

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

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

SESSION FIVE

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 3.05 pm

KOEYERS, MRS ANNE,
Chairperson, North Kimberley Land Conservation District Committee, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that the proceedings in the house itself demands. 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?

Mrs Koeyers: Yes, I have.

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

Mrs Koeyers: Yes, I do.

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

Mrs Koeyers: Yes, I did.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee has received your submission. Do you wish to propose any amendments to it?

Mrs Koeyers: No. Everybody who read it was quite happy with it.

The CHAIRMAN: Would you like to make any other comments before we start?

Mrs Koeyers: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Several comments in your submission raised concerns about the overall lack of planning or coordination of fire control. On page 2 you referred to pastoralists routinely undertaking early season burning as prevention against late-season fires but there being no overall management plan. You refer also to a lack of institutional support for serious wildfires. On page 3 you state that prevention measures do not appear to be coordinated or adequate, with some preparation for bushfires being undertaken but being clearly insufficient, given the number of uncontrolled bushfires each year. You state also that response procedures are not widely understood and therefore are not applied uniformly, even by responsible organisations; that current procedures do not provide for management or control outside of normal hours; and that there is a lack of awareness of recovery measures post large fires. Do you want to give the committee some background on that? It is a lot of information.

Mrs Koeyers: I was trying to say that the pastoralists who live on the properties try to conduct burns. However, it is not practical to rely on the same plan each year. A new plan must be made each year because each year changes depending on the length of the wet season, how late it was, how much rain fell during the wet season and what was burnt the year before. An early burn cannot be conducted on an area that was burnt the previous year. It just will not burn. Each year there is new growth. If the whole of an area was burnt the year before, there will be one wet season of new growth. That means there is no dead litter lying on the ground between the new growth. However, if a dry season goes by and there is a new season of growth, the previous season's growth will have fallen over and be lying on the ground. The fallen grass is what will carry the early fire. Without that fallen grass, an early fire cannot be conducted. When I say an "early fire", I mean at a time of year when there is still ground moisture and water in the creeks. That does several things. The ground moisture allows the green to come back and the dampness in the ground stops major damage being done to the roots of the plants and everything else that is happening underneath the ground.

The wet rivers, green flats and seepage areas pull up the fire. If a fire can be conducted early enough, where it spreads will be self-controlling; it will pull up at each river and wet flat. However, if a late fire is conducted and the ground is bone dry, it will keep on going and is damn near impossible to stop.

[3.10 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: Are you saying wildfires or controlled burn fires?

Mrs Koeyers: I am saying that if it is too dry, even a controlled fire becomes a wildfire. The things that control it are either the dampness or pre-cut break lines, and then you burn one side. Because you have lit it, it will creep back slowly from it; whereas, if it is a fire front coming, hitting it at speed, it will jump straight across it. If it is a slow, cool burn that is happening in March or April, it will hit one of these breaks, or the creek or the wet flat and it will pull up, but if it is happening in August or September, the break could be three roads wide and the fire will not even see it, it will just go straight across it. Everything depends on the time of year the fire is happening; it depends on how green the grass is and it depends what ground moisture is left, and you cannot predict this because it depends on the length of the wet season. When I say "planning", we do not necessarily mean that there has to be a 10-year plan, because that is not going to happen. It will not work. It needs planning. FESA burns one area, CALM burns another and we burn one. They need to be tied together to some degree so that when a big wildfire comes down from, say, the Mitchell Plateau and is heading from the north to the south, hopefully, it will run into the early burns that we have put in or into the burns that FESA has put in.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you talking about the fire management plan?

Mrs Koeyers: Basically, fire management plans, but the early burns are the fire management plan. Without the early burns you are not going to stop any fire.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you a pastoralist?

Mrs Koeyers: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: From a pastoralist's point of view, would it help if you and all the other pastoralists had fire management plans that were lodged with FESA and CALM where appropriate?

Mrs Koeyers: Not really, because who is going to know in advance what the season will do to be able to lodge one? You cannot have a plan for next year or the year after. Each year it has to change. You can have a plan and you can work to it.

The CHAIRMAN: How do you get the coordination between CALM, FESA and the pastoralists?

Mrs Koeyers: It would have to be done at the time.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Year by year.

