



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN
BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

TUESDAY, 5 AUGUST 2003

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES
Tuesday, 5 August 2003

Members: Mr Nairn (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Bartlett, Mr Causley, Ms Ellis, Mrs Gash, Mr Gibbons, Mr Hawker, Mr McArthur, Mr Mossfield, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Organ, Ms Panopoulos and Mr Schultz.

Members in attendance: Mr Adams, Mr Gibbons, Mr McArthur, Mr Nairn, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Organ and Ms Panopoulos

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

The Select Committee on the recent Australian Bushfires seeks to identify measures that can be implemented by governments, industry and the community to minimise the incidence of, and impact of bushfires on, life, property and the environment with specific regard to the following.

- (a) the extent and impact of the bushfires on the environment, private and public assets and local communities;
- (b) the causes of and risk factors contributing to the impact and severity of the bushfires, including land management practices and policies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land and private property;
- (c) the adequacy and economic and environmental impact of hazard reduction and other strategies for bushfire prevention, suppression and control;
- (d) appropriate land management policies and practices to mitigate the damage caused by bushfires to the environment, property, community facilities and infrastructure and the potential environmental impact of such policies and practices;
- (e) any alternative or developmental bushfire mitigation and prevention approaches, and the appropriate direction of research into bushfire mitigation;
- (f) the appropriateness of existing planning and building codes, particularly with respect to urban design and land use planning, in protecting life and property from bushfires;
- (g) the adequacy of current response arrangements for firefighting;
- (h) the adequacy of deployment of firefighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency and effectiveness of resource sharing between agencies and jurisdictions;
- (i) liability, insurance coverage and related matters;
- (j) the roles and contributions of volunteers, including current management practices and future trends, taking into account changing social and economic factors.

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Committee met at 2.00 p.m.

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires. Today's hearing is the 13th hearing of this inquiry and it is part of the committee's program of hearings and visits in different parts of Australia. Last week in Hobart we heard some evidence relating to the recent fires in Tasmania. Prior to that we visited a number of areas in Victoria, New South Wales and the ACT. Today and tomorrow in Perth we will continue with this area of inquiry.

I advise those in the gallery that before the conclusion of today's hearing, after we have heard from the listed witnesses, there will be an opportunity for others to come forward and make short statements that will go into the record of evidence. If anybody wants to participate in that respect, please let the committee secretariat know during the afternoon so that I have some idea of the number of people who might want to make a statement and so that we can manage appropriately the time that we have later this afternoon.

Before I call the first witnesses, I will introduce the members of the committee who are here today. On my left is Michael Organ, who is the member for Cunningham in the Illawarra district of New South Wales—Wollongong. Certainly they have had some fires in that area in the last few years. Next to him is Sophie Panopoulos, the member for Indi, which experienced some of the severe bushfires in Victoria, particularly over January and February this year. Next to me is the deputy chair, Dick Adams, the member for Lyons in Tasmania. Tasmania has had its share of bushfires over many years. The 1967 fire is probably the most famous of those—or infamous; I am not sure which. On my right is Steve Gibbons, the member for Bendigo, also an area that has had fires, getting around towards Ash Wednesday and the Linton fires where unfortunately a number of people were killed. Next is Gavin O'Connor, the member for Corio, which is near Geelong, also getting into those areas that were affected by the Ash Wednesday fires. Finally, on the far right—probably appropriately—

Mr McARTHUR—That is unfair!

CHAIR—is my colleague Stewart McArthur, the member for Corangamite, which also borders on Geelong and that western part of Victoria, the Otways and other areas that have been affected by fires. I am the member for Eden-Monaro, which is the south-eastern part of New South Wales. In January, we saw 60 to 70 per cent of Kosciusko National Park burnt out, and the Brindabella National Park on the western boundary of the ACT is also part of my electorate. There are other members of the committee but these are the members who are able to come to Perth. You can see that the representation is from a broad part of Australia and areas that have all had some involvement in bushfires at some time.

[2.04 p.m.]

EVANS, Mr John Stewart, (Private capacity)

LIDDELOW, Mr Edward John, Chairman, Fire for Life

MUIR, Mr Thomas, Vice-Chairman, Fire for Life

SPRIGGINS, Mr Don, (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to expand on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Spriggins—I am a former CALM forester and I am presently a consultant forester. I served with CALM for about 32 years before I set up my own practice.

Mr Evans—I am a member of Bushfire Front, as is Don.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

We have received submissions from individuals and from your organisation. Those submissions have been authorised for publication and therefore form part of the evidence that the committee will take into account when it is putting together its report and recommendations. To start things this afternoon, would one or a number of you like to make some brief opening remarks before I give the committee an opportunity to ask some questions?

Mr Evans—I was a member of CALM in Western Australia for nearly 40 years. Originally I worked in the goldfields and then in the south-west, where I spent the last 27 years—17 of which as a regional fire officer and 10 as a district fire officer, particularly in the karri forests and the southern region of the south-west of Western Australia—before I retired in 2001.

As such, I assisted with the coordination of the selection of the annual burning program and the management of the individual daily burning program in this area. Other responsibilities included the training of hundreds of CALM staff, timber industry personnel and machine operators—bulldozer drivers—for fire suppression throughout the south-west. As for the burning off I have assisted with, I have developed a close association with the bushfire brigades and I have worked with many of the people in this hall. I have a strong feeling for the karri forests and the jarrah forests, of course, and the coastal areas in particular, and the last thing I would like to see is a major forest devastating those areas. For that reason, while I am totally supportive of CALM, I have some concerns about the significant reduction in the amount of prescribed burning that has taken place in the last 20 years, on average, and the potential for very serious large-scale bushfires.

Mr Spriggins—I started my forestry career in Victoria. I went to the School of Forestry in Creswick and served for about six or seven years in East Gippsland and the north-east area of Victoria. I notice that quite a few of the MPs are from there. I got quite a bit of experience there with wildfires; there was no prescribed burning done in Victoria at that time.

I came to Western Australia in 1962, the year after the Dwellingup fire, and I was most impressed, and continue to be impressed, with the way the then Western Australian forest department developed their prescribed burning system. There is no doubt in my mind that it has been extremely effective in preventing the wildfires that we have seen in the eastern states—the Ash Wednesday fire, the various 1994 Sydney fires and so on—and it has been tested many times. Cyclone Alby had cyclonic winds in April 1978. There have been numerous fires—about 70-odd—in the forest areas, and cyclonic winds over 100 kilometres an hour. Most of those fires were pretty easily suppressed and the actual area in the state forest that was burnt was minimal, and it was all attributable to the fires running into very low fuel areas that enabled the ground crews to suppress the fires.

As John has mentioned, we are very concerned about the level of prescribed burning which is now taking place in state forests. There are about two million hectares of forest in the south-west. Burning that on an eight-year rotation would equate to about 250,000 hectares a year, which we believe is about the right figure, and it was certainly very close to being achieved for many years after the Dwellingup fire, but it has now dropped over the last couple of decades to often well below 100,000 hectares a year and the cracks are beginning to show.

There have been some very severe fires in the last few years. There was a very nasty fire at Mt Cooke, which is just south of Perth, in January of this year. Fortunately, it was burning away from Perth but, had it been further north and going to places like Kalamundra and so on, it could have been a repeat of the Canberra situation. Quite a few other fires in the south have gone rather close to consuming some of the townships, so we are very concerned that that situation be remedied. I know it is not easy. Weather conditions have made prescribed burning very difficult but I think we need to have another look at how burning is done, perhaps burn at night, and use a lot more imagination—think outside the dots—than we have in the last couple of decades.

Mr Liddelow—It is a little difficult following people like Don Spriggins and John Evans, with their great experience in the forest, but we are coming from a different background—that of community group concern. In this building on 12 February last year 240 people attended a public meeting which was called to express concern about the increasing dangers of the high fuel loads in our unburnt forest. To abbreviate those concerns, the major issues were the decreasing amount of prescribed burning, which was brought about by external pressures and reduced resources at Conservation and Land Management, or CALM. Perhaps most of all, the new government's intention to create massive new national parks in and around this area, particularly given the obvious lack of fire management that has been in place in the existing parks over many years, caused great concern.

The reports that were coming from CALM added fuel to those concerns—excuse the pun. In a report in 2000 by CALM fire manager Rick Sneeuwjagt, who is with us today, he stated that 65 to 70 per cent of the northern jarrah and southern forests, which is this area, would burn intensely and uncontrollably under mild summer conditions. In 1999 the CALM burning process was 134,000 hectares, in 2000-01 it was 91,000, and in 2001-02 it dropped to 74,000. That

brought their five-year rolling average from 154,000 hectares in 1999-2000 down to 136,000 in 2001-02.

An example of the reduced resources that contribute to the problem is that in 1989 the Pemberton CALM depot, which is in the heart of the karri forest just south of here, had 39 permanent people available for fire duty. In 2001 that had dropped to 14 plus 11 casuals, and a similar drop in equipment, and the Kirup depot, which is just north of here, in 1992 had 13 people available for fire duty and in 2001 that had dropped to eight.

At the meeting I mentioned there was a unanimous vote to form a group to promote the value of increased burning in the forest. We are that group and we have currently in excess of 280 members, and membership is growing.

CHAIR—Mr Muir, would you like to add anything from your organisation's point of view?

Mr T. Muir—I would like to refer to the traditional burning methods because my family were virtually the first white people to see the area. I am speaking on behalf of Fire for Life. It has a great wealth of information. That was without the forests, before white and after white. We have met with quite a lot of professional people—you will see reference to that in our submission—and we have a lot of knowledge from people of the older generation who have seen the forest as it was and how it was managed properly before it was locked away. My uncle will be here this afternoon and I hope he makes a statement. He is 80-odd years old. He told me this morning, 'I have been wasting my breath for 80 years because no one will listen.' That is the endemic problem we have.

There needs to be fundamental change. We need a mosaic burning prescription in these areas for animal refuge and repopulation, not massive areas scorched by wildfire. We need a prescription to take into account various vegetation types, not just total wholesale burning; low intensity fires that do not burn the canopy; and fires that have low flame height so there is no damage to mature trees. Fires of this type are beneficial to the environment, not detrimental.

CHAIR—Mr Spriggins and Mr Evans, you have both worked for CALM. There is an increasing tendency these days for litigation when things go wrong. How important did you see that support right up through the highest levels for the particular programs that you were involved in and did you see that change over time?

Mr Spriggins—I have been out of CALM for six years or so now but certainly in my time the highest priority in fire was life and property, and things like the environment and so on took a step back. Now the environment ranks equally with life and property, which I think is not a good step to take. But certainly there was very strong support in the days of the forest department, who initiated the prescribed burning policy. Burning was given very high priority in the work tasks for each of the districts. Whenever a suitable weather day appeared, we used to really make full use of it. The impression I get now is that that is not necessarily the case. Large aerial burns are still being tackled but a lot of the small, tricky areas that need a lot of troops, time and experience are just being left year after year because they are just too hard to do.

CHAIR—You think there is not the level of experience there any more?

Mr Spriggins—I think the experience is there; there are no rewards for doing burning. There is more possibility that if you burn and scorch some area you will be up before the hierarchy in CALM and, if a burn goes wrong and some smoke goes over Perth or a large city, you are likely to get a pretty severe brickbat. So there is now no incentive for CALM officers to go for maximum burning exposure; it is covering all possibilities and very lengthy consultation has to take place before a burn can be arranged. All these things make it much more difficult.

I will give you an example. In one district in Collie I was in charge of in the 1970s, there were—and still are—a lot of pine plantations surrounded by state forests. The program at that time was to religiously burn adjoining the pine plantations for perhaps 20 or 10 chains out about every three years to keep that low fuel buffer. The growth three to four chains out from that would never get more than five years old. I have a map in front of me at the moment and I am looking at that same plantation. I can see fuel that is 15, 18, nine, 12 and 24 years old right up against those plantations. I am a forester and I helped established those plantations. It was all basically with Commonwealth softwood forestry agreement money. The Commonwealth poured millions of dollars into that right around Australia and it really saddens me to see those plantations in such a poor state of protection.

CHAIR—All of you mentioned in your submissions that the amount of prescribed burning that is happening now compared to 10 years ago is less and therefore the frequency is clearly getting longer and longer between burns. Do you accept, though, that you cannot just have a particular formula across the board, that differing areas will require different intervals of burning?

Mr Spriggins—Absolutely. CALM, to their credit, have developed very relevant prescriptions to suit the area and type of outcome they want—whether it is favouring animals, seed regeneration or that type of thing. Yes, there is a lot of flexibility and when the burn is done, it is done to a very high standard—there is no question about that.

Mr ADAMS—Your submission deals, as you have just stated, with the difficulties of the frequency of burns and the fact that fewer are happening now. What is being done less in the area now than 10 or 15 years ago?

Mr Spriggins—The target should be about 250,000 hectares every year; that is our belief. That works out approximately to an eight-year rotation for the two million hectares. As John pointed out, it has not achieved that since back in the seventies. It has been running at only about 100,000. Just to go back to 250,000 tomorrow would not be sufficient as with that backlog, you would need to be looking at 400,000, or something like that, for several years to—

Mr ADAMS—Do you have a percentage? Has there been a change in the regimes of 25 or 50 per cent less now than there was 15 or 20 years ago?

Mr Evans—Each area has its own priorities and it depends on the current planning situation as to when those areas are targeted. If I can go back to the first comment about the potential for litigation, I think the potential for litigation is increasing, particularly in areas adjacent to the private property boundaries where many burns have been delayed for many years. The people living adjacent to those areas know what has been happening and they have significant concerns in a lot of cases with those heavy fuels. If fire does initiate on those CALM-managed areas and

escapes and damages those properties, I have certainly heard it from many people that there is likely to be litigation as a result. There is also potential for more risk to firefighters as a result of working in very heavy fuel areas.

Mr ADAMS—We have this issue that Mr Spriggins mentioned about smoke over Perth and other major cities, that this is a trend in the country, and that people set policies according to what the public shouts about. I think you mention in your submission the need for education so that people understand that, if we are burning, there is a reason for doing it. Is there a failure there? Has the media picked up on smoke and has the general public got the wrong idea about what smoke is? Does it get concerned about it? There are people who have medical issues with smoke and we are sensitive to that.

Mr Evans—I think it is an attitude thing. In the regional office over 17 years I only ever had three complaints about smoke over south-west towns. In some cases the smoke was so dense you could hardly see your hand in front of your face, and yet people accepted that situation because they wanted those forests prescribe burnt to protect them from wildfire. The reverse is the case in the metropolitan area where a completely different attitude pervades, mainly driven by the media, where, if there is any smoke in Perth, it is a big issue and people get struck down with asthma even if perhaps there is only one part per billion. There must be the same ratio of people with asthma and respiratory problems in the country and yet you never hear about any problems from them.

Mr ADAMS—So there is a need for some education, some process to make sure people understand?

Mr Evans—Absolutely.

Mr ADAMS—I have a difficulty with what Mr Muir said about predicting, or saying, we need this sort of fire. Sometimes fires get away and although you may want a fire at this height and not in the canopy, sometimes the one at the ground gets into the canopy. The public then gets into litigation and everything else. How do you manage that?

