

# **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE**

## **INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT ESPERANCE  
THURSDAY, 8 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**

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**Hearing commenced at 2.10 pm****GREEN, MR DAVID NEVILLE****Captain, Esperance Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you for attending and giving us the benefit of your experience and knowledge. 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 contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

**Mr Green:** Yes, I have.

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

**Mr Green:** Yes, I do.

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

**Mr Green:** Yes, I did.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Would you please state your full name, address and the capacity in which you appear before the committee today.

**Mr Green:** My address is actually the Fire Station, Esperance, 2 Forrest Street. I am the captain of the Esperance Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service. I am also a member of the Fire and Rescue Services volunteer project action team on volunteer communications.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you, Dave. You have not given us a submission particularly, so do you have any opening comments you would like to make?

**Mr Green:** Not at this stage. I think I might leave it until the end so I will have more of an idea of exactly the information you are after.

**The CHAIRMAN:** We have a couple of set questions, which will lead us into it, and then as you answer we will probably have some other questions. The first one is just about your fire and rescue service brigade, when it was established and how many members you have and the type of role your brigade performs.

**Mr Green:** The Esperance Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service is currently 42 years old in its current format. There have been records of bush fire brigades or fire brigades in the town, but it became part of the WA Fire Brigades Board some 42 years ago. I currently have a fairly young crowd going through from our juniors. Time-wise, I think there is me of 20 years, another couple of support members have a bit more time than I, but the majority of my members are under 10 years' service. There is a total of 18 active members and 24 juniors. The junior base has been very strong this past season, which I feel will flow into the seniors. We are a fairly active brigade. We average, as has been stated before to the committee, on highs and lows, about 100 calls a year over the past five years or so.

**The CHAIRMAN:** That leads on to the key emergencies that your community faces - is it bushfires, storms etc? Can you give us a bit of an idea of the types of emergencies you deal with?

**Mr Green:** Over the last two-year period we have actually had fatal traffic accidents that we attend. With the road rescue, we do the entire Shire of Esperance, as we do with hazards chemicals.

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We have had a few hazardous chemicals incidents involving the small 25-litre drums that have fallen off farmer's utes. We have been involved in the major bushfires around town. We have been a support crew for the bush fire brigades. Some members of my brigade have gone 100 kilometres east of town on a bushfire truck just to assist with crew changeovers and things. We have had a few major house fires - just the average type of thing.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are there any other questions, members?

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** What other brigades and services do you interact with and train with?

**Mr Green:** Down here, because we are more isolated, the closest VFRS brigade is in Ravensthorpe or Norseman. It is mainly for fire suppression, and we also use them as backups for the road rescue if we need water onsite, because our main appliance cannot leave the townsite. We use the urban rural brigades. There are three major brigades on the outskirts of town, and we interact with them fairly well. We have training sessions with them quite often. In fact, quite often it is not unusual to see some of our members on their trucks and vice versa. The shire is extremely helpful to our brigade as well. There is a standby appliance at the shire depot that my brigade has utilised quite a few times just because our fire and rescue appliance is not suitable for scrub bushfires, whereas this being an overall 3-4 unit, we utilise that in areas of town that require that type of appliance. That has saved us a lot of time at that job, and it also saves us having to call in another brigade and interrupting their day.

On the other side of the coin with the road rescue, not so much HAZMAT we train with St John Ambulance. Actually around three times a year we have designated jobs where we work together with those. Just last week assisted them with one of their triage exercises. We have assisted the SES with flooding. There were some floods 12 months ago on 1 April 2005, and we actually had to pump out their headquarters. We also called in the urban rural brigade that I mentioned before, and we treated it as a bushfire in the command structure and the bush fire brigades followed my directions and went where they were supposed to pump out. It was an excellent town effort. There is no animosity between any emergency services down here - everyone gets on really well.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** That is good. You mentioned that you go out to the traffic accidents and those types of things. What sort of things do you have in place for counselling? Do your members have access to those types of things should they require it?

**Mr Green:** Yes, we utilise the FESA chaplain, and we go through our area managers where there is a natural set procedure. We also obviously keep a close eye on our own members. We utilised the chaplain once about eight years ago. Most of the time, we sort of keep it in-house but everyone is aware that we have that extra backup if we need it.

[2.20 pm]

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** FESA does back you up where it is required?

**Mr Green:** Yes, that is correct. To follow-on from that slightly, we had a double fatality just before Christmas with two 18-year-olds. We had a joint debrief, if you like, with the police, the ambulance and ourselves. We all got together, and we all had a big talk through; it was self-supporting-type peer support. We found that that works better than having some stranger come in.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** So the town structure comes into play?

**Mr Green:** Our remoteness certainly helps in a lot of matters like that. There is more of a town bonding.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** A tight community.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** As a matter of interest, at the moment, St John Ambulance does not come under emergency services or under any of the umbrellas of FESA. Is it your view that perhaps it should?