Mrs Koeyers: Year by year, it would have to be done at the time. If you get a fire that goes through in October, your plan is out the door. Forget it! It has just completely changed the plan that you would have had in place, because it will not burn again. It will not burn in April or May. It will burn again come October or November, but it will not burn when you need it to burn early in the season. You need that dead litter. The last wet season - not this one gone but the one before - was a tiny, little wet season with hardly any growth. We deliberately did not burn much of our station, because there was not much feed for the cattle; it was too dry and it was too everything else, so we thought, "Okay, next year" - now - "we will get a fire and it will be good because we will have the dead litter and the growth and it will come up through it." What happened was that in September a wildfire was started at the King Edward River crossing, which we referred to in our comments, and it took out half the north Kimberley. We have been running around out there over the past three weeks dropping matches, and we cannot get it to burn. It will not burn. We are getting little stupid patches, which are absolutely useless to do anything with. They are not joining

together. We have had five blokes out there for two weeks, trying to follow tracks, chuck matches, use rivers and whatever to get breaks in. We went and looked at it in a chopper yesterday. It was a waste of time.

The CHAIRMAN: Are these firebreaks imposed on you by the council?

Mrs Koeyers: No. It is us trying to make certain that we do not get cooked in September again. If we do not get these patch burns in now, another big wildfire will come through; it will be on a 70-kilometre front or a 50-kilometre front, going like hell, and you cannot stop it. The only thing that is going to pull it up are these little, mosaic patch burns.

Mrs J. HUGHES: When you say little, mosaic patch burns -

Mrs Koeyers: Two hundred metres is no good.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Right. What are we talking about?

Mrs Koeyers: It depends, because it depends what sort of country you are on. If you have a late fire and it has willy-willies and wind with it, it can pick up hot embers and carry them for kilometres, not just a few metres.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: You talk about these management plans not being prescriptive and done in that particular year, but you obviously manage your station in a particular way. Do you not think that you have a responsibility to provide something to FESA or the local authority to let them know what you have done?

Mrs Koeyers: I do not actually, because we do not know in advance what we are going to do.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: What you have done in the past; that is what I am saying.

Mrs Koeyers: When you say in the past, each year -

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: What you did last year.

The CHAIRMAN: Surely the basic information that goes into a fire management plan, such as one for Drysdale station, would be the equipment they have, how to touch with them and all those types of things.

Mrs Koeyers: That is all in it. That is all recorded. Everybody has been through and recorded that several times, from the Department of Defence and FESA to -

The CHAIRMAN: When you get a stage where you have made an assessment, when the wet, or the dry, has been, and you say how you are going to manage your property that year -

Mrs Koeyers: Try to manage. We had a plan this year that is not working.

The CHAIRMAN: Would it not be worth sending that through to FESA or local government to say that this is what you are attempting? If there is a fire on an adjacent property, they can look at your fire management plan and say, "They've done that. That's what they intended to do, so we can rely on that if we can't get in touch with them."

Mrs Koeyers: That would be without looking at the satellite and mapping where it has burnt, or flying over every inch of it in a helicopter and checking it. We can go and chuck a match here, but there are 4 000 square kilometres on Drysdale alone. What are you going to do, drive around every bit to see where it burns? Really, you can only go off the aerial mapping, but that is pretty hard to read sometimes, and it is not always accurate either. I know what you are talking about with this plan. In years gone by, when they came to do the firebombing, we would know for a fact that perhaps CALM was going to bomb along a line, and so we would try to burn along another line so that we joined it. Usually, most of the fires start around the Mitchell Plateau or Kalumburu, around the Aboriginal communities. They come from there; either that, or they come from Oombulgurri. If they come from this side, they go across from east to west; if they come from the north, they come from north down to south. If we have got an east-west line that we have burnt north of, we

tend to burn one side of the road, the creek or the river one year and the other side the next year, so that we are not burning the same area. It would be better to have a three-year rotation, but that is nearly an impossibility. If we have a line burnt, we hope that any fire coming down will run into this break burn. The areas are so huge that to talk about getting out there with a few people and putting it out is just a waste of time.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is great to see you, Anne. It has been a long time. How is John? I will catch up with him later. Perhaps for the benefit of the committee, I will explain what Drysdale station is like. It is a hilly, timbered block that has a very high rainfall. It is not like a pastoral lease that members may have seen down south.