Mr T. Muir—The education part is doubly hard here. We have one daily paper and if you would like to read today's daily paper, the good aspects of fire fit on to about a quarter of that page. The anti-fire lobby—they may like to have another name—have got over half a page. This is regular. They have so much better media coverage than we can ever hope to get; it is unbelievable.

Mr ADAMS—You also have some concerns about the management level, I guess, of the new national parks, and about the changes in this region in terms of the new national parks. Do you feel that enough resources have been devoted to manage fires in those parks?

Mr Liddelow—If we base it on what we have seen in history, I would say absolutely. The amount of national park that is being proclaimed by the present government would require immense increases in staff and we have not seen any indication of that yet. The other problem that we have with the staff that work in the national parks—and I have met a few of them—is a lot of them are very poorly qualified. Their main work seems to be emptying rubbish bins,

preparing barbecues and, of course, most important, collecting fees. But as far as actually managing the ecology, most of them that I have met have no background whatsoever in that.

Mr GIBBONS—We toured part of the forest around midday today and it certainly does not look like there has been a drought here at all but obviously there has been. How long have those drought conditions prevailed?

Mr Evans—I would say probably four years. I live almost next door to where that burn is and for the first time in the 15 years that I have been on that property the bore in my place was almost dry by the end of summer, so it is very dry. I have been in this area on and off since 1963 and certainly these last four years particularly have been the driest I have ever known.

Mr GIBBONS—Do you think that the drought situation has lessened the opportunity for prescribed burns? Has that restricted the opportunities to conduct them? Has that been an impact?

Mr Evans—It has to a degree. Obviously, it dries out quicker. There is still a degree of opportunity there, but CALM work by very strict guidelines as to when and how those burns can be conducted and they are mostly guided by what is called the soil dryness index—the higher the index, the greater the risk of an escape and damage to the standing trees and so on. So there are, very rightly, restrictions in terms of the soil dryness index as to which burns can be undertaken and certainly, if those levels are exceeded, that particular burn cannot be done until rain occurs.

Mr GIBBONS—You mentioned that you were not getting—I am guessing—adequate coverage in the local paper. Do you people go out, seek and prepare stories and try to brief journalists with your side of the issue?

Mr Spriggins—If I could just comment quickly before you do, Eddie. I was chairman of the Institute of Foresters for several years and I made strenuous efforts in my time to get publicity in Perth for large wildfires that occurred in the forest areas. It was virtually impossible to get anybody interested. The comment that I would sometimes get was, ‘We will have to refer this to the Conservation Council to get their opinion before we do a story from you.’ I think that is a major problem. I have photos here I can show you of the Nuyts wilderness area. A wildfire went up two years ago and the number of dead animals there was absolutely colossal.

Mr GIBBONS—Domestic animals as well as wildlife?

Mr Spriggins—Native animals—quokkas, ringtail possums, kangaroos and all that sort of stuff. To try to get that across to the Perth media, we just ran into a brick wall; nobody wanted to know about it.

Mr GIBBONS—Would you say that the people who might have a different view have far better access to the media?

Mr Spriggins—Absolutely. I think if you look in today’s *West Australian* you will get a pretty good example.

Mr GIBBONS—Would that tell you that perhaps they are more skilled at doing that and maybe you need to brush up your own skills?

Mr Spriggins—Well, I can always improve, for sure, but I think there has been, particularly in the ABC and the *West*, a mindset against forest management. They just do not want to know about it. Time and time again I have tried to get in articles and so on in. The Institute of Foresters published a book on forestry and we tried for about six months, I think, to get a small review of that in the paper but nobody wanted to touch it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—For the *Hansard* record, Mr Spriggins, when you are referring to ‘the *West*,’ you mean the *West Australian* newspaper.

Mr Spriggins—The *West Australian*, that is right.

Mr McARTHUR—Could the panel make a comment on the impact of wildfire, something similar to 1961, on the destruction on native animals and the impact on biodiversity?

Mr Evans—I think it is a real threat to our local karri forest here. As operations officer, I was involved in a fire that occurred in the Brockman National Park in 1983 just south of Pemberton. It was a very hot day with very strong north-west winds. They were quite extreme fire weather conditions. That fire was burning at probably 250 metres an hour and it was a very high intensity fire. Luckily, on the other side of the road, it ran directly into an area that had been prescribe burnt only about three months before and it just came to a grinding halt within metres of the edge. The threat to biodiversity was clearly illustrated by the fact that 35 per cent, based on CALM surveys, of the big mature karri trees in that national park died as a result of that wildfire. So I think that there are great risks to biodiversity in these areas that carry very heavy fuels.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your view on the destruction of native animals?

Mr Evans—Absolutely the same thing. In that particular fire about 14 quokkas were found dead in a gully within the boundaries of that fire, and that happens heaps of times. I have photos I took from a spotter at Walpole of that Point Nuyts fire that Don Spriggins just referred to. The fire was backburning in a southwards direction towards the coast, towards the cliffs, and the quokkas there—hundreds of them—jumped off the cliffs into the ocean to avoid the flames and, as a consequence, died in the sea. They did the same into the inlet as well. So I think there is a significant risk of very severe disruption to the biodiversity of those areas carrying heavy fuels, as well as risks to the firefighters themselves.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your view on these prescribed burns and their impact on biodiversity and the wild animal population?

Mr Evans—I think it is minimal. In all the hundreds of burns that I have conducted and been part of, I have never seen any dead animals in a prescribed burn. In most cases I would be prepared to take my family into the middle of a prescribed burn, quite comfortably, without any risk to those people. Taking all the various factors into account, if prescribed burns are done correctly, the initial damage to the environment is minuscule and the benefits are huge in that the values for those areas are well and truly protected by the removal of those heavy fuels which would cause massive damage if they catch alight in the wrong fire weather conditions.

Mr McARTHUR—Could I ask the panel: what are the perceived benefits of those people who are against prescribed burning? What arguments do they use in the public debate?

Mr Liddelow—I am referring mainly to some of the voices of the Green movement and I will say right here and now that not all of the people who are part of the Green movement are anti-burn, but certainly some of those who attract the publicity are anti-burn. They really just say that it has no place in today's world, that we should be having less fire rather than more, and that it is a natural element. What they do not seem to understand is that there was always burning under the Aboriginal regime. What happened before them we do not know. They do not really give any concrete reasons except they are opposed to burning. I have a feeling—and carrying on from what Don and John have said—that a large degree of opposition from a couple of people in particular in the Green movement is related to the fact that CALM is involved in burning and over the long drawn-out logging debate here it has become almost like a personal animosity between the parties and it manifests itself in opposition to fire when it is associated with CALM.

Mr McARTHUR—So you cannot detect any real, rational argument against prescribed burning as you see it in this part of the world by those people who are against the proposition?

Mr Liddelow—No, definitely not.

Mr McARTHUR—Would anyone else in the panel like to comment on that?

Mr Evans—I think one of the things to remember with prescribed burning or with the fauna in the environment is that things like brush tailed wallabies need regular prescribed burns to generate fresh feed. Areas in the jarrah forest older than perhaps four to five years rapidly lose that vegetative material and therefore the food for the brush-tailed wallaby. If you do not have regular burning, those animals relocate to somewhere which has been freshly burnt to get the food.

Mr Spriggins—One of the big arguments of the conservation movement is that not enough is known about burning and prescribed burning to be able to say what to do or not to do and the answer to that seems to be to virtually sit back and do nothing. That is not a realistic option to take. Others on the panel have said that all the history of fire is that the forest was burnt on reasonably regular intervals back for 50,000 or 60,000 years, so to institute a policy of no burning or minimal burning is going right against that experience. You can only work on the knowledge that you have at the time. I think due credit should be given to the Western Australian people in the forest department and CALM who have developed the burning mechanisms, prescriptions and so on over the years. It is so far ahead of any part of Australia that I am aware of in knowledge and in applying that in practise that they should be a world leader; they should be applauded for it, but that has not been the case in the last decade or two.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Mr Liddelow, could you clarify some of the statistics that you used there because you mentioned the area under prescribed burning now—I think you mentioned 130,000 and 70,000 hectares, or something in that region—and the desire for a program of burns of 250,000. That area that you are quoting, does that include the wildfire acreages? Obviously there is an area of prescribed burn and there is an area that I guess burns every year because of fires that occur.

Mr Liddelow—To the best of my understanding, and I am not part of that system, it does not include the wildfires. It is the area which they have actually set out to burn and what they have achieved. If you want me to repeat it, in 2001-02 it was 74,000; in 2000 it was 91,000; and in 1999 it was 134,000. Don gave the area of 250,000 as the desired area. The figure that CALM have published is 220,000 to 240,000, so it is in the same ballpark.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Do you agree with that, Mr Evans? I gathered from the opening paragraph in your evidence that 100,000 hectares per year was about the maximum that you would tolerate.

Mr Evans—That 100,000 hectares is the average over the last, say, five years based on CALM's report. CALM's submission—I am not sure of the number of it now—indicates the production and prescribed burning since 1986. It states that the previous levels were around 250,000 and that they are now down to under 100,000. To overcome that, I have recommended in that report you may have in front of you that something like an extra five permanent crews are necessary to bring the production of prescribed burn back to the appropriate level, given that in the last 20 years the estate that CALM is required to manage throughout the state has probably increased by 50 per cent or more. One of the things that really affects prescribed burning in all regions, not just necessarily this one here, is the fact that we often have crews leaving this region when prescribed burns are ready to be conducted in order to assist other regions, like Esperance, Geraldton or wherever. They are sent to assist with either wildfires or prescribed burning in those areas so you get a reduction in burning in your own patch. To meet that requirement, I think that five additional crews, properly resourced, would be a minimum.

Mr Liddelow—Could I add to that? One of the downsides to all of this, of course, is that as the fuel and the area increase, the window of opportunity to burn safely becomes ever narrower and it requires greater resources to carry it out safely. The way we seem to be going at the moment, we are in an ever-tightening band that is going to create further problems.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—This is to all members of the panel: would you care to comment—because there is a theme that comes through in your submissions—on the management of land under control of local authorities and the private lands? Do you have a concern there?

Mr Evans—I do. I feel that CALM does the best that it can with the resources it has to manage the fuel on its own land, albeit behind what we would like to see. But on private property there does not seem to be across the various local authorities in the south-west any consistent formal identification of fuel loadings on private property forest, particularly those adjacent to townships. That could have a devastating effect if a fire began in them. I think that FESA, who, at one stage, assisted the local authorities with fire planning to reduce fire hazards, should probably be requested to initiate a program of fuel management or fuel identification to minimise those hazards.

Mr Spriggins—I would support that. There are a lot of local authorities in the south-west that are very casual about fire control of private property and other lands. I could name quite a few—

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Go ahead. I invite you to do that.

Mr Spriggins—Okay. Denmark would probably be top of the list, I think, followed by places such as Margaret River and Busselton Shire. They are not anti-fire but they are not pro-fire either. When you put in an application for a building, in many cases you are only allowed to clear the building envelope. The build-up surrounding scrub and forest in some cases is absolutely horrific. You can go to places in Denmark and see probably 20 to 30 tonnes per hectare on some of the private properties where people live. I have seen chalets where there are leaves on top of the roofs that would be probably about a foot thick. It is a disaster waiting to happen.

I think there is a big problem with the forest fuels in the forest area because that is where the severe fires will come from because they have got so much area and fuel to build up. It might only happen once every three to four years that you get a really nasty day but, equally, on private property there is a huge problem. A fire can easily spread from state forest into that private property and cause an enormous amount of damage and potential loss of life.

Mr T. Muir—This shire is not immune either. I am a fire control officer within this shire and at one stage it would have been negligent of me to let people go in to fight fires on properties at the Karri Lakes development. That is a fact. There was only one way into the development; there was no track out on the other side. It was heavy karri forest, very heavily vegetated and at that stage I said, ‘No way.’ I would not let people go in there. It would have been negligent of me.

Last year there was a fire in the northern regions of Denmark and I believe they had a contingency plan to evacuate Denmark; it was about five hours away. I was talking to the CEO from Mount Barker two weeks ago about the fire they had over there. Some of that was on private property. There are developments around that do need looking at but your hands are tied. I was a shire councillor for a while; there is nothing you can do once they have got the planning approval. You can probably serve a section through the Bush Fires Act. But it is very difficult when they are allowed only to clear a building envelope and they have 80 or 90 foot karri trees that are dead leaning over houses—it is just crazy.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Spriggins, you said you came over from the eastern states, from Victoria.

Mr Spriggins—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It is encouraging that you spent some time, albeit a brief time, in north-east Victoria. You commented on what you believed to be the progressive attitude in fire management in Western Australia. Why do you think that a different culture and philosophy have developed in the West while the eastern states appear to have gone in a totally different direction?

Mr Spriggins—I think a lot had to do with leadership at the time. We had a conservator of forests who attracted me to come here—that was A.C. Harris. He was very keen on prescribed burning and so on, and he really drove it in this state to get it off the ground. He was followed by conservators like Bruce Beggs, who was in charge of the Dwellingup fire when it went through, and he was scarred, if you like, by that and saw the benefit of prescribed burning after that. I think that was it; it was leadership from the top.

Ms PANOPOULOS—This is to Mr Spriggins and Mr Evans: you have said that over the last 10 years or so there has been a reduction in the amount of area control burnt. We have heard that the conditions have been particularly dry over the last four years, which would not explain what you say would be the gradual decline in the number of hectares or the proportion of crown land burnt. What do you believe has influenced that reduction? What do you think has caused that change, other than, as you have mentioned, a decrease in resources? I do not want to put words into your mouth, but do you think there is some infection of the eastern states' philosophy coming into Western Australia?

Mr Spriggins—I do not think there is any doubt about that. I think CALM is a much different organisation from what the forest department was when A.C. Harris was the conservator. The focus was on protecting life and property and that is what we went about. Now CALM has got a much greater charter, of course, to look after all the animals and so on, and I think that sometimes that aspect gets in the way a bit of sensible fire protection and overshadows it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—This is to everyone on the panel: you have obviously got concerns about changing trends within the department. What have you done specifically to raise these concerns with your local representatives, whether it is local government, state or federal representatives, and with the department, and what responses have you received?

Mr Spriggins—When I was chairman of the institute I went around to every member in the south-west—

Ms PANOPOULOS—When was that, sorry?

Mr Spriggins—This was about 18 months to two years ago. Went around to every member in the south-west. We prepared a brochure setting out the fuel conditions in the south-west and pointing out the concern that we had. Whenever there was a wildfire I would usually email them all and tell them what the situation was and draw that to their attention.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Did they ever respond to your concerns and representations?

Mr Spriggins—We got letters back but there was—

Ms PANOPOULOS—Were the letters acknowledging receipt of your information or did they actually provide an opinion?

Mr Spriggins—I think they were nice letters that came back but I do not think the action on the ground has changed as a result of our efforts.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Did the letters acknowledge what you were saying or was it an attitude of, 'We will take it on board'?

