: This is from Bunbury, Albany, Geraldton and probably also Kununurra.

Mr King: Is the ESL going to keep going?

The CHAIRMAN: As far as I know there are no plans to change it.

Mr King: After, say, four or five years of this ESL, we might have been given \$25 000 a year for the bush fire brigades. If we need more money, is FESA going to say that \$25 000 is all we have used over the past two or three years, and that is all we will continue to get? Will they put a big screw on it and say that that is all we are going to get each year?

The CHAIRMAN: I think you will have to ask FESA that. The government has put in the ESL. That money goes to FESA, which allocates it.

Mr King: Okay. Sorry.

The CHAIRMAN: You are not going to get me to answer that! I wanted to ask about fire hydrants. Under the current system, FESA pays for the installation, removal and maintenance of fire hydrants in gazetted fire districts and local government pays for the cost of reinstating pavement. Outside gazetted fire districts, local government pays for the lot. The committee notes that in other states the water body is responsible for the installation and maintenance of fire hydrants. We would like to get your comments on that if we could.

Mr King: I have nothing to do with them. You will have to ask my boy here.

The CHAIRMAN: That was a straight pass the buck!

Mr Stubbs: It was, was it not?

Mr King: I have nothing to do with fire hydrants. Sorry.

Mr Stubbs: I do not really have a strong view about them, either. I have not really encountered any issues in my six years in local government in two local authorities. I have not really got a strong view on it.

The CHAIRMAN: Some of the local authorities have an issue with it, and FESA also does. Is there anything else that you would like to throw in, something that maybe we have not covered? I will give you an opportunity now. Do you think you have covered everything we need to cover?

Mr King: I think we have covered everything I wanted to cover.

Mr Stubbs: Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIRMAN: Gentlemen, thanks for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for the correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced in the sense that the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct; that is, you have 10 days to look over it and then send it back with any corrections. Thanks again, gentlemen; that was great.

Hearing concluded at 10.03 am