Mrs Koeyers: It is nothing like Fitzroy.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is nothing like that at all. The fact is that these fires have a serious impact. For instance, what did the cattle loss and asset loss resulting from one that came through last year mean to your business? Can you tell us the net result of that?

Mrs Koeyers: We do not know exactly how many cattle we lost, but we lost a lot. Cattle were dying. We shot cattle. The boys came through donkey shooting, and they put cattle down for us. A lot of cattle were dying. They did not burn to death; they were starving after the fire. That is what the problem was. I cannot tell you how many. That did not just apply to us; it applied to every station that the fire went through. Drysdale is basically mostly totally tree-covered rolling hills, and has mountain ranges out the back and big river systems going right through it. Now is the time to burn, if we could get in these lines, but there is no dead litter. We lost about 90 per cent of the place with that wildfire last September-October, which totally changes what you can burn the following year. As for our rainfall averages, the most shocking and worst we have ever seen was around 600 or up to 1 500 millimetres, which was the most we ever had. This year we had 1 300-and-something millimetres - I did not add it up at the end - and it fell late. There are areas out there still wet now that we have never seen wet at this time of the year. We actually did our first muster yesterday because we have not been able to muster until now. We had to put the yards close to the road because we cannot get anywhere else. We still cannot drive around the place. Everybody has been running around trying to burn, including FESA, because it is the time we should be doing it, but it is not burning very well. I saw a couple going quite well on Home Valley and Karunjie as I came in, but ours did not.

The CHAIRMAN: What is the alternative? Do you wait until later in the season?

[3.20 pm]

Mrs Koeyers: We will keep going. We will keep on burning until we can get enough in to do the job, because we do not want what happened last year to happen again.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Would it be safe to say that burn management is part of the way in which you farm?

Mrs Koeyers: Yes; you need it for several reasons. Early in the season you need it mainly to put in breaks so that you do not get the hot wildfires that do a lot of damage to stock as well as to the land. If you can do it early enough, you get green pick from the ground moisture that is brilliant for the cattle. Not only do they love eating it, but also it brings them into certain areas where you have burnt, which makes it much easier to muster. It is certainly part of the rangeland farming method. The last thing that any of us need are these really hot fires that are huge and go through in August, September and October. Without being able to have the dead litter on the ground, we cannot get an early fire in. As wet as it is now, if we had not been burnt last year, we could now be burning, even though the ground is still wet underneath. Without the dead litter there, it will not carry a fire. The only other time it may carry a fire now is if there is a big wind behind it, because it is a plant there, a plant there and a gap in between, and the wind pushes it from plant to plant.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Could you explain to the committee how you raise your cattle? From when they are born, how many years is it before you turn them off, and how many would you turn off per annum?

Mrs Koeyers: It depends totally on the market. The market has changed a fair bit in the past few years. It used to be almost all meatworker bulls going to the meatworks. What it is now is a lot of export onto the boats, which means a lot younger stock are going, because they are looking for young stock. We used to have three or four meatworks; now we do not have one. The one in Katherine closed down, Batchelor closed down and Broome has gone. There is not a close meatworks. That means the cattle have to be trucked all the way to Perth or go on a boat. If you want to send them to a meatworks, they have to go to Perth, to Harvey Beef or something like that. Most of the cattle are now going onto ships, which means the age at which we are sending them off is a lot younger. Basically, we muster them in, and then export anything that the boat will take. The horns need to be mostly within the ears for them to put them on the boat. The horns cannot stick out further than the animal's ears, because they do not really want to put them on the boat. You either have to be able to trim the horns back sufficiently to get the cattle onto the boat, or they have to be a younger animal that does not have the horn problem, so all our young males are going onto the boat these days. It has changed a lot in, say, the five years since we lost all the meatworks.

The CHAIRMAN: You mentioned in your submission that local government staff do not always have the necessary expertise, local knowledge or resources to manage fire beyond the town boundaries. You suggest that perhaps in the event of large fires, an earlier handover of control to FESA should occur. Would you like to comment further on that statement?

Mrs Koeyers: A lot of those comments relate to the lack of knowledge. There was a chap in Derby who was supposed to be doing the job down there and he was totally useless - completely. Cait at Mount House had several run-ins with him because he did not understand what she was talking about. He did not understand the need. Whatever she was trying to explain to him, he had no concept or could not follow at all. The shire here at Kununurra has not been bad, but the Derby shire was just useless. That was what started the comment on complaints about people not being of use. What was the other question?