Mr Spriggins—The letters did not do that but I think off the record there were admissions that, until there was a crisis, it was very difficult to sell politically to the metropolitan electorate that you needed more prescribed burning.

Mr Evans—I think if there is a major fire in the wrong place, that is when the current situation will come to a head. For instance, last autumn a major fire originated out of a lightning strike. Just by the way, last year, out of 600-odd fires that the department fought, something like 200 were initiated by lightning, so it is a huge proportion. If that fire, which eventually grew to affect about 39,000 hectares, had burnt in the high population density areas and high value areas, like the Warren National Park and other very high profile places, there would have been headlines and lots of action would have been taken as a result. However, because it happened down there in the jarrah and tea-tree scrub in the Denbarker country, there were no properties burnt in the fire so, luckily, there was nothing to be worried about. There was hardly any publicity, just a couple of paragraphs and that was it. If it had been a major threat to a town or if a high value conservation area had been destroyed, it would have been different.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Evans, in your written submission you have mentioned that there are too many constraints on prescribed burning, and you also mentioned in your oral evidence that the department uses the measurement of soil dryness to determine that. Other than that, what, in your opinion, do you see as unnecessary constraints on prescribed burning? You have also alluded to the fact that requests for burning have been rejected. Could you explain who is allowed to burn and from whom they have to ask permission?

Mr Evans—It is a very good system that works, providing you get the approval that is. In this region, the three districts—that has been reduced now—would make a request to the regional office. The regional office would assess those requests and forward a request through to head office, to CALM fire, to determine a priority for those burns and, providing the resources were available and conditions were okay, that burn would go ahead. But if there was some factor like insufficient resources available or a higher priority elsewhere—there could be a high value silvicultural burn to be done somewhere else—that would take precedence. So in a lot of cases, because those resources were not available locally or had to be transferred to assist the other ones, the burn was not able to go ahead. It was not often that smoke over Perth directly affected us here, like it does further north, because the smoke has a longer distance to travel so it does not have the same effect. However, if there are a number of large burns, it can have that effect. It has stopped CALM on several occasions where very high value burns were needed. For example, Treen Brook needed to be burnt to protect the Pemberton town site, but that could not be done.

Ms PANOPOULOS—This belief of yours that there are undue constraints on prescribed burning: has this developed over time and, if so, over what period?

Mr Evans—It is a very stringent process. It is good to have a very close review of all the requests. It certainly has been increasing. I have not been there for two years but prior to that I would say that, for the last five years, there has been a very close look at all the approvals. In some cases, ministers had to give personal approval for burns to be done. There were also delays on occasions when the daily request sometimes was not approved until it had been right through the whole process, including the ministerial approval process. That only happened a few times, I believe, but it did happen. That caused the burns to be delayed until maybe 10 o'clock in the morning while a decision was made, and a substantial part of the day in which to get crews into position was lost.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Spriggins, you referred to the need to protect plantations by hazard reduction in adjacent areas. I am wondering, in your experience, if you could tell the committee

how much of the prescribed burning in the south-east is directed at protecting plantations and how much at protecting specific residential, rural and industrial properties?

Mr Spriggins—The amount of plantations in state forests is not huge. I could not give you a figure off the top of my head; there are probably 20,000 to 30,000 hectares of pines within two million hectares of native forests, so it is not a huge area. The perimeters of state forests in many cases abut residential or semi-rural land subdivisions, so there is a great perimeter a nasty fire could come out of and have a large impact on people that are living outside the forest.

Mr ORGAN—So a lot of effort has to be put into protecting those plantations. Is that traditionally the way it operates?

Mr Spriggins—Yes. Without keeping low fuel zones around plantations you can easily get a hop-over and land in the middle of the pines which burn much more easily and rapidly than the native forest.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Evans, in your submission you state that for private property owners who do not hazard reduce, you would recommend the brigade should not suppress fires on their property, and that a red painted rock should be placed at their property entrance to warn brigades. How has this suggestion been greeted by volunteer firefighters who, around Australia, are telling us that the thing to do, wherever the fire is, is to get in there and get it out? How has this idea of the red brick been greeted?

Mr Evans—That idea apparently originated in the United States where it is a common practise to put a big rock in front of the entrance to the property and paint it red to indicate to the brigades that the brigade personnel should not enter under any circumstances to attack fires in that property because of the danger that has been identified there by an inspection by senior brigade personnel earlier in the season. That has been supported in principle by the people that I have spoken to. In 1986, I think, Cyclone Fifi came through and many of our firefighters within CALM took huge risks in the country north-west of Denmark in entering private property which had very heavy fuels, very poor access and no signage, water points or preparation around the houses. Some of our people were trapped very significantly and, as a result of that, there was a directive issued to our people that they should not take unnecessary risks to protect private property whatever the situation was. It was just too dangerous for them to do that.

Mr ORGAN—How would you propose removing that threat? Obviously, to get all levels of the community to deal with fire issues, it is not just a matter of prescribed burning; it is building codes, development, and all levels of government. How would you propose to overcome that?

Mr Evans—It is the responsibility of the local authority, which is supposed to administer the Bush Fires Act, to ensure that the conditions of the act are abided by. It can identify and agree to certain maximum levels of fuel in the forest areas on private property and set that as a requirement. It can issue orders to have that reduced if necessary, either by the landowner or by contract people who could go in—maybe shire personnel—and do the prescribed burn and reduce that fuel accordingly. That has not occurred, to my knowledge, virtually anywhere in the south-west. There was one attempt a few years ago and that failed dismally because of the person they targeted, so that did not proceed. Realistically, if they set the target maximum level

for fuel loadings on private property and administered it, it would make a big difference to the safety of the property owners and their neighbours.

Mr ORGAN—In Hobart last week we were shown an area that looked incredibly dangerous. The point made by the fire authorities there was that it is not just a matter of the fuel reduction if you have a house in the middle of the bush, it is having available water and egress—the ability to get in and out. Would you agree that it is not just a matter of hazard reduction, it is a whole heap of other factors such as protecting property, staying with property during a fire and liaising with fire groups et cetera, not just one element?

Mr Evans—Absolutely. I assisted in drawing up a set of guidelines for the Manjimup Shire Council probably 15 years ago and they were adopted by the local fire bushfire advisory committee. They gave exactly those conditions—certain standards of access, water supplies, clearances around houses, emergency exits and so on.

Mr T. Muir—I was the Manjimup bushfire advisory chairman for many years. We tried to implement management plans on private property. I know of two incidences where we tried to but it is an administrative nightmare. Once they have done their management plan and put their property into sections—they hazard reduce in this area then that area and do all the other things such as put in water tanks and whatever—every year the shire has to go and inspect that place otherwise it falls behind. I know this shire tries to do its best but it is an administrative nightmare and it is very expensive.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time this afternoon, for your evidence and your submissions—all very useful information for the committee.

[3.03 p.m.]

CAMPBELL, Mr Andrew Graeme, Manager, Environmental Services, Shire of Manjimup

JOHNSTON, Mr Timothy Raymond, Deputy Chief Fire Control Officer, Kojonup Bushfire Advisory Committee

MARSH, Mr Gregory John, Councillor, Shire of Kojonup; Representative, Bushfire Advisory Committee

CHAIR—Welcome. I will not re-read the formal bit about evidence; you were here earlier, I think, when I read that at the start of the proceedings. We have both your submissions. The Shire of Manjimup submission, which we previously received and authorised for publication, and the submission from Kojonup, which we received today and authorised for publication prior to the public hearing this afternoon, now form part of the evidence for the committee. You might like to make some opening remarks before we ask some questions.

Mr Marsh—The Shire of Kojonup covers a total area of 2,937 square kilometres and is situated 250 kilometres south-east of Perth on the Albany Highway. It is in a high fire risk area, originally covered with heavy forest vegetation that has been cleared to make way for grazing land and annual crops. The annual rainfall is approximately 500 millimetres per annum, resulting in a spring flush of grasses and pasture ultimately dying off leading into summer, leaving a high fire risk over the hot dry summer.

Kojonup is unique in that it relies on volunteers alone and does not have any organisations helping it. It has developed its own fire protection system over many years and generations, based on volunteers and experience. Kojonup was one of the first shires in WA to pioneer and embrace a radio-controlled network to support its volunteer firefighters. It now has some 580 members over 12 brigades. Today's volunteers own and maintain 128 medium-heavy firefighting units and a further 120 to 130 light-fast attack units. This means that around 250 privately owned units are capable of attending any fire in the district at any given time. The firefighting forces are controlled by four senior fire control officers, 12 brigade fire control officers and other deputies. A fire advisory committee has been set up to oversee and advise this organisation as it sees fit regarding firebreak orders and fire management.

Last year over 40 wildfires were reported, mainly caused by lightning strikes. With a strike force of this magnitude, most fires were extinguished in minimal time, with the largest resulting in only 480 hectares, or around 1200 acres, being burnt. One day a number of lightning strikes were reported within 30 minutes across the shire. The temperature was in the high thirties and there were northerly and north-westerly winds and, under pressure across the whole shire, all fires were extinguished in a short time, with the largest of these burning a mere 320 hectares, or 800 acres.

The volunteers ask for very little, but unless some funding opportunities are made available, privately owned equipment will become unaffordable. Would Kojonup be better off under a

central system, as proposed? I doubt it—maybe 12 brightly painted fire units, very little local knowledge and a control centre in an airconditioned office some 50 kilometres away.

Increasing legislation both restricts and constricts bushfire volunteers. Hazard reduction burns, which were once common practice, are becoming a thing of the past due to certain policies and a minority Greens movement. The question of liability and insurance coverage for volunteer firefighters is ongoing.

Kojonup brigades are proactive and reactive regarding firebreak orders, fire control and protective burning where possible. Our method of firefighting is probably different from methods in a lot of other areas as we need to chase them down and extinguish them in minimal time, and we keep adding numbers and equipment as available. Kojonup has a stand-alone system that does not need outside agencies to help regarding our radio communications networks and service abilities, which are provided within our local system.

With the new FESA levy being introduced to maintain firefighting equipment, we feel that we should not have to apply to receive the grants that are collected by shire councils and that this money should remain in the community. We have learned to rely on our initiatives in solving problems in our own communities, but we desperately need some more support.

Mr Johnston—We are attempting to address the last two references in our submission—liability, public liability and so forth—and obviously the roles of volunteers. I will give you a bit more of an overview of what happens in the Kojonup shire. I listened with interest to the previous gents who were here. Kojonup Bushfire Association was formed in 1947. In fact, in those days there was no Bush Fires Act in Western Australia. The Bush Fires Act was brought into being in 1954, partly as a result of the Kojonup Bushfire Association existing, because there was no legislation to cover what was happening in our shire.

We have a proactive system and a reactive system. Our proactive system is covered by very stringent firebreak regulations. I would like to tender a copy of the firebreak rules within Kojonup. All farmers and their dwellings have to be protected by firebreaks. The reason this is done is quite obvious. We prefer people to stay at home during a wildfire, so we enforce firebreak rules to the degree that it is safe for people to stay home. We only have to put one or two units in at each dwelling that the fire is approaching to be happy that there will not be any problems.

Our method of enforcing the firebreak rules is that at the closing date, which is 15 December, all firebreaks have to be in place. We put an aeroplane in the air on 16 December and overfly the whole district. Anybody whose breaks do not meet the standards are fined and forced to comply with firebreak rules. We have a similar operation happening in our local town where we attempt to reduce the level of fuel hazard within the town so that, should a wildfire approach, we have our best chance of protecting the town and stopping fires escaping from the town.

Mr Marsh brought to your attention the fact that we have a stand-alone organisation. All the equipment in the Kojonup shire is privately owned by landowners. He gave you an idea of how much equipment is there. We own all our own radio communications equipment, of which there are 44 radios controlled by fire control officers. We own our own tower and we have people on the ground within our shire who can maintain that tower in an emergency. Obviously, as you

would realise, when fires come through, one of the first things that go out is the power system, so we have back-up power systems in that tower so that, hopefully, we do not get caught without a communications system.

One of the great fears we are now facing as volunteers is the threat of litigation. I think I can use myself as an example—not that I have ever been sued. I am purely and simply a volunteer. I can volunteer to go and do several other things in my local town if I wish to; I do not have to be a volunteer firefighter. All that really stands between me and being sued by someone are the words ‘acting in good faith’. It has never been tested. I could make a huge error of judgment as a senior fire control officer in my office and unwittingly place people at risk and then be dragged into the courts if someone were hurt seriously. I could go into a coroner’s inquiry. All that is standing between me and any prosecution are the words ‘acting in good faith’. That is a lot for a volunteer to hang their hat on. We are all getting very uncomfortable with the fact that we are exposed to more and more litigation and we do not think it is particularly fair on volunteers to place themselves at such risk.

CHAIR—Thank you for that.

Mr Campbell—I have been employed by the Shire of Manjimup for the past 10½ years and currently hold the position of Manager, Environmental Services. My role includes responsibility for the volunteer bushfire brigades within the Shire of Manjimup. The submission made to the House of Representatives Select Committee on the recent Australian bushfires was made by a resolution of the Shire of Manjimup at the council meeting on 8 May 2003.

The Shire of Manjimup comprises 6,894 square kilometres, making it the largest municipal area in the south-west region of Western Australia. Eighty four per cent of the shire comprises state forests, national parks, reserves and crown land. The 2001 census showed that the population of the shire was 10,030, broken down to 5,811 people living in urban areas and 4,219 people living in rural areas. There are 5,767 rateable and non-rateable properties in the Shire of Manjimup. The main industries consist of tourism, agriculture, horticulture, native and plantation timber production and processing, viticulture and aquaculture. Diversity within the shire’s economy, population dispersal and environment present the most significant fire threats. The combination of dense forest and vegetation, undulating terrain and three to four months of summer drought often lead to fire threats to life and property. It is often secluded freehold property surrounded by dense forest and vegetation which is most at risk. However, potential clearly exists where major residential areas could be threatened under the right conditions.

CHAIR—Mr Campbell, I do not really want to interrupt you, but I note you are reading part of the submission that we have received.

Mr Campbell—It is part of the submission, yes.

CHAIR—It is already part of the evidence so it does not need to be repeated to become evidence. If there are any particular aspects you want to highlight, that is fine, but I think we would rather use the time for questioning if you were just going to read the rest of that.

Mr Campbell—Yes, that is fine. I will just finish the last paragraph which is not part of the submission. A total of 29 volunteer bushfire brigades exist under the control of the shire. It is

anticipated that \$350,000 will be spent on volunteer bushfire brigades and other fire related duties within the Shire of Manjimup in this financial year. This does not take into consideration any fundraising, donations or in-kind work contributed to the volunteer bushfire brigade network.

CHAIR—Thanks for that additional information. Mr Johnston, you mentioned that the firebreaks are checked on a particular date and, if they are not up to scratch, people are fined and they have to get them up to scratch. Is that the case also with fuel reduction on private property? You talked about fuel reduction within the town, but you may have heard the evidence where the previous witnesses were expressing concern that shires are not enforcing fuel reduction burning on private land.