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**Mr Green:** They do things as a commercial venture, so it is a very hard thing to say. From my personal experience, Esperance-wise, and as a member of the VC PAT committee, there is a communication problem with St John. They obviously, and I guess rightly so, have a confidentiality problem with their patients' details. They do not like open communication, but in a bushfire incident, for example, if we need to contact them directly, we cannot do so. That is an issue that needs addressing between St John and the other emergency services.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** You mentioned that you were into communications yourself, as part of the captain role. Are you finding that compatibility between other agencies is an issue for you? I know new things are coming on board. How do you feel about that? Do you think they will work?

**Mr Green:** The way the strategy is rolling out seems to be really good. We have always got on great with the bush fire brigades. We have always had channel swapping, for want of a better description. We have always talked, and that has worked great. In the last 12 months, we have opened up a bit more. We are actually using the State Emergency Service channels and they have ours. Again, that has turned out to be a boon in communication incidents as we can talk directly. Opening up communications is a very good thing, and I think the strategy is heading in the correct direction.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I will go onto FESA a bit more. A number of local government are proposing that FESA take over part or all of the local government bushfire responsibilities. These responsibilities include those related to supporting and administering bush fire brigades. FESA has suggested that the legislation allows FESA to take over bushfire responsibilities but only when local government in the respective area wants this to occur. Do you have a view on that one way or the other?

**Mr Green:** Esperance is unique in the fact that we actually had the first fire services district manager, which was John Winton, going back to 2000, and it is now Stuart McIntyre. He did the bush fire service role and the Fire and Rescue Services training role. I have noticed there are discrepancies in the way the systems work, and I would be interested to see how they plan to do it. Currently, I find that basically FRS has to see Stuart in winter, and bushfire get him in summer, depending on how the bushfire collates. In administrative-type things, it is very hard to chase up that person. I wonder whether FESA might end up having the same sort of problems. The theory is sound; it is just a matter of how it will be implemented.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Do you think that if FESA were to take over the responsibilities of the brigades and so forth that would have an impact on your volunteers?

**Mr Green:** At the moment, we seem to be getting a lot more paperwork coming out, which is a general complaint from volunteers. There is a lot more responsibility for what you are doing and having to ensure you comply with acts, rules and regulations. We do not seem to have everything come through to us all the time. A lot of the mundane things, I think, realistically, yes, should be done by a paid officer. That is from a volunteer point of view.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The legislation at the moment empowers three bodies FESA, local government and CALM to have control of a fire at any given time. Control of the fire is dependent on the land tenure at the moment. The Auditor General and the coroner have both criticised this arrangement, claiming that one body must be made accountable and responsible for the control of fire during a multi-agency incident. Both claim that anything less jeopardises the safety of the community of Western Australia. Do you have an opinion on that? We have 144 local governments. With CALM and FESA, that is 146 agencies, as such, that have control of the fire.

**Mr Green:** Fire control is restricted to attending Esperance fires. Down here, everyone works together, so it is not really a problem. It is a case of more of a group discussion than somebody standing there with a big stick saying, "This is the way we're going to run the fire." I would find it

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very hard to comment on that strongly, because I have never encountered the problems that I have heard about in other areas. That is only hearsay, so I do not particularly want to comment on those.

**The CHAIRMAN:** FESA is proposing that it be re-established as a department of emergency services. This will mean removing “fire” from the corporate name. FESA’s argument is that this removal is appropriate because fires are just one of the many emergencies that volunteers attend. There has been some objection to this on the basis of the claim of a loss of identity. Do you have an opinion on whether the authority should be re-established as a department, and do you have a view on the name of the department - that is, dropping “fire” from it?

**Mr Green:** The problem is that when you drop “fire”, it does start rolling it all into one. Regarding having a department that says “emergency”, currently you effectively have four groups, taking into account sea, search and rescue, coming under the FESA wing. That is an awful lot of diversity to try to control and manage by one group. Currently, in the FESA structure, we are going up, and I find it very difficult to understand. As an example, we are just going through the process of building our co-location building here with the SES sea rescue. We have gone right through the whole procedure up to a regional manager. You would think the regional manager’s approval would mean something, but then it goes into 480 Hay Street and it goes off to accounts; it goes off to here and it goes off to there, and you find you are battling other departments: you are going over old arguments three or four times. If somebody has a fire problem, it will probably go to somebody who knows nothing about it. It is very hard, from down here, to understand exactly how this structure is supposed to work, because it appears not to.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** You do not have a great deal of confidence that each emergency sector will be catered for properly?

**Mr Green:** No. I think there are too many specialities to be all rolled into one.

**Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS:** I wonder whether you might explain how the emergency services levy has impacted on your brigade; if, indeed, it has impacted on your brigade?

[2.30 pm]

**Mr Green:** The ESL has been negligent in affecting the way the fire and rescue brigade is funded as a result of the fact that we were fully funded by the state government before anyway. So, I would not say that we have any greater money coming through. We are still restricted to the same type of budget figures as we had before. If there is any greater money because of the ESL, certain individual brigade levels are not being made aware of it.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does the council supports the bush fire brigades?

**Mr Green:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And always has. Was the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service directly funded through FESA?

**Mr Green:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So you are a FESA unit, so you are directly funded?

**Mr Green:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Can you comment on whether you are comfortable with the level of support that you are receiving from local government, FESA and CALM?