The CHAIRMAN: You suggested that fires should be handed over to FESA earlier.

Mrs Koeyers: The shire means well a lot of the time, but we are 500 kilometres or 400 kilometres away from it. There is no one body at the moment grabbing the fire early enough to do anything about it; this is this shire, that is that shire. When there was the Bush Fires Board, it seemed to be more involved. We actually had somebody to talk to and the board was out there more often. There seemed to be a chap driving out, like in the Peter Saint and Garry Bishop days, but now we hardly ever see anybody. As far as coming out and talking about what we are doing, where the burning is going and everything else is concerned, we seemed to have more of a plan in the past. It was always not a written plan as such. We did try that. At one stage we had lines drawn up on maps and cut lines were graded. About five years ago we put in a firebreak, east-west direct from the station, but it has not been touched since. It is just like all these great ideas come up and then go by the bye because staff and people change and nobody seems to be there anymore to follow things through.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: That was the point I was trying to make to you before. I am not trying to be deliberately antagonistic, but you talk about that rollover in staff. That is why it is probably really important that that information is gathered; so that something can continue even if it does not become relevant in, say, this fire season.

Mrs Koeyers: I do not mind what you are saying. I understand what you are saying. It is not that I am saying you should not have it, and we are all quite happy to get the information and put things down. What worries me is having a little bit of paper that says - forget the LCDC comments at the

moment - "Drysdale is going to burn there, there and there." You can put it on paper all you like; there is no guarantee it is going to happen.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: I understand that.

Mrs Koeyers: Is everybody going to understand? I have seen it too many times: once something goes down on paper, you are stuck with it and it is in concrete. That is the worry with having this plan that I know damn well half the time will not work when you get out there on the ground and actually try to do it. We sent the boys out the back of the station, we sent them out to camp for five days, and we said we want to see, this, this and this burnt. They were out there running around. They tried, believe me. John went just yesterday in the chopper. He came back, threw up his hands and said, "Bloody waste of money. Bloody waste of time. Didn't do what we expected it to do at all." What more can you do? I do not know that we have sufficient breaks in yet to break a wildfire coming through. We will go back and try again; we are not finished. All the places are not doing the same thing. On all the uninhabited Aboriginal pastoral leases, for example, nothing is happening. The wildfires come through a lot of those other places that is nobody living on. I can name pastoral properties out there for you.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Surely with that, would you not raise it with the Pastoral Lands Board?

Mrs Koeyers: You can raise it as often as you like. Carson has been abandoned for eight years. There is nobody living on Karunjie and there is nobody living on Durack. There has not been for years. I mean, you raise it.

Mr S.R. HILL: As station owners, we would go through the Pastoral Lands Board and raise it with it.

Mrs Koeyers: It knows that there is nobody on them. I presume nobody is putting in any pastoral returns or whatever. I do not know. It is not my job to tell the Pastoral Lands Board that Carson has been abandoned for eight years. What I am telling you is that on a lot of these properties nobody is responsible for any form of fire management. When a fire does come through them, out of control, nobody is there trying to put it out. At least on most of the working pastoral properties somebody tries to do something.

The CHAIRMAN: You made a comment on the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley permit system. Would you give us your views on that?

Mrs Koeyers: The permit system will not work unless it worked in with the person who is actually living in the area. You cannot have a permit issued by somebody who is 500 kilometres away, because he does not know whether it is too hot, too late, too dry or whatever. Whether it is Peter Lacy on Mt Elizabeth station or, in this instance, my husband, John, on Drysdale or wherever it is, you need somebody who is actually out there and involved. If there is to be a permit system, it is no good the person in town making the decision. That is what we were saying with that comment.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you need somebody on the ground monitoring whether it is relevant?

Mrs Koeyers: Whether it is too late to issue a permit. John will say, "Oh, no, if we issue one now, it might go right through and burn Peter Lacy as well. We had better not issue that."

Mrs J. HUGHES: You have years of experience.

Mrs Koeyers: How would anybody in town be able to look at it and see? What we are worried about is a permit system that is controlled by somebody who cannot see what is happening out there. We do not mind the permit system. It just a matter of who gives the final nod - yeah or nay - for whether we should burn. You cannot see it; the distances are so big.