Mr Johnston—Our situation is slightly different from what you have heard before. Basically, the sheep do the fuel reduction during the summer period in our country so we actually do not force people to reduce the grazing amount of feed that is on that property. So that is how that occurs. We have this massive build-up of fuel loadings during the spring and we have a very vulnerable period for the first three months of summer, but then the sheep get on top of it and ease the pressure. Some of the bush blocks that are still on private land are burnt out on a reasonably regular basis but not overly, but there is not a lot of virgin bush left in our shire.

CHAIR—You will have to excuse us for not having intimate knowledge of the geography of each shire. The other question is: what is the relationship like between your volunteer brigades and CALM, for instance? Do you work together? Do they ask you to assist in some of the work that they do on public lands or vice versa?

Mr Johnston—We are probably in the fairly fortunate position in Kojonup, once again, that we do not have much CALM-controlled land within our shire. There is good liaison between the shire and CALM. They attempt to answer any of the questions we ask. We have one reserve that they helped us partly burn out this year. Because we do not have a great deal of CALM land within our shire, it is not a question that bothers us too much.

CHAIR—Maybe if I could ask Mr Campbell that question and the question before with respect to enforcing the law as far as fuel reduction on private land in your shire is concerned.

Mr Campbell—We are under a very similar circumstance to the Shire of Kojonup. We have a firebreak notice which we enforce every year on a certain date. Normally, non-compliance of a firebreak notice will result in a fine. We find that once there is a fine and a further threat of action, people will normally take the necessary measures to comply with the firebreak notice. If they do not comply with that firebreak notice, we have options available to us to ensure that they comply with it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Campbell, in the written submission from the shire there is a statement that the shire routinely burns land under its control as well as, occasionally upon request, land owned by the state government. Does the shire have particular targets every year?

Mr Campbell—We allocate a certain amount of funding each year towards burning of our land. What we would do, prior to a burning season, is consider what we think to be the most significant fire threat to surrounding properties. We also take advice from our local fire control

officers and our hierarchy in our bushfire network as to what they think are the most appropriate areas to burn and then we will either undertake those burns ourselves or use those burns as training burns for our local volunteers.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Johnston, you spoke about the mandatory firebreaks in the shire and how strictly they are enforced. How long has this particular system been in place?

Mr Marsh—Thirty or 40 years.

Mr Johnston—Thirty or 40 years. The district would have been flown over for the last 25 years, to the best of my knowledge.

Ms PANOPOULOS—But the mandatory firebreaks?

Mr Johnston—I would say that they have been in place and rigorously enforced for 40 years.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Is there much opposition on the ground?

Mr Johnston—We get the same five or six people every year that do not do too much and get prosecuted every year. I suppose that is their way of protesting against it. The rest of the people are very accepting of it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am interested in the attitude of the state government towards this very unique system you have. Do you get much comment or interference?

Mr Johnston—No interference; we do not get a great deal of comment either. The state government keeps telling us that they will not interfere with our system but unfortunately, since the fire and emergency services levy has been introduced, a whole new level of bureaucracy has come in over the top of us which volunteers are meant to cope with.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Could you please explain some of the practical results of that?

Mr Johnston—For example, if a wildfire starts in Kojonup and someone close by on a farm sees the smoke go up, they do not wait for me or one of the fire control officers to tell them to go; they go. If it ends up being a false alarm, they turn around and go home again. Under some of the arrangements we are now seeing come out for FESA, for example, we are meant to log people into fires—log the time they go in and come back out—so they do not work more than eight hours and do not get too worn out. The end result of that is you have to tell someone like a farmer in Kojonup who has spent 15 hours the previous day driving a harvester doing his harvesting operations that he can only work eight hours when he is at a fire and then maybe have to come back for the next three or four days to sort the mess out rather than get the job done and go home. That is the sort of bureaucracy that is starting to infiltrate to us and it makes my job and Councillor Marsh's job very hard to sell the volunteer organisation to someone when you have that level of bureaucracy on top of you. People do not have to be volunteer firefighters, they can go and do other things.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Or they can, as is the trend in some parts in the eastern states, go and put out the fire without joining the volunteer fire brigade.

Mr Johnston—If the laws were made too stringent and they impinged upon our firefighting organisation and forced us to break the law to do what we have been doing for the last 30 years, I suspect that in Kojonup we would end up breaking the law. We would go and put the fire out and we would sort out the other problems later.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And you would sort out afterwards the clocking on and off.

Mr Johnston—It would not happen. I do not mean to be flippant about that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—No. Mr Johnston, trust me, there are many communities right around this country—and I can say in my electorate for one—that wish they had the power and systems you have in their neck of the woods. You will be much admired right around the country.

Mr Johnston—Yes, but the problem we face is that we are breaking the law so our protection, as far as litigation goes, is out the window. As a volunteer, I am absolutely walking the knife-edge by allowing things like that to occur as a fire control officer, knowing full well that there are laws governing that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—With this problem of increased litigation, is it the fear of it or have there been instances where claims have been made?

Mr Johnston—No, in our case it is the fear of it, but that is enough to drive a volunteer away.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Does council insure firefighters?

Mr Johnston—Yes, they do.

Mr Marsh—Our council has a great insurance policy and we are covered to the maximum level we feel we can be but, until it is tested in court, no-one will know. We hope we have all our volunteers insured but, until it is tested in court or someone gets burnt, killed, maimed or something like that, we do not know. If it is tested in court who knows where we could be? We could be in trouble and so could all our volunteers. This is where we need a guideline to make sure that we are protected.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Thank you for illuminating us. You are, as I said, much envied and if I can say something totally gratuitous whatever you do, try not to give up your independence. You have something special here; just keep it.

Mr Marsh—Thank you.

Mr McARTHUR—I want to pursue this firebreak argument because we have had other witnesses from local governments who have not allowed landowners to remove some of the fuel close to their houses, so we have an interesting change of philosophy. Could you help us as to what criteria, when you fly over the farms or the land holdings, do you agree on as far as adequate firebreaks are concerned?

Mr Johnston—Quite often I fly in the aeroplane. We make an assessment from the air. The rule of thumb is that if we put two firefighting units in at that building, they will be capable of

protecting that area. So it has got to be fairly low in fuel loadings, the breaks have to be 60 or 70 metres wide around the buildings and so forth.

Mr McARTHUR—What do most land-holders do in your case? Do they use the sheep to reduce the fuel?

Mr Johnston—They graze, spray, mow or burn out the area. They use all those methods of getting their breaks in order.

Mr McARTHUR—Again, could you help us with the philosophy and culture in the area? Have the land-holders accepted this fairly draconian point of view that somebody flies an aircraft over their farm and says, ‘You haven’t obeyed the rules’ or ‘You have’? Has that been agreed to because there is a mutual benefit to all land-holders? Is that the background to it?

Mr Johnston—In our submission you will notice that in our shire’s case we are reluctant volunteers in the sense that we are volunteers out of necessity. We are protecting our own assets. We are not volunteers as a hobby or as a service to the community like you would have in the outer metropolitan area where someone has a different job during the day and he likes to volunteer to be a firefighter on the weekend or during the week. We are protecting our own assets so it is a common interest thing. For the few people that do not comply with the law, it is to the benefit of the majority that they are forced to and we do our best to force them to come into line.

Mr McARTHUR—It means that if those farmhouses are protected then the local fire brigade can concentrate on the main fire front.

Mr Johnston—Yes, exactly. We are not tying up resources trying to protect buildings, we are flat out fighting the fire. That is the object of the whole exercise—to put fires out and not waste time trying to protect buildings and lives. We know that people can stay at home and they are pretty safe.

Mr McARTHUR—Then you can deploy your units out to the fire front.

Mr Johnston—Yes, exactly.

Mr McARTHUR—Just for the record, I presume you are in a grassland fire situation rather than a timbered area.

Mr Johnston—Yes, majority grassland, but it is fairly undulating country with reasonably wooded creeks and so forth. It is difficult country to fight fires in if you allow them to get a hold.

Mr McARTHUR—What would be the difference between the two shires?

Mr Johnston—Vastly different, you could not compare the two methods of firefighting that are required here and in Kojonup.

Mr McARTHUR—You are basically grassland with some timber.

Mr Johnston—Yes, and our method of attack, as we said, is we just simply have to chase fires down and extinguish them that way whereas more often—I do not want to put words into their mouths down here—they have to put in control lines and wait for fires to come to them.

Mr McARTHUR—For how long do your fires run? Do they run—

Mr Johnston—No, unlike the eastern states, in general, if we get a very bad fire day in Kojonup and get a fire going, it is because of a trough line coming through and, more often than not, it is drizzling the next morning. We have never had a fire run after midnight but it can do a hell of a lot of damage in the eight or nine hours because of their capacity and the speed at which they can travel.

Mr ORGAN—I would like to congratulate Kojonup on your community-based, bottom-up, self-sufficiency approach. It seems to be working and I think governments at all levels should be supporting it. Councillor Marsh, I get the impression that local councils are concerned that government is not providing enough financial resources and support to your organisations and communities. Is this money going somewhere else? Is there money available? What do you see as the way forward? From your submission you seem to be indicating that you really do need financial support to maintain this present system. Is that correct?

Mr Marsh—That is correct. I believe that the FESA levy should not go out of our shire. All that money should stay in our shire.

Mr ORGAN—What is the FESA levy? Is that new?

Mr Marsh—It is the fire and emergency services levy, which was just introduced and it has been collected. I think it is \$30 or \$35 per rate owner who pays that and it goes into a levy for fire and emergency services.

Mr ORGAN—Will your council be making a specific submission that that money should stay within the community?

Mr Marsh—We made a submission last year and were successful, but we feel that for the amount of equipment we have there, it is a matter of time. We only had a limited amount last year introduced in our shire. For the amount of units we have, if it is kept to a minimum each year, eventually the volunteer force's equipment will be depleted just for the lack of funds.

Mr ORGAN—Apart from the FESA levy, do you feel any need for stronger support from government in regards to supporting your system?

Mr Marsh—We believe that community funding is out. We want to stay private. We are private now and we want to keep it that way. We do not want community funded equipment but we need assistance so that we can maintain the system we have now. It is working well; why should we change it?

Mr Johnston—Can I add to that that one of our problems is that governments are not prepared to fund privately owned equipment. We have a bit of a stalemate there. We have worked out a backdoor method of getting public funds into privately owned equipment, as you

would imagine we would have a go at doing, but it is really less than satisfactory. We have had a system in Kojonup where, through our rates that the people pay to the shire council, a portion of that went to look after bushfire services in Kojonup. Now we have a fire and emergency services levy so that money that was in Kojonup goes to Perth and we have to put our hands up to get the money back down again with all the strings attached that come with that money. It comes out of Perth with a duty of care. Quite frankly, none of the firefighting units in Kojonup would pass a FESA examination because we just could not afford to have \$200,000 units in Kojonup; a farmer cannot afford that sort of money. But our system relies on that overwhelming amount of equipment to make it work and the only way we can make that work is to have privately owned equipment.

Mr ORGAN—I am wondering if the firefighting authorities of Western Australia have looked at your system. What do they think of it?

Mr Marsh—It has certainly been seen, I think, and it is probably the envy of a lot of others, but I have not been involved in it until the last couple of years. Although I was a fire control officer and held a radio for 25 years, I have not been involved in the administration for the last 12 years. Mr Johnston could answer that much better than I could.

Mr Johnston—It seems to me that governments and bureaucrats work out a system and one size fits all, and of course it does not work. They have looked at us and they acknowledge we exist, and they say we are doing a good job, but they still keep changing the rules above us which affect us so heavily and force us into changing our operation to comply with the law. When a volunteer sees that happening there is a bit of a reaction to it: ‘Look, they are not going to tell us what to do. This system is working well, why change it?’ Then they say, ‘Okay, we do not want to be part of it, we do not want to be fire control officers. We are not going to take on responsibility any more.’ So we are eroded and our efficiency at firefighting is placed at risk.

Mr ORGAN—If your system is placed at risk and has to disappear, what is it going to be replaced with?

Mr Johnston—One imagines FESA would give us four or five red fire engines. The end result is our district will be regularly burnt out on a large scale. That is the only end result that there can be to that. It would place life and property and risk—and not only private property; a lot of public property such as power lines and bridges would be at risk. We look after those sorts of things that the government owns.

Mr Campbell—Can I make a comment in relation to that as well? From the Shire of Manjimup’s point of view, we are probably the opposite. As a shire, we hold significant amounts of equipment which we are required to maintain each year. Along with Kojonup, we were not satisfied with the level of funding that was provided to the Shire of Manjimup because the level of funding that was provided was seen as the bare minimum. What we applied for was definitely a lot more than what we received. What the funding does not take into account is all of the work that is done by volunteers in kind. The Shire of Manjimup owns something like 70 slip-on fire units which go on the back of Land Cruiser-type vehicles that act as fast attack type units which can access a fire quite readily.

Outside of that, there are probably at least that many privately owned units which will effectively have to be maintained by these volunteers and there is no indication from the government at this stage that they will assist in any way in funding privately owned equipment. That is a real issue for the Shire of Manjimup because if these people start to drop out of the system, who is going to replace them? There is nobody. At this stage, we are not going to get any more significant equipment. This year we were funded a \$90,000 heavy duty fire truck which is to replace an existing outdated fire truck. We do not consider that to be an additional appliance, just a replacement. So if we maintain this minimum standard of equipment, the day will come when we are actually short of resources and something is going to occur that will threaten life or property.

Mr ADAMS—In terms of your private firefighting equipment, I take it that is equipment that is used on the farms, et cetera, and then used for firefighting, other than a tanker or –

Mr Johnston—It is about fifty-fifty. About 50 per cent of the equipment that we have listed on Mr Marsh's report is purpose-built firefighting equipment made by farmers specifically to fight fires and to do burns on their own property. A reasonable amount of cropping is done in our shire and there are a lot of stubble burns going on. It is a requirement for the firebreak laws that there must be a minimum of two firefighting units attend in any controlled burn in the Shire of Kojonup. It is a pseudo way of forcing people to have equipment. So about 50 per cent are permanent and the others would fall into the category of slip-on units, which I understand are shortly going to be outlawed anyway because they are not attached to the chassis of the firefighting unit. That is something I suspect is going to come in very shortly.

Mr Marsh—One other point there: it is mandatory to have a fire unit on standby in the paddock for any harvesting operation.

Mr ADAMS—That has come from experience, I guess.

Mr Marsh—That is right.

Mr Johnston—While the firefighting unit is in the paddock with the harvester, if the farmer lights a fire, he might not be able to control it, but he can suppress it enough to give us time to get other gear there to help him out.

Mr ADAMS—They move pretty quick.

Mr Johnston—In grasslands it probably averages five to six kilometres an hour but it can take runs at 60 to 70 kilometres an hour.

Mr ADAMS—I take it you are in cropping as well? Is there cropping in your area?

Mr Johnston—Grain and sheep, basically.

Mr ADAMS—The difficulties of getting over private equipment being funded by government will probably take a lot of effort. In terms of the management of other fire services or the state fire service, how do those management links occur with you?

Mr Johnston—At a local level they are very good for us. We work through the Albany Bush Fires Board, which is part of FESA, and our relationship with them is excellent. They give us all the help and advice they can. The relationship breaks down a bit further when you start to get to the bureaucrats higher up who seem to run an agenda that is slightly not what we think should happen.