**Mr Green:** Incident-wise, we do not have any problems at all. If we have an incident, whatever you want is there, whether it be through the shire, CALM or FESA. Administratively, sometimes, as I say, I wonder how this FESA system is working. You ask for something, and it has to be directed through three or four different departments. FESA is an authority. We are asking operational questions, and these questions are not being answered by operational people. They are

doing policies on how things will be run, and they are not operational people. Sometimes you look at it and go, "How are we supposed to do this?" or "Why do we have to do this?"

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** You obviously have quite a few roles, from what you are saying, that you cater to. Some areas have a training officer. Does FESA provide training for all of these areas up to a certain level? You mentioned that you had 20 juniors, do they then come into the training regime under FESA or do you guys, as volunteers, foot the bill for that training?

**Mr Green:** FESA subsidises when they go away for junior competitions. Our juniors are not actually fully trained as firefighters. That is my cadet system that we have running in Esperance. We use the sport side to get the kids interested so they will come along. They come along and do the competitions, and then go into the seniors and become firefighters as well. Stuart does our training as well. What I have found - I am not saying standards have gone down - is that it is not as informative as it used to be. For example, with the breathing apparatus training, previously you would have the unit set up in the Forrestfield training academy. They would go around the states and train everybody in breathing apparatus use, and everyone in the state would have the same instructors, being taught the same standards and same techniques - there were no ifs, buts or ands. Whereas now you get a BA training course, and they get such-and-such from Narrogin or Albany to come across and help. It is not always the same techniques being taught. If they are not going up to Perth regularly themselves, they are not being taught the current standards either. Therefore, to me some of the training standards have gone down because it is not standardised or specialised. Some of the things we do need specialised training, I feel.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Going back to your juniors again. You said that FESA assists you with travel, but do they assist them in the cadetship at all? Who funds that?

**Mr Green:** I am not too sure exactly how the cadets are funded.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is that through the school, David?

**Mr Green:** It goes through the school, and we are supposed to be assisting. I believe there is some cadet system in the senior high school, but we are not involved in those.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** So these are your young people?

**Mr Green:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** One last question, do you have any ideas on how we could improve emergency services in Western Australia from your point of view? Is there anything we could do better that we are not doing or is there anything that we are not doing that we should be doing?

**Mr Green:** Probably because of my background and the committees that I am on I have to keep harping that we still have to bridge this communication gap. There is work going on hopefully that will go a long to solve it, but as was brought up before, St John Ambulance are not partial to emergency services so therefore they will not be involved in the program as such. Also the FESA structure needs to find out how operational people think and think the way they do. We have scenarios of IT people telling operational people how they are going to fight fires when they do not even leave their offices, or what equipment they need on the ground. Somebody in Perth may say something works fine in the Forrestfield training academy, but it does not necessarily work at Esperance.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** So local knowledge is primary.

**Mr Green:** Yes. We have our regional officers but I they become administrators and they do not seem to be more on the operational side. As the previous group you were talking to said about the broadacre appliance, different areas of this state, because it is so large, and different towns require different equipment.

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**Mrs J. HUGHES:** So perhaps different firefighting strategies are needed for different zones or different types of terrain throughout the state.

**Mr Green:** I mean, if you look at, say, the FESA structure and the way we are supposed to be, Esperance is equipped the same as Katanning, they are looking at having the same equipment at Ravensthorpe, yet they do not have the port, the gas lines coming in and everything else. Again, as they are looking at figures and balancing everything and interchangeability, so your appliance ?? so we will send you another one. I think it really needs to be specialised. If an area needs something then that area needs it. It is not a case of you cannot have it because X does not have it.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Just mentioning the port, considering its increase in size and its capacity, has that impacted on your volunteers at all? Have you needed specialised training at all for those types of enclosed fires I guess that you could get at the port with the ships?

**Mr Green:** That is currently under investigation. I raised the matter a while ago and the line leader told us we were not allowed to go into the port to do any enclosed work; the port should be supervising its own area as a minesite. Again, this is the reality of the situation. We are remote. If there is an incident in the port and someone is in trouble, my people will go in there. I feel that it is actually a worse scenario now because we are not allowed to go in there and train, whereas we were allowed before to get an idea of what the port is like. Now we are going in blind if someone is in trouble. People will go in.

**Mrs J. HUGHES:** Is there a need for you as a captain of a brigade to be able to have access to the hierarchy, as such, to put to them what is needed in your district for training; instead of coming from the top down?

**Mr Green:** As I said, we have discussed it before. I have gone the vertical line, if you like, and FESA have said, 'No, you cannot do that for occupational health and safety reasons.' There was no discussion on how to solve the problem.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Does the port have its own firefighting ability?

**Mr Green:** I believe they are starting to establish one now since that has come to daylight.

**The CHAIRMAN:** So up to now, has it not had any of their own emergency services procedures or personnel?

**Mr Green:** No.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you again, David, for coming and thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription of 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 within 10 days of receipt it will be deemed to be correct. Thank you again for coming in and imparting your knowledge.

**Hearing concluded at 2.38 pm**

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