The CHAIRMAN: At the moment, the Bush Fires Act empowers local government to order private landowners to install firebreaks. This provision does not apply to state government-owned

land. Do you think the act should bind the Crown so that the state government is bound by the same provisions as private landowners?

Mrs Koeyers: A firebreak on timbered rangeland is a total waste of time unless you burn one side or the other of it. What is a five-cut grader-wide firebreak going to do? It is going to do nothing.

The CHAIRMAN: But, at the same time -

Mrs Koeyers: Where is the point in telling somebody to install one?

The CHAIRMAN: They do not have to do anything at the moment for government land.

Mrs Koeyers: They should have to do something, but I do not think a firebreak, as a cut line, is the answer unless it is tied in with a plan to burn north of it one year and south of it the next year, or some plan. Just putting in a cut line -

[3.30 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: I am having great difficulty here because you are saying there has to be a plan, whereas, earlier on, you were saying it was a waste of time having a plan.

Mrs Koeyers: No, I did not say -

Mr M.J. COWPER: To clarify that, what I believe that Anne is saying is that to have a locked-in plan, without any flexibility, is not of any use to the pastoralists in that part of the world because of the local conditions. It depends on the nature of the seasons as to when and how that plan is activated. A plan may well be just one piece of paper that you fax through to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority at any one time. Generally the committee is asking the people appearing before it whether they think pastoralists should be bound by having a plan. In the previous question I was alluding to the fact that as part of the management of your station, there is a plan. The use of fire and management of burning is actually inherent in the way in which you farm.

Mrs Koeyers: We have to burn. We have to burn for several reasons, and the plan is often formulated as you go along. That is the problem. The plan has now changed. The plan has changed this week because it did not work. It was not our fault that it did not work; it did not work because it is too wet and because there is not enough dead litter to carry the fire. What scares me about having a concrete plan is the lack of flexibility. If we are going to have any form of planning out there, it has to be on the understanding that the plan may have to change, depending on the conditions and the amount of grass available, and whether it will or will not burn.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that not how all good plans work anyhow?

Mrs Koeyers: No, a lot of government department plans I have seen are set in stone, and the minute you do not do what you are supposed to do according to the plan, you are in trouble.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: I think that with a fire, nothing can be inflexible because there is no certainty about what it is going to do - whether it is going to take off this way or that way. I would expect FESA and people involved in fire management to have flexibility because they know they have to.

Mrs Koeyers: Yes, as long as that is what appears when it is actually written down. If we fill in a line here, a line there and say this is our plan and put our plan in, and it does not happen the way it should, what is going to happen then? Is everybody going to be jumping up and down and saying, 'Oh, you didn't follow the plan'?

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Fair enough.

Mrs Koeyers: It is not the planning process we are against; it is being stuck with something we cannot guarantee.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is it just a need to report what you have been successful with?

Mrs Koeyers: Hopefully, from the aerial satellite imagery etc, it should be fairly clear what has burnt and what has not and what still needs to be done. Sometimes when the fire-bombing plane goes through it is a waste of time. What we get is a little patch here and a little patch five kilometres away, and you are left with a three-kilometre corridor. You might as well have not burnt the two little patches as a firebreak because the latest fire will come down and it will go through that three-kilometre corridor that has not been burnt.

Mrs J. HUGHES: And then spread out again.

Mrs Koeyers: Then spread out again. I have seen very few successful aerial breaks put in over the past few years, where we have got a solid line out of it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: This poses a huge problem, because what you are proposing to create - the myriad that you need in order to stop a fire coming through - may not be burnable at any given time.

Mrs Koeyers: A lot of the time it is because we got burnt the previous year. What you need is that second or third year rotation, because that gives you the dead litter to carry an early fire.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes, but because half of your land is gone, that is already gone, that is burnt.

Mrs Koeyers: If we do not burn some of it again now - even though it was burnt last year we still need to re-burn some of those areas now - some idiot will drop a match somewhere during September or October and we will have exactly the same problem all over again. It is mostly not pastoralists that are doing the late fires, because that is the last thing we want. We do not want to not have any grass left to feed the cattle. It is no good for us; it is no good for anybody. If you could stop the outside influences that are creating the wildfires, you could start to get a rotation going and you could get it to burn now when you need it to burn. I do not know the answer to that.

Mrs J. HUGHES: That is a big one.