Mr ADAMS—Do you think the bureaucrats should look more closely at professionalism? I know you say that people work 15 or 16 hours et cetera at a time. A young firefighter was killed two years ago, I think. There was a report that came down yesterday that somebody was ploughing a firebreak during the fire and this boy was caught and run over because of dust, smoke and probably tiredness and everything else. When you start to look at firefighting in a more professional manner, there are sometimes problems with covering costs like this and the risk of people being killed fighting fires. Do you think there is any need to look at these things in a professional manner from time to time to assess issues like that?

Mr Johnston—I can see that in our case we need to place more emphasis on training. But there again we are dealing with volunteers and if they do not want to be trained, they will not be, and you cannot force them to be trained. We would be horrified if it got to a situation where, if you were not trained and if you did not hold a piece of paper from the authorities above, you could not attend a fire. That, too, would undermine us. So we are walking a very delicate tightrope there also. One size does not fit all and I can see the commonsense in the way things are structured along the coast with the kinds of fire brigades they have there with the equipment that is supplied by government. It makes commonsense, but it also makes commonsense for us to have a system designed the way we have our system designed.

Mr ADAMS—Historically it has come out of your needs.

Mr Johnston—Yes, and we do not want to erode the two by being overbearing, basically.

Mr ADAMS—I want to refer to building standards within the municipality. Do the councils allow buildings within forestry areas, areas where canopies overhang houses or a building et cetera?

Mr Marsh—Put it this way, in the granting of permits, we do not really approve of it. We try to discourage people if we can, but you cannot force them, can you, really?

Mr ADAMS—Are there council by-laws?

Mr Marsh—There are council by-laws but, to this date, people have seen commonsense. There is more a commonsense approach. If it has been pointed out to them, nine times out of 10 they have acted before they have built the dwelling.

Mr Johnston—If you choose to build in the bush, you still have to comply with the bushfire firebreak regulations. If you do not, you will be prosecuted.

Mr Campbell—In the case of the Shire of Manjimup, we would certainly address those types of issues at a planning level rather than at a building level. Obviously, Building Code Australia is the legislation we work under for that type of thing. If the property was part of a new subdivision

or something of that nature, we would make sure there was a minimum standard of fire safety attached to that particular subdivision. I noticed one of the previous speakers, Tom Muir, referred to an area of Karri Lakes, which is in the Shire of Manjimup. That has strategic firebreaks and that is certainly an area that concerns us. However, the subdivision was approved well and truly before probably anybody who is currently working at the Shire of Manjimup was working there. Therefore, I think it is an undesirable situation. However, we do not have a lot of power to force people to undertake anything other than their planning approval.

Mr ADAMS—You base your whole issue on the firebreaks. We have had evidence that sometimes it does not matter whether you have a mile firebreak, it is not going to make any difference to a fire getting over it. What would be your response to that?

Mr Johnston—There are going to be certain circumstances that firefighters are faced with—and I suspect we saw them on the television in Canberra—where you simply will not be able to deal with what you are confronted with, and no-one will be able to deal with it. Fortunately, those days are very rare and I do not think, in the long term, you can plan for those one-off events. I think you can anticipate those one-off events in the sense that you can have forward planning. If you have a drought in the mountains in the eastern states and there has never been a drought there before, things are going to burn where they have not burned in the last 100 years. I think you can anticipate something is going to happen and something is going to go wrong and you should be doing planning well ahead for those sorts of thing. We have a high fuel loading year approaching this year in Kojonup and the senior fire management within the district are already talking about strategies to deal with it.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Mr Campbell—and this is a general comment to all of the panel—there is a reality about today, and I am speaking about the times we live in, that we do live in litigious environments. Often, rules are put in place to protect the volunteers, as much as anything for their personal safety and their safety from litigation. I speak from an electorate that lost several volunteer firefighters in a fire at Linton. In your submission, Mr Campbell, you say:

... the safety of fire crews has been jeopardised due to the lack of appropriate communications in certain locations.

You make a point about communications. Has the shire examined alternatives of the sort that seem to operate in other shires, with perhaps not so much of a reliance on the mobile phone networks and those sorts of things? I think in the Linton example it was a failure of communications, among other things, that led to the death of volunteers.

Mr Campbell—In terms of the part of the submission regarding communication, communication is a very big issue for us in the Shire of Manjimup. Currently we operate five communications repeaters on the VHF network. We have black spots within our areas and often fires occur in the black spots. It becomes a very big issue when there is no communication between individuals even though they can go to mobile unit to mobile unit communications just through the radio network without going through the repeater. However, one of the reasons I was referring to the mobile phone network and the expansion into that type of system is that I was looking at a system in the following context: most people who are involved in the bushfire network are farmers within our shire. Normally, a farmer will have a vehicle that has a radio. The farmer is not always around that radio so, if they are not around that radio and a call comes across that there is a fire somewhere, they are very difficult to contact. If they had access to a

mobile phone system there is obviously the potential there to page them or whatever to notify them that a fire is happening. Also, in the situation where there is a black spot area or something like that, the mobile phone system may be beneficial in being able to contact certain individuals in regards to that. The eastern states example that you were referring to, from my limited understanding of that, is that there seemed to be a lot of traffic across the communications network which did cause a bit of a problem in getting the message through to the right people. One of the reasons I pushed the mobile telephone network was that, in the case of high traffic, if any individual needed to be contacted and the person controlling the incident was aware that they had a mobile phone then they could be contacted immediately without any issue.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Has the shire got some professional advice? Given the status of the mobile phone network and the sorts of private communications that are in place, what is the best way to overcome the problem that you just described, that is, of fires occurring in areas where there is no coverage and where people could be put at risk?

Mr Campbell—Yes, we have spoken to quite a few people about the best system that is available. We recently put a communications repeater into a town called Northcliffe which has eliminated significant black spot areas through this shire. There is also a proposal at the moment to put another communications repeater at a town called Yerramin, which is east of Manjimup. In terms of mobile phone coverage, the shire has made a funding commitment that was under a Commonwealth grant, I believe, to three additional towers within this shire to assist not only the community but also the bushfire network.

CHAIR—Just on that, you say in your submission that you need better mobile phone coverage because the topography is not reliable. However, a satellite phone will always be more reliable than a mobile phone when it comes to topography.

Mr Campbell—When you consider the environment that we have with significant overhanging of trees, satellite communications become an issue.

CHAIR—Topography is very difficult. No matter how many mobile phone towers, you will always get problems.

Mr Campbell—From my experience of satellite communications systems, everybody I have spoken to who has access to a satellite phone or even a GPS coordinates system has difficulty in heavy vegetated areas because of the canopy.

CHAIR—Fair enough.

Mr Johnston—Can I just correct a little bit of my evidence? I made the statement that the slip-on units were going to be banned or outlawed. In fact, my understanding is that the government will withdraw funding for the slip-on units unless they can be attached directly to the chassis of a vehicle, which makes them useless anyway because the idea of the piece of equipment is that a farmer can slip it on to the back of his vehicle when needs be and slip it off again.

CHAIR—This is the Western Australia government?

Mr Johnston—Perhaps I was speaking out of turn there a little bit, but there are problems with attaching those units to the back of the vehicle and making them secure at high speeds and so forth, because they have been known to come off. I thought I had better correct that.

CHAIR—I was going to ask you about that because everywhere we have been those slip-on units are just so common.

Mr Johnston—My understanding is that the subsidy is probably going to be withdrawn unless they can be attached to the chassis of the unit so that they cannot come off easily.

CHAIR—We might ask some questions of the government tomorrow on that when we take some evidence from them.

Mr GIBBONS—With regard to the slip-on units, the new requirements will be to attach them in a manner that will stop them from coming off at high speed. It does not mean necessarily that they need to be permanent attachments, I take it; it means they have to be fastened to the vehicle in a way that would stop them coming off; otherwise they do not need to be slip-ons once you can unbolt them and take them off. Is that the idea?

Mr Johnston—I probably have spoken out of turn in the sense that I do not know the nuts and bolts of this—

Mr GIBBONS—That is my point.

Mr Johnston—but my understanding is that they need to be attached to the chassis of the vehicle, which alleviates the idea of the slip-on unit a little bit.

Mr GIBBONS—Not necessarily. I take it they might be just plonked on the back of the vehicle if there is a fire—everybody has to get out there quickly—and obviously some have come off.

Mr Johnston—Yes.

Mr GIBBONS—I suspect the regulation will be that it must be fastened securely to the back of that vehicle because it will be used for other purposes once the fire is out.

Mr Johnston—Yes, that is right.

Mr GIBBONS—I am also interested in the mobile phone coverage throughout the shire. What percentage of your geographical area is covered by TelstraNet?

Mr Campbell—I am not exactly sure of those figures. I have seen some diagrams which show probably a 30 kilometre coverage from the towers. I know through experience that if you have the right equipment in your vehicle—external aerials et cetera—you get a lot more coverage than that. A 30 kilometre radius would cover from Manjimup to Pemberton. There is a tower in Pemberton so that would then cover the 30 kilometres to Northcliffe. Basically, all the town sites would be covered at this stage but certainly, as you get further out, you get black spots in there as well; it makes it difficult.

Mr GIBBONS—Is it black spots or quite substantial distances that do not have coverage?

Mr Campbell—There are quite substantial distances that do not have coverage. If you were to drive from Manjimup to Walpole, which is still within our shire but 120 kilometres south, there is a mobile phone tower in Walpole as well but for about 65 kilometres of that travel you will be without mobile phone communication.

Mr GIBBONS—On another inquiry we visited Walpole, I think two years ago, because of that very problem—the black spot for commercial radio, the ABC, television and just about everything else. Walpole itself was a black spot. Has that situation improved? I do not mean to be facetious.

Mr Campbell—No. The telephone and TV systems are in place and we are currently exploring the radio systems.

Mr GIBBONS—You mentioned before that the farmers have VHF radios in their vehicles.

Mr Campbell—Yes.

Mr GIBBONS—Are they VHF radios or are they UHF, like sideband or—

Mr Campbell—Yes, most radios that are funded by the Shire of Manjimup are VHF. A lot of farmers carry UHF as well. Our senior bushfire people also carry UHF for that particular reason. The difference is the cost of the two systems. Obviously, VHF radios are more expensive—about \$1,500 per unit.

Mr GIBBONS—I am delighted that Walpole is no longer a black spot. Thanks.

CHAIR—There must be a good local member! Thank you for your submissions and for your evidence this afternoon. Mr Campbell, please pass on to the shire our appreciation of their hospitality and thanks for allowing the committee to hold the hearing here.

Mr Campbell—Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 3.59 p.m. to 4.24 p.m.

OMODEI, Hon. Paul Domenic MLA, Member for Warren-Blackwood, Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Regional Development and Emergency Services

CHAIR—Welcome. Would you like to elaborate on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Omodei—I am the member for Warren-Blackwood, representing the south-west corner—the place that God made after he had rested. It takes in the shires of Augusta, Margaret River, Nannup, Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Manjimup.

CHAIR—Thank you, as the local state member, for having our committee in your neck of the woods. We appreciate it. I think you were here earlier when I read the formal part with respect to evidence. We have your submission, which has been authorised for publication and forms part of our evidence, and we thank you for that. Would you like to make some opening remarks before we proceed to questions?

Mr Omodei—Thank you, Mr Chairman. I will certainly keep my remarks brief and try not to refer to the submission.

I thank the committee for coming to Manjimup to take evidence for this House of Representatives select committee. It is very important to us. We live in a large forested area and fire is a pressing issue for us. I am here not only in my own capacity as the local member representing the community but also to lend support to the submissions by the Institute of Foresters Australia, the Fire for Life group and the Fire Front group, who I think have made excellent submissions to the committee. I have lived in this district all my life. I live 20 kilometres down the road and my property is surrounded by state forest. I have no formal qualifications in fire management but I have been a volunteer, have seen a few fires, and worked in the community for a long time.

I start my remarks by asking the committee a question: has the committee the capacity to compel public servants and politicians to give evidence or can you cross-examine them? We have a number of CALM officers here today who are well qualified, well credentialed and well regarded—they certainly are a very professional organisation. But very few bureaucrats in the nation would be prepared to give evidence criticising their political masters. It would not be what you would call a career-enhancing move. I am sure that when you meet Alan Walker, Rick Sneeuwjagt and co tomorrow they will say that the budget they have been given is adequate to do the job that they are obliged to do. I think the community has a different point of view. They are engaged in managing state forests, national parks and reserves but there are other issues in relation to residential areas, special rural zones and rural properties. That is a question I would like to ask.

Over the years we have had a royal commission into the Dwellingup fire and we have had an upper house parliamentary select committee look at the fire in Western Australia. I suspect that their reports are gathering dust, like a lot of other select committee reports. I do not want to antagonise you—there are a lot more members of the committee than me—but I hope that your report is of a status that does change the way that we manage our forests in Australia,

particularly in Western Australia. I would be very concerned if this very worthwhile effort that came to Manjimup did not bear some fruit in the future.

The truth of the matter is that successive governments in Western Australia have failed in properly managing our forests. I put my hand up and say that I was a minister for eight years in the previous government. I held a variety of portfolios. But in the end it seems that city dwellers rule the roost—for example, concerning smoke over Perth. You have heard members give advice about what happens when smoke is picked up by a south-easter, goes out to the ocean, gets picked up by the Fremantle doctor, comes back in, is trapped in front of the Darling range and, combined with pollution from the industrial area, creates a problem for the city. Yet we are able to live with smoke in our towns and on our farms for many months. That begs the question as to how well our education programs are going in advising and educating people in the city.

The issue of hazard reduction burning is obvious. All the submissions you have received here today talk about hazard reduction burning. It is absolutely essential. As Tom Muir said, mosaic burning of different prescriptions already happens to some extent.

It is interesting that if you were to apply for a special rural zone subdivision in Western Australia you would be required to do a fire management plan. In that plan you would have to have firebreaks, a 90,000 litre tank, take-off points up from the bottom of that tank, which would have to be fitted with a coupling so that the fire brigade could hook onto it, a number of watering points and so on. Yet that does not occur in residential areas—you will see them in the hills in Perth—it just does not happen at all. The government of the day can retrospectively force people to put in swimming pool fences and a whole range of other things that they do. The current environmental protection bill is going to be retrospective to June 2001. Yet we see a whole lot of people being placed at risk, mainly through their own actions or the lack of the will of the authorities, whether they be the local government, the Planning Commission or any other department. Again, I wonder whether the committee can call bureaucrats or heads of government departments to respond to questions on why the hills of Perth are under great threat because of trees under gutters, high fire hazards and so on.

Rather than labour the point, we need to have state fire management plans. Each local government need to be compelled to have their local emergency services plans up to date. There not only needs to be adequate funding for CALM as the major firefighting organisation and for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, but also volunteers need to be funded and trained appropriately so that we can combat any major event in Western Australia.

It is interesting that there are probably six or seven days of the year when there is a huge potential fire hazard—when the weather conditions are right. Similar things happened in Canberra and some of those other large fires. At the other end of the spectrum there is a similar window—it is probably a larger window and it is usually in autumn after the first rains—when you can safely burn large areas. Our problem is that we do not have the resources or the ability to call on enough resources—by that I mean volunteers and trained people—to embark on a large hazard reduction.

The forest around my property has not been burnt since 1979. This year, it could have been burnt quite easily in autumn, but CALM have a huge program to catch up to their planned 200,000 hectares and a lot of areas remain unburnt. I think there needs to be a large effort and

cooperation between FESA, CALM and volunteers to ensure that we control burn, particularly close to residential areas, to protect small towns and life and property. If the resources are not there, let us stick with getting the priorities right—protect people and properties first and then worry about the environment as a second option. It is easier for the department to burn large areas—thousands of hectares—than do the small ones that are close to home. I think there needs to be a priority.

There is a lot to be learned from the work that CALM do in Western Australia. They are well and truly to the forefront when it comes to research and fire management and behaviour, and even their own vested project could be expanded and used in other states of Australia. I know that the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre will be getting that advice, and we have people represented on that organisation. Rather than go on, maybe you can ask me some questions.

CHAIR—Thanks very much. If I could just go to your question: to be consistent, as I am sure the Member for Corio sure will remind me, at one of the other hearings where a witness asked the committee a question I said, ‘We are here to ask questions, not answer them.’

Mr Omodei—Fair enough. Why am I not surprised?

CHAIR—Let me answer it by saying that I can assure you that my colleagues will be asking questions of the various people that come before us tomorrow in a variety of ways, and covering whole aspects of their submissions that we have had. Beyond that, the committee would like to think that people with good information will come forward, as they have. The inquiry has attracted over 450 submissions, which is one of the largest number of submissions for a parliamentary inquiry, from probably primarily what I would call the grassroots that are out there managing and dealing with bushfires and the land. It is certainly getting a very broad cross-section of information. Parliamentary committees do have various other powers that they may or may not use at times, with varying success.

You mention the cooperation or coordination between a number of organisations. This is an issue at which the committee is certainly having a close look. We saw in Tasmania quite a good situation where there is a formal protocol between the various agencies, and that has built up a very good culture amongst those organisations over the last 10 years. What is your understanding of formal arrangements between the various agencies that could be involved in either bushfire prevention or suppression?

Mr Omodei—From what I can understand, it depends on whose property the fire is on. If it is on state forest or national park, CALM has precedence over other people. FESA controls other lands and local governments have their land. But the coordination here is very good. I must say that Kojonup—you heard evidence from them—is probably a shining example of a local government that is very well organised. It would probably be the exception to the rule, by the way.

In the end, funding is the issue. I believe that our volunteer brigades, even though our local governments put a great deal of money into them, are under-resourced and under-equipped. A lot of the reason for that is that a shire like the Shire of Manjimup, with 14½ or 15 per cent rateable area, does not have a big rate base. There is not a good money stream coming in so somebody else has to come to the party to assist. To that extent, I do not think it has been done well enough.

CHAIR—Something that has not been mentioned much today is the issue of fire trails in the forests. As I understand it, there are quite substantial areas in the south-west that have moved from state forests, for want of a better term, into national park over a number of years, and I think potentially some more are to go that way. As somebody who knows this area quite well, have you had any experience of that, when land changes from a working forest to a national park? Have changes taken place with fire trails, maintenance of them, keeping them open and that type of thing?

Mr Omodei—A lot of road accesses are being closed, particularly where forest that was once production forest goes into national park. I believe that CALM is not adequately resourced to maintain a lot of those routes. By closing them, we are really creating another problem in getting access to the forest. Shifting large amounts of forest into national park also means that with the constriction of the timber industry there is far less plant and equipment from the private sector made available to CALM on an on-call basis. Sometimes that machinery might be a lot more kilometres away than when it used to be when we had a strong and viable timber industry in the state.

If we create national parks for the sake of creating a reserve, unless the relevant government department has the appropriate resources to manage those areas properly we are only going to consign them probably to destruction by fire—one of the reasons we are here today.

Mr McARTHUR—You say that voters in the city have a great influence in the outcome of attitudes towards smoke over Perth and prescribed reduction burning. Why do you think that has continued to be the case in Western Australia?

Mr Omodei—I think there is an inherent bias in the media against logging, particularly. I think the media is certainly pro Green, and the issues of smog or smoke get far more coverage through the media than does good forest management. John Evans put it very well when he said that he had never heard of anybody complaining of having an asthma attack in rural WA but you certainly get them in the city.

Mr McARTHUR—You blame the media, but who has been putting the argument on behalf of the country areas down here in saying that the forests would be better preserved by prescribed burning and that some of the maintenance of forests and national parks needs a certain amount of management? All those arguments have never been run very strongly.

Mr Omodei—I think everybody has tried. In my lifetime, country people have never been backward in coming forward to protect their own bailiwick. I know of a lot of situations where good, well-versed country people have sent letters to the press and failed to have them printed. At the same time, we do raise the issues in parliament. I have raised the issues of controlled burning and fire on a number of occasions in parliament. In the end, I suppose one of the problems we have in Western Australia is that out of 1.8 million people, 1.3 million of them reside in the metropolitan area and there are another three or four major regional centres that take up another 100,000-odd. So you only have about 300,000 or 400,000 people in the rest of the 2.5 million square kilometres. So the country voice is not as strong as it could be.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think the fires in Canberra, north-east Victoria and New South Wales might have helped the argument that there was a difficulty out there if fires were left to get to wildfire status?

Mr Omodei—I think they have helped a hell of a lot. As a matter of fact, I have been on the radio today saying just that. There is the alternative view that you should not have any burning at all. Maybe they should go to Canberra and have a look. I think you would be pretty well convinced fairly quickly that what happened there could happen to any country town in WA. In my electorate there would be at least three or four towns where, on a hot summer's day with either a north-westerly, a northerly or a north-easter, if one house caught alight, the whole lot would go. I think they are well-known facts in country WA and it just seems that city people seem to be insular. Maybe, because this committee is meeting here today and is going to make a report, these things will be highlighted. But we do have to embark on an education program; that is the responsibility of all of us.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Omodei, you are calling for CALM's prescribed burning budget to be increased to allow for additional burning. I understand the cost to CALM for prescribed burning, suppression and rehabilitation operations for the nine month period July 2002 to March of this year was approximately \$8.1 million. What figure would you suggest is needed for CALM? Do you think that money should be also directed to other organisations, such as councils, bushfire brigades et cetera?

Mr Omodei—I dare say the reason CALM gets the lion's share of the money is that they control most of the lands. But the situation is that, despite the fact that they would have burnt probably about 170,000 hectares this year, there are about 750,000 hectares of public lands that were actually burnt, most of them by wildfire, so it is over 500,000 hectares. CALM has not only to be equipped and resourced for prescribed burning, regeneration and mosaic burning but also to have a suppression effort. In other words, it needs to have enough men and machinery to deal with that major event. That is why I say it is certainly under-resourced. It might tell you something different, but I believe it needs to have a greater effort.

There needs to be more effort in autumn—the ideal bushfire months. In the end, if you have a discrete number of people, they can only burn so much land per day. As soon as it gets too hot in the summertime it is more difficult. Add the smoke situation; the resources are not there. So maybe there needs to be a system where you can call on a lot more people at certain times of the year, and that is going to need money.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I have one question on that issue of rural representation and the rural voice. Being a country member it is of particular concern to me. It is not an issue that is necessarily as serious a problem for the current federal government because the government has a majority of rural and regional over city seats, so there is quite a clear rural voice being heard in Canberra. It is a concern in Western Australia. Is there anything that could worsen the problem? Are you aware of any particular changes that would decrease the voice of country Western Australia and Perth? Considering the economic contribution that country Western Australia makes to the economy, it would be quite a serious concern.

Mr Omodei—There is no doubt that the current High Court case and the push by the current state government for equal representation—one vote, one value, as it is called—would mean a

reduction of seats out of the rural areas into the city. Of course, that is a bone of contention right now. It would just reduce the country voice.

Mr ADAMS—You are asking a political question that has nothing to do with this committee. He is a Liberal member and he has been asked a political question that has nothing to do with—

Ms PANOPOULOS—No, it is about rural representation.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—Can I ask the member: does he believe in one vote, one value? Does he believe in democratic practice or doesn't he? What is the appropriate weighting you would give to democracy in Western Australia?

Mr ADAMS—What is it? Let's have this out now.

Mr Omodei—We could have it out here or outside, I do not care, but the truth of the matter is this: there is no such thing—

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—I am a country boy too.

Mr ADAMS—So am I; I grew up in the country.

CHAIR—Order! One at a time.

Mr Omodei—You know, as a member of parliament, that in the electorate of Wanneroo, for example, when you set the quota at 24,000 and it grows to 44,000 in the eight-year term, there is no such thing as one vote, one value. It is out of kilter within three months of your setting that quota, so don't give me that rubbish.

Ms PANOPOULOS—My apologies for upsetting some of my colleagues. My main concern was and is rural representation. But thank you for the answer.

CHAIR—We will leave that debate for the High Court to finalise.

Mr Omodei—Thank you, Mr Chair.

Mr ADAMS—I wanted to ask Paul what he did about—I think he understands that land management is the responsibility of the state governments; he was the minister for a long time—putting some education in place to educate the city folk.

Mr Omodei—I have been trying to educate my city colleagues ever since I came into public life.

Mr ADAMS—How much of the budget of your department did you allocate to get that up?

Mr Omodei—I was the minister for local government, forest products, disability services, ethnic affairs and water resources, and they all had parts of their budgets for public education.

You would have to agree, I am sure, that city people are not always as well informed about country issues as we would like them to be, particularly as country members.

Mr ADAMS—Sure; I could not agree more. There are some major issues to be resolved in that. I would value your comments on whether the prescribed burns affect tourism.

Mr Omodei—Prescribed burning is important because it makes the place a safer place to live in. One of our major tourist attractions is the Bibbulmun Track. I certainly would not want to alarm people who use the Bibbulmun Track but, without proper prescribed burning and hazard reduction arrangements, sooner or later somebody could get badly hurt or killed using that track, particularly where there is not appropriate access and egress. I do not think it is a major issue for tourists. It is a large area. The Shire of Manjimup alone is 7,000 square kilometres, so you could have ongoing burning. Okay, you would see the smoke if you were in that locality, but there are a lot of other places you could be.

Mr ADAMS—I take it that that track is a long walking track.

Mr Omodei—It is a walk track that runs from Perth right down to Albany.

Mr ADAMS—Right down to the end.

CHAIR—I think we saw part of it today. Just to follow up on Dick's question, we noticed that this region is obviously growing greatly in terms of the winery industry and that grapes are going into areas where probably only five or 10 years ago there were none. Has the prescribed burning become an issue with the wine industry?

Mr Omodei—It is becoming an issue. If I can just finish off on the other point, the other thing that happens when you have burns is that the wildflowers come out much stronger after a burn. On the wine industry, yes, there is an issue. There is no doubt that smoke will affect the grape harvest in autumn. We harvest grapes in autumn and we like burning in autumn. I think that that is something that needs to be worked out between the two sectors. The viticulture industry needs to be cognisant of the fact that the government needs to burn the forest and the CALM people need to rotate the burning so it does not have a major impact on the grape industry, because I would say you would have to be fairly close to the fire. I know that in the eastern states this year some wine was dumped because it was contaminated by smoke. That is an issue we have to deal with.

CHAIR—Once again, it is an issue of whether it is smoke from prescribed burning that you can organise or substantial smoke from wildfires, as was the case in the eastern states.

Mr Omodei—I suppose it is quite relevant to here because of the small area of agricultural land that we have. Out of the 10 per cent that is cleared in the Shire of Manjimup, most of it is close to forests.

CHAIR—Thank you very for your time this afternoon and for your submission.

Mr Omodei—Thank you.

[4.55 p.m.]

DAW, Mr Rodney Clarence, (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome, Mr Daw. I remind everyone that after this witness we will have an opportunity for others to make statements. I think there are a number of people who have put their names down. We will not have a huge amount of time but if anybody has not put their name down and they want to make a statement to the committee, they should let Sarah know straight away. Mr Daw, would you like to elaborate on the capacity in which you appear today?

Mr Daw—I made a submission in my private capacity but I am also the Chief Bushfire Control Officer for the Shire of Ravensthorpe. I have been involved in fires for 47 years, and for over 20 of those years, I have been Chief Bushfire Control Officer of the Shire of Ravensthorpe.

CHAIR—I will not re-read the formal part of my introduction, which you were here for earlier. Your submission has been received by the committee and authorised for publication in similar fashion to the previous witnesses, so that is on the record. Would you like to make some opening comments before questions?

Mr Daw—Sure. Because my submission will be tabled, there is no need to read that out again. Basically, I would just like to say that fire has been a big part of my life and has ruined a big part of my life as well. We have had to make a hard working commitment to protect our farm and our small community. If we had not done that, the disasters would have been greater. I have had personal disasters in my life while I have been involved with the Ravensthorpe brigades. Tragically, we ran over our shire clerk and CEO, and he unfortunately lost his life. A few years ago I lost one of my best mates in a head-on collision in the Fitzgerald River National Park fire, and that was very hard on me. More recently, we lost one of our councillors attending a fire. So you can see that in a small community it can be a very traumatic business. When we are out fighting what are basically crown land fires, or what we used to call vacant crown land fires—they are now called unallocated crown land fires—that is a very big job for a very few people and we just cannot handle it. The big fire we had last year proved that. We just could not handle the size of the fire we had.

To enlarge on that a bit, our shire is 1.2 million hectares, of which 830,000 hectares are bush. So we have a very small portion of our shire that can be raided to provide us with the resources that we require to fight these large fires. It could be said that if we do not do anything then these fires will only get larger. But the farmer has got a living to make and a lot of these fires come in summertime when they are out on their headers trying to pay for their \$300,000 header and provide a living for their wife and families. To say to them, 'Look, get off your header and give us a hand to fight this fire,' is becoming increasingly hard.

The recent fire we had finished up being 107 kilometres long, 65 kilometres wide and took out 304,000 hectares. It was the third really large fire we have had in excess of 200,000 hectares in a span of 15 years. As I mentioned in my submission, we just could not handle that fire. Eventually, farmers were severely affected, losing some 100 kilometres of fence and several thousand hectares of pasture. The losses would have been worse had it not been a drought year

and the paddocks were largely bare; otherwise, in my experience, the fire would have finished up in the sea. It burned continuously for 10 days and, on two nights, with humidity at 14 per cent and winds up to 60 kilometres an hour, it was travelling in excess of 12,000 metres per hour at times. With the small resources we had, even though we did have some assistance from guys from Manjimup and Bunbury—and it was great to have that support—it was still not enough. The fire was far too huge, we could not even get close enough with a plane to take a photo or see where the front of the fire was; we did not know where the front of the fire was. This is the sort of thing we are facing in a small community.