Mrs Koeyers: That is a huge one. It is people driving along the road, leaving campfires. It is the local Aboriginal people thinking they are doing the right thing, but they are not necessarily doing it at the right time. There are lots and lots of different reasons that the wildfires come about.

The CHAIRMAN: What is your suggested solution to managing fires on Drysdale, on your Kimberley lands?

Mrs Koeyers: At Drysdale we are going to go back and keep burning and keep burning until we get something that will be successful at stopping a later fire. We will just keep going a bit more, and we will just have to do it because if we do not do it and get a complete line of joined up burn, the same thing is going to happen to us again. You do not want to burn too much of the property, but you are 1 000 per cent better off burning it now, getting green regrowth, not damaging the roots of your plants and not killing the trees, because it is a cool burn at this time of the year. If it goes through in September, October or November, it is a hot, late burn. It does damage to the roots of the plants. It takes everything and there is nothing left. It kills a lot of the trees as well. It is the worst thing that could happen from either a pastoralist's point of view or an ecological point of view.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Have you found the weather changing significantly over the years?

Mrs Koeyers: Not as a pattern. You get a huge big wet, you get an early wet and you get a late wet. People refer to a "normal wet". I have not seen a normal wet in 20 years. It changes a huge amount.

The CHAIRMAN: In the submission you sent to us, you sent us information regarding a civil case. Can I ask if that has been settled?

Mrs Koeyers: It died. He did not do anything further about it, thank goodness. It would have been very interesting if he had gone ahead with that.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: I am interested in your comments regarding FESA's area of control burning program being relatively ineffective, given poor efficiency of ignition and burning, lack of coordinated ground support activities, and difficulty in planning, given the narrow window of opportunity based on the availability of the plane. The Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia were pro an increase in subsidies for aerial control burning, seeing it as a more positive option for fire management planning. I gather from your comments on page 10 that you are also in support of subsidies, but request that it be available at varying times, that burning breaks occur across the board, and that breaks be tied into one another and the results tracked.

Mrs Koeyers: I gather that this year the plane is available at more varying times that has previously been the case. There were a few years where it literally came on 10 April for a week, 10 May or whatever, and that was it. It could not come back because there was only one plane and it had to have an incendiary machine installed, or it had to go down south, or for whatever reason you could not get it later. If your place was not ready to burn in that particular week, you might as well throw your money away. It was a complete and utter waste of time. It did not fit the intended purpose at all. The plane flew along and a little bit of smoke came up. "Well, whoopee-do, we have some smoke." It was a waste of time. If it has not actually created a line of burn that joins together, it is not a firebreak. Just because people see a bit of smoke, it does not mean it was effective. You have to go back and touch it on the ground or fly over it. The satellite is all right to some degree, but everybody will admit that it is not always truthful. There are areas of basalt where it does not seem to read properly and things like that.

Mrs J. HUGHES: As pastoralists, would it be advantageous - you obviously come together to talk about fire -

Mrs Koeyers: Or we ring each other. We do not necessarily come together because of the distance.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Yes, to talk about who is going to try to do what at any particular stage, to try to get some coordination in achieving that?

[3.40 pm]

Mrs Koeyers: No, not necessarily. We might ring up the station next door or someone from it might ring us and ask whether it is okay if it does it on the bottom boundary, and Peter Lacey might say that it is okay and we will do it from another side. It is not a plan as such to tie into each other.

Mr M.J. COWPER: This map shows the properties.

Mrs Koeyers: That will do. It does not matter which one I use. Many of the fires come from Kalumburu or down this way or they come from here and go from east to west. We had a cut line that goes from the centre of the property to the back boundary, which is out here.

The CHAIRMAN: You will need to say what the names are.

Mrs Koeyers: It starts from Drysdale River Station and goes in an almost direct east to west line and out to the back boundary of Drysdale River Station. A few years ago FESA paid to put in a cut line that almost joins the boundary of the Prince Regent Nature Reserve. If that had been graded and cleared last year and we had a north or south burn from it, we would have been able to stop that big fire that came through here and ended up right down here.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Anne, could you clarify that?