Basically, we lack volunteers, resources and funding. As I said, I have been involved in these issues for a long time. I am Chairman of the Fitzgerald River National Park Advisory Committee. Quite a few years ago after a large fire, the advisory committee formed a fire working group and we split the national park into 32 cells. Each one of those cells has a boundary of chain bush, or modified scrub as we call it. What we are doing there is getting a cell of, say, five-year-old fuel alongside a cell of 20-year-old fuel, alongside a cell of 10-year-old fuel, so we will not get this competitive raging fire. It gives us a chance. I am proposing that all of the VCL in Western Australia, particularly in the southern agricultural area, should be comprised of no more than 20,000-hectare cells and that each of these should have a boundary and a fire management plan to go with it. These management plans would, depending on where they were, have a name and a number. The management plan would say that this piece of bush is getting too old, that it is 30 years old and that we have got to do some mosaic burning. It would state that we have to get the fuel loads down or do whatever is needed to make that cell safe or reasonably safe—nothing is ever safe. I have seen fires run across fuel that is only five years old. It depends on your weather conditions and everything else.

As you know, if we, as fire control officers—and I have been involved in incident control systems et cetera—can knock out one of the fire triangles, which are heat, fuel or oxygen, we can stop a fire. We have successfully used that approach in the Mallee country where I come from—although we do have a large variation of fuel, from heath land, which is fuel only this high, to salmon gum which can be 80 feet high. In amongst that we have tea-tree, mallee, moort, gimlet, you name it; there is a big variation. I do not know the Victorian Mallee, but I guess it would be similar to Victoria.

On occasions we use dozers and big chains to pull the scrub down. That effectively smothers a fire. We do that where we can and when the machinery is available. What it does is lay the fuel down on the ground where there is very little oxygen. So what we are doing is knocking out one of the triangles of what makes a fire. Where the scrub is standing up, obviously that is where the oxygen can get at it and that is what makes fire. I do not have to lecture you on that.

I know we are not supposed to ask you questions, but I would like to ask you something. I went to the EMA conference in Canberra in November 2001. I wondered whether you had seen those recommendations that came out about volunteerism and lack of government funding, and whatnot, which were the conclusions of 437 delegates over a wide range of organisations. I wonder how seriously you are taking those. I did not hear anything about EMA following the Canberra fires. I will not ask you to take up your time on that now, you are probably more interested in a quick yes or no. Are those recommendations being followed up?

CHAIR—No, it is important. The committee had a briefing from the EMA and the EMA appeared in a public hearing before the committee, so all that information has been provided. I just cannot recall the specific recommendations you are referring to but we were given a lot of information by them.

Mr Daw—There is a page-full of them there but there is a lack of confidence amongst volunteers. We all have the Anzac spirit in us and we all love having a go; there will always be volunteers. But they are under-funded and now we have the possibility of litigation, as you know. That is not being addressed properly. We have a lack of public insurance cover. All those issues were addressed. The EMA conference did say that they would try to get together again in two years. I am not sure how seriously the government took the outcomes but I would like to think that those recommendations were carried out. I have touched on that. I do not know how much more time I have; could somebody tell me?

CHAIR—We probably have a few questions. If you have a couple of points there, please finish those off.

Mr Daw—I was just going to turn over this little card I have here as there are a couple of things I wanted to refer to. I mentioned the rateable base. We have had about 204 fires that I have controlled in five years, mainly caused by lightning, and that is across a wide spectrum of fuel. I firmly believe in this cell idea that I have spoken about. I also represent over 30 councils along the south coast, including Albany and into the wheat belt—the Great Southern. I am on what we call the consultative committee for FESA. I enjoy that job very much and I have had a bit of an input there with some of my ideas and hopefully some of those ideas are getting more support and we can get the assistance we need.

The main assistance we need, of course, is in the form of money. At the moment, for our fuel reduction and strategic firebreaks, we receive help from FESA in our shire. This has only happened over the last 10 years and, remember, I have been involved for 47 years, so for a long time we had no assistance whatsoever. We smashed up a few of our own private vehicles and we have had our own fuel costs and everything else. There has never been a penny come back. It has been a very costly exercise.

Over the last 10 years through our regional managers, with the old Bushfires Board and then FESA, we have had anywhere from \$5,000 to \$30,000 per annum to assist us in our strategic firebreak or fuel modification. It is nowhere near enough to achieve the target that we want and, on top of that, when we do have a wildfire that we cannot handle, in the past we have had assistance through FESA from DOLA. I now understand that DOLA is going to hand over management of that UCL to CALM. We have some questions to ask about that as well, particularly in relation to wilderness areas and the Fitzgerald River National Park. I have seen fires come out of that park and burn the driftwood on the beach. What chance has a group of hikers got that are walking that wilderness area? It is criminal. We have to keep reducing that fuel in those wilderness areas and we have to maintain our access and water points. That is something, along with management plans, that I will be fighting very hard for.

The last point I want to make—I have probably spoken long enough—is that I have been thinking about these outback areas. Where we cannot handle the situation, obviously because of our numbers, it does not take a fire long to become large in those situations, and that makes it

unmanageable from our point of view. I have thought about and suggested, over a few years now, that maybe we should be looking at professional strike teams. These would be funded by FESA and it could be a way out for employment for some of these fellows in the timber industry, who very much understand fire, to form these strike teams. That was a thought I had and hope to progress.

CHAIR—Thanks for that. The shire that you are the fire control officer for, Ravensthorpe, just to help us interstaters, where does it fit in relation to here?

Mr Daw—It sits on the south coast between Esperance and Albany.

CHAIR—Are you actually employed by the council or is that—

Mr Daw—No, I get nothing.

CHAIR—You are a volunteer.

Mr Daw—In the last 12 months they have offered me a sum of \$3,000 to assist with my phone calls, fax and what have you, which is nowhere near what it costs. I operate the base radio and roll-call. I have to attend to all the urgent calls, and I do that freely in my own time. This is just a gesture that the shire has made to me in the last 12 months, which is much appreciated.

CHAIR—The fire that you talked about that devastated 304,000 hectares, where did it start?

Mr Daw—It started at a little place called Three Star Lake, which is towards the top end of our shire. It is closer to Norseman than it is to Ravensthorpe, and it is really in the never-never.

CHAIR—What was the land tenure in which it started?

Mr Daw—In UCL—unallocated crown land.

CHAIR—It was a lightning strike?

Mr Daw—Lightning strike.

CHAIR—You said it ultimately burnt out many—

Mr Daw—304,000 hectares.

CHAIR—And 100 kilometres of fencing, did you say?

Mr Daw—In excess of 100 kilometres of fencing, yes.

CHAIR—What is the situation with that fencing? Do the farmers get any assistance?

Mr Daw—Most of it was insured. None of the farmers have sought assistance, they have all been covered. There has been some neighbourly help and that sort of thing, so it has all been covered.

CHAIR—That is interesting.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—What sort of a reception have you had for your suggestion about professional strike teams? Where have you floated it?

Mr Daw—Fairly good. I must say, it is not completely my idea. I understand that they have pretty much a similar type of thing in Victoria. I have not studied the Victorian model but I suggested it at the consultative committee meetings—Bill Forbes is our Chief Executive Officer, as you might know—and Bill is having a pretty good think about it. Other members of the committee such as Peter Capito, who represents the wheat belt area, are in favour of it. Brian Wood, who represents the north midlands—the area around Northam and Toodyay—thinks it is a good idea. Maybe we are starting to get somewhere. Of course, we are a consultative committee and we just make recommendations, we do not make rules. We have no teeth, basically.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—How would you see that suggestion of the professional strike team fitting into the operational response? Do you think there would be some difficulty between a professional team and the volunteers? How would you overcome that problem? In some other areas this has generated some difficulty where you have, say, paid fire officers and volunteers.

Mr Daw—It is not difficult to get volunteers but to get them to get off their header and fight a fire is becoming increasingly difficult. If it is a neighbour's fire, there is no problem. They will hop off and help Billy Smith or whoever. However, when it is coming out of the bush and we feel a moral obligation to stop that fire because if we do not, it is only going to get bigger, we cannot do that because we do not have the resources or the manpower. Logistically I do not think it is a problem. We have called on crews from Manjimup, Bunbury, Albany and Esperance before to assist us, and we can get them there probably within eight hours of a fire. Generally speaking, we have learned what is likely to be a bad fire and what we can handle ourselves, given the weather conditions and the four-day forecasts. The weather bureau is absolutely fantastic here now compared to what it was 10 years ago; they have come a long way. Given all the factors, we can determine pretty much how big that fire may or may not be. I think strike teams have got a strong possibility.

Mr GAVAN O'CONNOR—It is an interesting suggestion. I am not familiar with the WA situation, but where the timber industry has been reduced in size, there are usually structural adjustment packages and money available to assist the adjustment process in rural communities. Your suggestion might have legs. I do not know whether anybody has explored it.

Mr Daw—I can tell you something, and this is interesting as well. I have difficulty in getting the volunteers to do a thorough job on mop-up, which may lead to a second fire under bad conditions. As soon as the fire is out, they want to have a beer, go home and get back on the header, or they want to milk the cows, feed the sheep, take the sheep to water or whatever they have got to do. We have had CALM crews there, and when they do a blackout, which is anything that the chief orders—usually a chain or 50 or 100 metres, however bad the piece of country is—

it is a blackout; they really do a thorough job. If we could get that sort of professionalism out into the field with paid men, I think we would be a lot better off.

Mr ADAMS—I wanted to explore the issue that was raised by my colleague. Hearing evidence earlier about independent private firefighting equipment etcetera, do you think there would be a difficulty over who is going to manage the fire if these strike teams turned up?

Mr Daw—No.

Mr ADAMS—You seem like a pretty independent sort of bloke who knows a bit about fire, but is there going to be a conflict between—

Mr Daw—No. We would not allow conflict and we have not had it before. We are all sensible when it comes to fire and I have worked with the guys from CALM, FESA and on incident control and it has never been a problem. We are there for a job and that is what we do. The volunteers would welcome them with open arms, I tell you.

Mr ADAMS—Would the shires be willing to sign protocols along those lines?

Mr Daw—Yes, no worries. I tell you what, the publican would help them out too because the last time we had eight CALM trucks there from Manjimup, they washed the pub down for him before they left. There is a lot of good feeling, it is a good community thing. It is something that we can all do together. Washed the walls down, I meant.

Mr ADAMS—When you say ‘resources,’ do you think that more resources or training are needed, say, in your area?

Mr Daw—Yes, but you cannot force a volunteer to train and you cannot tell a volunteer what to do. We have to encourage volunteerism, we cannot be dogmatic about it and say, ‘You shall do this and you shall do that.’

Mr ADAMS—That is where motivation comes into play. What about the resources?

Mr Daw—We do need a hand with resources and I think the FESA levy is going to go a long way towards that. That was one of the most commonsense things that WA has ever done. It is going to get money back into the country where it belongs, not in St Georges Terrace.

Mr ORGAN—Mr Daw, I know you are speaking from experience of the south-west here. I wonder if you have any comment about your comments and how they apply to the rest of the state, or any information you could provide to the committee.

Mr Daw—I would be terrified to come into karri country or something like that. That is their job. Every man for his patch, I believe.

Mr ORGAN—Okay.

Mr Daw—But it still does not take away your effectiveness as an incident controller where you are helping with planning, communications, which is another important part of fire, or

something like that. We can all help in that sort of thing. I have had guys from Manjimup over home and they have seen a fire burning at 12 kilometres an hour and they said, 'Crikey, it doesn't do that at home.' At the same time, I have not seen karris burning 100 feet high either.

Mr ORGAN—I am wondering if you have spoken to volunteers from areas such as the Kimberley and other parts of the state?

Mr Daw—No, but we do have a Kimberley representative. They have a different type of fire as well, in the spinifex country. They have a very big lack of graders. They could control that spinifex country if they had more graders, if they could do a mosaic. FESA is on to it. There is a lot of cooperation in the Kimberley of late and I believe that there will be a lot less fire up there within five years.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Daw, for your time this afternoon and for your submission and evidence.

Mr Daw—Thank you.

[5.21 p.m.]

FELLOWS, Mr Graham George, (Private capacity)

GIBLETT, Mr Gregory Ernest, (Private capacity)

MORGAN, Mr Robert Ian, Fire Control Officer/Secretary, Dingup Bushfire Brigade

MUIR, Mr James Robert, (Private capacity)

OAKES, Mr Nicholas James, Workers Employment Adviser, UnionsWA

CHAIR—We have a little bit of time left. I understand that at this stage five people would like to make statements. If my colleagues agree, we will give each person three or four minutes to put their views to the committee. The first person is Mr Nicholas Oakes. Please make your statement to the committee.

Mr Oakes—I work for UnionsWA, having been seconded from the Australian Workers Union to work with some of the displaced timber workers who were referred to earlier. Prior to that I spent four years in local government and two years as the Shire President of Bridgetown-Greenbushes, an adjoining shire, and they have had some experience in dealing with the valuable volunteers that small communities rely on.

The committee took me unawares and I apologise because the union would otherwise have put in a more formal response. I spoke with the organiser concerned and there were a number of issues the union wanted to raise. The AWU has coverage of those workers employed by the Department of Conservation and Land Management who are responsible for firefighting, and it is good to hear some of the positive feedback from members of the public about the professionalism and the ability of those firefighters who have the skills to operate in what are severe firefighting situations.

The concerns go to a number of areas. One of them is the concerted attack on the Department of Conservation and Land Management by the conservation lobby. That took two forms. They attacked CALM's ability to manage forests, and they attacked CALM at every turn in terms of their management of fire, and that took the form of the smoke in the air over Perth, and their bungling of fires and fires that have escaped from prescribed burning or controlled burns. That has meant that politically CALM's fire services have not received the support that they previously may have. I am not saying that the budget has been diminished, but it has not been consistently maintained.

I am advised that the number of AWU members in CALM is diminishing. There is a skills deficit there. CALM has been reasonably responsive in employing displaced timber workers but the skills development phase is quite long. I am told by experienced AWU members working for CALM that you need three or four fire seasons, as a minimum, to be competent in a crew. We are not talking about individual firefighters—they are a crew. They operate a heavy duty bulldozer or pump tank as a team. It is a life-threatening situation. I cannot think of anybody else other

than police who operate in a working environment where the potential for loss of life is as profound. We heard before about the unfortunate incident in Linton—touch wood, that will not happen here. It is because they work together as a team. These people are exposed to life-threatening situations as part of their job. So there is a concern about that.

There is a concern about ministerial interference with prescribed burning. We have heard that there has been a reduction in prescribed burning and there has been an increasing number of layers of bureaucracy to go to get a burn going. The minute there is a burn, the EPA monitor levels and then there is an outcry in the press. If you do not live in Western Australia and realise the penalties of having a one-paper town—we heard about it earlier—where the population lives, it is fairly hard to get your voice heard in Western Australia. Let me tell you, it is.

We had a viable timber industry. The machinery that was used in forest harvesting was contractually required and so were the employees contractually required to make themselves available to fight fires. That has been significantly diminished and I have not seen, unfortunately, CALM acquire new replacement equipment, so we have a bigger forest in the state with fewer human and physical resources. The experience issue is really profound. People are under stress. I had it put to me today that over the last eight month fire season one group of workers were consistently on call between 14 and 20 weeks. That meant that they did not have a weekend off with their families. This group of workers is going to be feeling stressed.

I am saying that there needs to be a lot more resources put into firefighting at this level. It is great to hear the guy from Ravensthorpe say that it is good for firefighters to come from Manjimup and help them, and it is great that they can, but the real concern here is that, if they are over in Ravensthorpe fighting a fire and there is a fire north of here, there will not be any resources here. People who live in this locality know that on any given day on the south-western highway you will see CALM fire crew vehicles heading north or south to attend emergency fires. Dealing with emergencies tends to occupy all resources and that limits the ability for fuel reduction burns.

I quickly raise the issue of spring burns versus autumn burns. You will have heard autumn burns mentioned regularly. My advice from people who work for CALM is that, because the ground is moist coming out of the winter, spring burns have a far less intense fire. They require fewer human and physical resources to manage. There are fewer hop-overs from spring burns, although you run into the problem that the green movement talk about—‘you are cooking all those baby birds’. If you go out there after the burn, you do not see a whole lot of cooked eggs.

In Western Australia the issue is that, with the split of the Department of Conservation and Land Management into the Conservation Commission and the Forest Products Commission, we have a Conservation Commission that is charged by government to have a nature-conservation ethic. There is a scientific argument amongst the peak scientific groups within Western Australia and there are the pro-burners and the no-burners, and it would appear to me that the no-burners have sway at the moment and government policy is reflecting that. It is not just this government; previous governments have done that. It is also cheaper. So at a philosophical level we have had a shift away from burning and then a lack of maintenance of resources, notwithstanding that the forest estate has increased significantly.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. On a point of clarification, you mentioned that there has been a reduction in the number of CALM employees.

Mr Oaks—Yes.

CHAIR—So you were referring to the actual number of employees. You said ‘members’ or something.

Mr Oaks—Yes. Over a number of years there has been a steady reduction in skills and a loss of permanent full-time positions in CALM that has been topped up by seasonal employees, and there are seasonal agreements in place with the AWU. The previous government put 30 casuals in place but that caused some disquiet amongst permanent CALM employees. They do not want to work with casuals; in a fire they want to work with somebody behind them who knows what is going on. This is about creating permanent full-time jobs in rural communities to protect our environment.

CHAIR—It is a reduction in actual employees. Thank you.

Mr J. Muir—I have been in the district all my life. I was born in 1920, so that gives you an idea of my age.

Mr ADAMS—Are you related to the people on the board at the back?

Mr J. Muir—They are my grandparents. Our family have been farming in this area since 1855. I have seen dramatic changes in the structure of the forest. It is unbelievable that when I was a boy, we could ride our horse and chase kangaroos through the forest at all sorts of speeds. Today, it would be virtually impossible. Some of the country is so thick that a dog cannot bark in it—there is no room to open his mouth. I have spent most of my life here in this district as a farmer and a farmer’s son. I had two years of school in Perth and I had two years in the army. I have travelled on numerous tours around the world.

We grazed cattle on the coastal areas of south-west Western Australia from the 1860s to the 1980s and then the powers that be decided that the area should be locked up as a wilderness area. Wilderness it is. All it does now is breed wildlife, which is not conducive to good management—foxes, cats, dogs, and all the sorts of things we do not want. We have a few kangaroos and a few kookaburras, which we do not like. The forest department stopped burning in the 1930s and the uncontrolled fires that have developed have roasted the forest. It will continue to happen unless more controlled burning is carried out. Wildfires in Western Australia could be prevented, if not reduced, by more controlled burns by CALM.

I have an article on American fires, I have been over in those areas where the American fires occurred—not when the fires were there but where the fires did occur—and it was unbelievable the fire hazard that existed. The Americans are now doing something about that.

In 1937 a fire raged from east of Manjimup to Walpole, when the forests were unburnt for up to 10 years. Today, there are areas that have not been burnt for 40 years, and the understorey is much more intense than it was in 1937. The Aborigines, assisted by lightning, burnt the forests and the heat lands every three or four years—as often as it would burn—which helped to keep

the forest open and reduce the understorey. The ecology developed with a regular burn and it is necessary for the flora and fauna to survive.

Small fires prevent big fires. Unless more controlled burning is carried out, towns like Manjimup, Pemberton, Northcliffe and Walpole could go up in smoke. Spring burning is a necessary evil. It is contrary to the way the ecology developed but, because of the folly in the forest department in the past, there appears to be no alternative. History tells us where we have been and it should be a guide to where we go in the future. I do not have any more to tell you, Mr Chairman but, if you would like to ask me any questions, I am willing to answer them.

CHAIR—We will probably hear from the other people who want to make statements. If there are any particular things that members want to return to, if we have time and if you can wait, we will call you back. Thank you.

Mr Fellows—I am a resident and landowner in the Manjimup shire. Just before I make my statement, with your permission I would like to respond to the question of local government's attitude to fire risk. I would like to relate a situation that has happened recently. In my capacity as a horticultural consultant, I was representing a landowner in the Busselton shire who is unfortunate enough to be on a property that is zoned rural but with a visual impact overlay over that zoning. The environmental officer of the Busselton shire refused to approve our plan for a new orchard in that area purely on the basis of a firebreak that was constructed along the neighbouring fence, which is a normal procedure, I am sure, throughout the country. When we questioned this point with the environmental officer, we said, 'On what grounds do you object to that firebreak?' She said that it was aesthetically unappealing to her eye and she insisted that, if our plan were to be approved, that firebreak must come out. This firebreak consisted of a six-metre wide gravel compacted area, which also doubled as a road alongside the orchard. We refused to remove it and we are still battling with the shire to get final approval to continue with this orchard.

As fate happens at times, on 6 January we were attending the property for irrigation inspections and a fire broke out in the orchard. It was one of those shocking days where, right on midday, a strong easterly breeze came up. From within the mulch of this area, which is an organic property using straw mulches—the common practice for weed control and water conservation—a fire broke out in the tree rows. Fortunately, the fire was contained within the property. I recall the words of the fire captain of the local volunteer brigade that attended: without that firebreak, the whole area would have been at risk. That is an area which is subdivided into two-hectare blocks where people build houses on restricted building envelopes and they are not allowed to clear the vegetation around those envelopes or even within those envelopes. So there would have been the risk of considerable loss of life.

I feel very humbled by the audience here. I am a relative newcomer to this situation. I have only been a resident here for the last 10 years and my peers and neighbours who are sitting behind me have a lot more experience and a lot more to say about bushfires. But somebody must champion the cause of the volunteer.

I was horrified to learn recently that our state government is imposing an emergency services levy on all residents in Western Australia. Prior to 1 July this year, all volunteer fire areas were exempt from the levy that was imposed on private insurance. This amounted to a sum that

people paid every time they paid for insurance for home contents—you are probably all aware of that. As at 1 July, that levy has been scrapped from private home insurance but the state government has increased the stamp duty on those policies to 10 per cent, which, on average, for the sort of home that we see around this district, is going to add between \$40 and \$100 to the cost of an insurance premium. We cannot be exempt from that—we appreciate that—but now we also have the emergency services levy, which again we as volunteer firefighters and, conversely, SES people and that sort of person are not exempt from.

We hear over and over today that volunteers are the backbone of the firefighting team Australia wide, not just in Western Australia. We hear people like our own shire representative, Andrew Campbell, saying, quite rightly, that there is X number of slip-on units. I am sure you know they do not come with the vehicles. Those vehicles are supplied by the farmers and the landowners. We put in our own fuel, we supply the vehicles, we supply so much.

Then there are the people sitting behind me—I am just a volunteer available to help—who put in much time for committees as secretaries et cetera, and all of them, me included, pay a fee for that privilege. We pay subscriptions to be a member of that volunteer bushfire brigade. But the government want more. Now they want us to pay levies, and I think this is wrong. I humbly request that when you are speaking to the government—I think it is tomorrow—this sort of thing should come up: people like us should be exempt.

They say in their brochure—I gave you a copy during the break—that this is a fair and reasonable way to get everybody to contribute. I do not think it is fair or reasonable. If we want everybody to contribute, let those who do not contribute with their time and indirect payments be exempt from this new levy. Therefore, for example, if you are a registered member of a volunteer fire brigade, like myself and probably all the people sitting behind me, you should be exempt. If there are people who do not contribute in that way, sure, it would be very simple that they produce their membership card and not pay it.

The severity of this is not the \$30 that I have to pay; \$30 to me is not the end of the world. But when you consider that this \$30 levy is to be included on every rate notice issued—I have a neighbour whose family is probably more involved and gives more to our brigade who receives six rate notices for their farm—it is easy to see that they have a \$180 levy to pay, not just \$30, and there will be people with more and more rate notices.

That is the point I wish to make. In that leaflet the government say, ‘There is no way you cannot pay it because we will impose 16 per cent interest for all the time that you do not pay that levy.’ What would they do if all the volunteer bushfire brigade members, like myself and the people sitting behind me, said, ‘Okay, we resign en bloc’? Where would this country be without these people? Thank you for your time.

CHAIR—Thanks very much for your time and for that brochure.

Mr Morgan—I will be short and sweet. Reference to liability has been made; it is in the terms of reference. I think the terminology in the Bush Fire Act—acting in good faith—is basically crap. I will give you the terminology for that later, if you like. I have people in the brigade who will not do anything for the brigade or assist in any way simply because of the liability crisis. Those words need to be acted upon and we need a clearer definition of the liability issue so that

volunteers are protected. It is a different situation where we have professionals who are paid. They are paid, they are professionals; that is a different aspect. Volunteers should be exempt because they are volunteering.

Then we get to the funding issues with FESA; some shires like it, some do not. Our brigade lost funding of \$8,000 simply because FESA does not recognise the use of trailers. You have to ask yourself how many trailer units are in use in the state. They are a very valuable resource. I am sure in your areas your brigades will have trailer units. They have limitations, yes, and there can be dangerous situations if they are put in the incorrect position by an FCO or a person in authority, but that is what their training is for and they have to understand this.

If the current situation where FESA does not support the use of trailers and/or other restrictions coming in relating to the slip-on units, under the current funding system FESA will only support public equipment—that is, shire units and what not. Therefore the privately owned equipment will gradually deteriorate because the funding to maintain that privately owned equipment comes from voluntary funds from the owners and other people around the particular areas in the brigade. They are getting most upset that they are going to have a FESA levy put on top of them. Basically, the government are double-dipping: ‘Yes, we will get some money off you to supply certain units to certain areas, but we also expect you to maintain the area through these voluntary pieces of equipment.’ It is a really stupid thing where they are double-dipping on the private owner. I think it needs to be addressed.

If our brigade were to do some training to burn a large bit of bush, the current system is that FESA will not fund us. Yes, we get some assistance from the shire, and the shire does a fantastic job in the Manjimup and Northcliffe areas in providing support, but we still have to have funds to do this training. In the past, a lot of it has been done by, as I said before, subscriptions or voluntary donations from property owners within the brigade area, or we hold wood raffles. Wood raffles around here are a good income. But we are still voluntary; people have to spend the time to sell raffle tickets or whatever to raise these funds. FESA will only give support to maintain the equipment and support actual bushfires, not training and burning large bits of bush.

The issue of firebreaks came up. Some people like them, some people do not. I am aware that in some situations, given the right weather conditions, fires will easily jump over firebreaks and firebreaks are insignificant. But the idea of a firebreak is to give some access around a property as well. It gives trafficable access to vehicles that have to go to fight these fires. If there is a lightning strike on a property and the fire is reasonably small, a firebreak would contain the fire. If you can get onto it quickly by going along these trafficable breaks, you can put the fire out quickly and therefore there is less chance of it becoming a major fire.

As for CALM, in recent years our brigade has had problems but lately the cooperation has been terrific. I recommend CALM. At any time they have been helpful. They have fed us; they are good blokes. But they have huge restrictions. Over the years, as has been mentioned, they have lost equipment and manpower. I will give you a couple of examples. I went to Scotts River to support them. At the end of the day I went back—I was going home but went back to have a meal—and I saw all these private pieces of equipment come around left, right and centre from local people and/or other brigades coming from other areas such as Manjimup or Nannup. I saw all these CALM fire trucks lined up. The excuse given to us was ‘when the other blokes went

home they took the keys with them'. How come there weren't crews to take over from the CALM crews that were there before?

Then we went to the Unicup fire, which was quite a big fire. I will tell you where it is later if you want clarification; everything ends in 'up' around here. There was an excess of 100 units that did not belong to CALM; in other words, normal bushfire blokes, and assistance from shires. We were put in areas where the fire was less active and aggressive, which is naturally so. As was mentioned before, CALM people are very professional and they are used to the severe fire fronts whereas the volunteers generally are not. There is no doubt about that.

But the question you have to ask is: if CALM has enough equipment and personnel to do these things, why does it rely on and call in all these private units from all over the place to assist it in fighting fires which generally—in this case and in the case of Scotts River—started, I believe, on CALM land and went onto private property? There has to be something wrong. CALM is losing manpower and equipment and it has to be addressed.

I agree with the person who said, yes, it is funny how, during the fire season, you see CALM trucks going from one area hundreds of kilometres away to support another fire in another area. What would happen if we had a major fire in the area they came from? Where would they get the resources? They do not have the resources. You get the CALM hierarchy saying, 'Yes, we do have the resources; we can manage,' but in fact they cannot when you look at the resources they have to rely on—that is, the public volunteer or the shire equipment.

The bottom line is that we need more CALM resources, more burns to reduce the fuel loadings—of course with much due care to the environment, property and, the ultimate, to the protection of life. I think we should get back to what the Indigenous people did before us and, later on, the first white occupiers of land: continue to burn the land on a regular basis and keep the fuel loading down. Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Thanks very much, Mr Morgan.

Mr Giblett—I am a shire councillor in Bridgetown-Greenbushes shire. I am not here to represent the shire today; I am here under my own steam. I, like the Muirs, am of a pioneering family here and I have grave concerns about an issue I have seen today that has been glossed over, in my opinion.

We have talked a lot about the bush and private land. In the town of Bridgetown, we are unique in that we have a river, the Geegelup Brook and the railway line all running through the town. All of those areas have had very little done to them; they are a time bomb just waiting to happen. I am 50 years of age. In my lifetime, I do not think any of that river country has been burnt deliberately. For example, we had a small fire come off the river this year and it was fortunate that our volunteers got onto it and stopped it. It had the potential to burn the town. I see it as local and state governments not managing their land. We are not unique; other towns have railway lines, rivers and road reserves running through them. Nobody manages that land. It is very important in the scheme of things that we are talking about here today that huge tracts of unmanaged land are allowed to build up for years and nobody does anything.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Giblett, for that additional information. Time is getting on and, for a few of us, it is two hours later than we think it is as we came across to the West earlier today. I thank everybody for their participation and input, and for the interest shown by the people from the region who have been here today. It is excellent that so many people have come along. It indicates to the committee the importance of this issue, which is certainly something we have picked up everywhere we have been so far. The committee will move to Perth tomorrow for an all-day hearing there.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Adams**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 5.54 p.m.