Mrs Koeyers: It started at the King Edward River crossing, which is 110 kilometres north of Drysdale Homestead. It headed west up into the Mitchell Plateau and took out a lot of country. It went a little bit north into Theda station. It came south and went through the old Mitchell River, which is part of Doongan Station. It went through Doongan on the east and to the western side of the road. It took almost 90 per cent of Drysdale. It went through Mt Elizabeth and it went right out into the southern side of the Prince Regent River. The only reason it did not take the whole

northern side of the Prince Regent River was that one of CALM's earlier burns during the early burn program had burnt a strip on a north-south line from here down, which stopped the fire going on to the northern side of the Prince Regent River. It stopped it going further west and taking out the whole of the Prince Regent Nature Reserve. The fire went past the head of the Prince Regent River and it spread out again and it went west right out to Walcott and Charnley River and then it went through Charnley River Station, which used to be Beverley Springs Station. It was still going. I think it stopped at a couple of roads down there. That is when we put it in as an incident at the meeting last year. It was huge. That was all supposedly from one tourist and one camp fire. The land it started on was the Wunambal-Gaambera camping area, which is a lease at the King Edward River crossing. They would not have known there was a fire there. I am not even being critical when I say that they did nothing about it, because they would not have known it was there. A tourist called me on the radio and told me there was a fire. I contacted CALM at the Mitchell Plateau and told it there was a fire. John, a ranger, went down from the Mitchell Plateau and tried to do something with it but could not do anything. It went down to the Mitchell River block of Doongan Station. Someone tried to burn back into it but could not stop it; it just kept coming. By the time it got down to Drysdale, it was about a 70-kilometre front. The shire offered us a grader but it is impossible to do anything to affect a fire with a 70-kilometre front with one grader and two blokes. To stop one of these fires, many people and resources must be thrown at it. John was on our grader fighting it from getting into the homestead. We stopped it only one kilometre from the homestead while at the same time it was jumping the track that would have been good to pull it up some 60 kilometres west of us. It is not possible to be in both places at once. As nice as it was for the shire to offer us a grader, it was a bloody waste of time. We could not have stopped it with just that either.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you referring to the point at which the shire should hand the fire control over to FESA much earlier?

Mrs Koeyers: Somebody in some department should be watching for fires like that. Nobody really knew how big it was. If one of these fires starts on crown land or in an unmanaged Aboriginal station, the fire could be on a 70-kilometre front before anybody knows it is there because nobody is living on the property, nobody is watching it and nobody is monitoring the satellite. At least if it is on one of the pastoral leases such as Drysdale or Mt Elizabeth, people know it is there and can try to do something about it. When it is coming in from crown land or one of the pastoral stations that have nobody living on them, nobody knows it is happening until it is too late; the fire is too big and we cannot do anything with it.

The CHAIRMAN: Are you referring to the fact that there should be just one central point to notify when there is a fire?

Mrs Koeyers: If there were one central point, at least we would know what was happening. It is too disjointed at the moment.

The CHAIRMAN: Should FESA be that point?

Mrs Koeyers: We feel that it should be FESA because that is its job; that is what it knows about.

The CHAIRMAN: Currently the people responsible for fires are FESA, CALM and the 142 local councils. Should the local councils be cut out of that operation?

Mrs Koeyers: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: And CALM?

Mrs Koeyers: It is better off to have one body. CALM comes at it from a different angle from FESA. I am not saying that the ecology and everything else is unimportant, but CALM is sometimes terrified to burn anything because of the backlash when people complain. If burning is not conducted, we will have these hot, late fires.

The CHAIRMAN: You are requesting a return to a system of heavily subsidised slip-on units. That was abolished with the introduction of the ESL on the recommendation of the coroner after the Gingin fire when the slip-on unit slipped up and somebody was killed. From your point of view, what is the benefit of FESA subsidising slip-on units?

Mrs Koeyers: When that went out the door, we were offered subsidised overalls or something. Nobody will run around in an overall and put out a fire, but people would use a slip-on unit.

The CHAIRMAN: You would have your own -

Mrs Koeyers: We do have a water tank. The point I am making is that there is no assistance available whatsoever in any way, shape or form. We put our machines, time and effort into fighting fires, whereas down south and in other places, different bodies throw plenty of money at wildfires and bushfires. Up here there is nothing. If the individual pastoralists will not be helped, somebody should do something about the fires from the crown land or the unmanaged Aboriginal properties. Currently the only people in the north Kimberley who are doing anything to fight wildfires are those on half a dozen pastoral properties, and that is all.

Mrs J. HUGHES: If aerial burning must be done, is that at your cost?

Mrs Koeyers: We get subsidised for aerial burning but we have not used it in the past few years because it was not available at a time that suited us. Aerial burning is great if it is done at the right time.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that time that suits you not a predetermined time each year?

Mrs Koeyers: No, it is not. It cannot be predetermined. It depends entirely on how green the grass is and how much water is around.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do you need better access to that service according to the place and time?

Mrs Koeyers: FESA or somebody must be constantly talking to us - whichever body it is - and asking us whether an area is ready to be burnt. People can ring us up and say it looks good on the satellite, but that does not mean a thing.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: It is about open dialogue between you and FESA.

Mrs Koeyers: It is about having an open dialogue and what is actually happening on the ground; it is not about a colour on a map that indicates that it is time to burn. That does not necessarily mean it will burn.

The CHAIRMAN: Does that not come back to working with FESA to develop a fire management plan?

Mrs Koeyers: We have done this. We have had plans with FESA in the past, as I said. However, staff change and the plans go out the door. We then have to go back to the shire for this or that. It is not well organised.

The CHAIRMAN: Is that not exactly what happened regarding the aerial burning this year? FESA, which provides the planes for the aerial burns, changed this year. I assume that that was a response to comments from the pastoralists over the previous years.

Mrs Koeyers: I guess it was. We have not yet tried to get a plane in two or four weeks when we will need it when the land might burn. I do not know.

The CHAIRMAN: How much notice is required to get the plane?

Mrs Koeyers: I do not know because we have never been in a position whereby the plane would be given to us when we have needed it. We have been told that the plane will be not available on this week or that week or that the plane is available on this week or that week.

The CHAIRMAN: Have you tried to work that out with FESA?

Mrs Koeyers: Not this year, because we are not ready to do it yet.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Anne, who should initiate it? Should it be your responsibility or FESA's responsibility to do that?

Mrs Koeyers: It should be a combined effort because we are all aiming for the same thing. We should be talking to each other and trying to work out when it should be done, which is when we think it might burn. If we do not think it will burn yet, we should be able to ask whether the plane could be made available in three or four weeks. If we are told that it cannot, we will just have to try it on the ground.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It is a moving target.

Mrs Koeyers: You have put your finger on it. It is very difficult to make it work. The pastoralists are working with anybody to end up with what is needed for the pastoralists, the country and the ecology. We all want what is best for the country as well as the station. We are not trying to burn the hell out of it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: On page 70 of your submission is a reference to insurance cover for equipment for fighting the fire. Can you provide the committee with more information on that?

Mrs Koeyers: I do not have enough detail on that. The Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley had a good policy. However, the Shire of Derby/West Kimberley's policy was lousy. I would have to look into that. I am sorry that I have not done that. Many of the comments were made at the meeting. Some 20 people commented on it.

Mrs J. HUGHES: It seems to be a bit -

Mrs Koeyers: It is ad hoc. It is not the same in each shire.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Are some pastoralists operating under different rules from others?

Mrs Koeyers: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Does that come under FESA?

Mrs Koeyers: No, the shire provides the insurance.

The CHAIRMAN: If the responsibility for fire came under FESA, would FESA be expected to pick up that insurance?

Mrs Koeyers: I do not know whether it would be expected to pick it up and pay the bill, but it would be nice if all the shires operated under the same rules. Our LCD has people in mainly two or three shires and they are not all covered by the same rules. The reaction we get from the Shire of Wyndham-East Kimberley is great when we ring and ask it about this, that or the other, but that is not necessarily the reaction that my neighbour who lives 20 kilometres or 50 kilometres down the road gets from the Shire of Derby/West Kimberley. It is not consistent, regardless of whether it is the insurance policy or the reaction to send people to help put out a fire. There is no consistency because there is not one body.

The CHAIRMAN: Anne, do you have a final comment that you would like to make that has not already been covered?

Mrs Koeyers: You guys have a hard job! Please keep in mind that it is very hard to set an exact formula on something over which we have no control. We have no control over when the rain falls or how much rain falls. We are scared to be bound by something exact. We are quite happy to work with everybody, but we cannot guarantee that the plan will happen as it is proposed.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your contribution to the committee's inquiry. We know that you drove seven or eight hours to get here to give an hour's worth of evidence.

A transcript of the 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 additional 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.

Hearing concluded at 3.53 pm
