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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN
BUSHFIRES

Reference: The recent Australian bushfires

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE RECENT AUSTRALIAN BUSHFIRES
Wednesday, 6 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 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 9.47 a.m.

PEARCE, Mr Robert John, Executive Director, Forest Industries Federation of Western Australia

READ, Ms Brea, Resource Policy Officer, Forest Industries Federation of Western Australia

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Recent Australian Bushfires. Today's hearing is the 14th of the inquiry. It follows the inspections and hearings we held in the south-west yesterday and, previously, hearings in New South Wales, Victoria, the ACT and Tasmania. Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Pearce—I am the Executive Director of the Forest Industries Federation of W.A. In a more private capacity, I was previously the minister for environment in Western Australia.

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 contempt of parliament. We have your submission No. 340. For my colleagues' benefit, the submission is not at the front of your papers because we have a change in witnesses. The submission has been authorised for publication and is therefore part of the evidence of the committee. Would you like to make some opening remarks, and then we will have questions.

Mr Pearce—Yes, I would, thank you, Mr Chairman. Firstly, can I say that the Forest Industries Federation welcomes your committee coming to Western Australia because we think that will give a timely reality check to the people of this state about the potential for devastating bushfires in our state. In the last 40 years Western Australia have probably had a better record than most states in terms of fire control, and I think you acknowledged that yourself publicly just a few days ago, Mr Chairman.

We had our Canberra in 1961, in a small town called Dwellingup, which was burnt out in a devastating bushfire, and, as a result of the royal commission which was held after that, a regime of controlled burning was instituted in Western Australia which has continued pretty much to the present day, with a good level of bipartisan political support and with a lot of support from the people of Western Australia. As a result of that, I think we have had a very well managed fire situation in what is a very dry state with a very large area of forest around our city and in our south-west.

The Forest Industries Federation, however, is concerned that the bipartisan consensus which has supported that now has the potential to break up. There have always been groups of people in the state—green groups, fundamentally—that have pushed for the abandoning of the controlled burning regime which has operated so successfully here. At the present time those groups seem to be getting the ear of government in a way they have not previously. The current government is setting up a range of policies which, in our view, have the potential to be quite damaging in this regard.

To give the current government its due, in the last four to five years the controlled burning regime has fallen behind the program quite substantially. That really started under the previous government, because they became very sensitive to the issue of smoke over the city. With the wind patterns in Western Australia, even if the burns were quite distant from Perth, smoke over the city caused a lot of complaints, and there are a lot of political directions to the current people who are doing controlled burning not to burn under any circumstances that might put smoke over the city. That was part of the reason why the controlled burns fell behind. The present government has not been quite so prepared to issue that kind of direction and so the program has been catching up a little, but it is still behind time.

However, in the current government's set of arrangements around forest matters, two things have happened which cause us considerable alarm. The first is that a very substantial extra part of the forest is going to national parks and reserves of one form or another, so that over half of the forest area will be in these kinds of reserves. There does not seem to us to be any matching commitment to fire control in those areas. In fact, it seems to us the reverse is happening: that there are not management funds being put aside, or not the will to have the kind of controlled burning regime in the national parks and these new reserves that will be required if a disaster is to be avoided in the future.

On the other hand, operations in the forest have been put under the control of the Conservation Commission. In the past it has been done by officers of CALM. We have had a lot of confidence in the way the CALM fire control people have gone about their business. We think they have done an excellent job for the people of Western Australia, but we see a situation developing in which the Conservation Commission—which are not professional officers but political appointees—are taking control of every aspect of forest management. They have just produced a forest management plan in the last few days which does not have any significant reference to fire control at all, just an implied criticism of the Bush Fires Act for not being sufficiently focused on biodiversity, conservation or protection, and a suggestion that the Environmental Protection Authority is doing a review of burning regimes which will then become, I presume, their policy. That seems to us a very unbalanced way to go about these sorts of issues.

The second and related issue to that is in not just the controlled burn arrangement but in fire protection. Much of the fire protection in Western Australia is being done by my members—that is, the people who are logging and harvesting contractors, who provide their work force and their machinery when there is a fire. Because of the current government's policies, that segment of the work force has been reduced by about 60 per cent but the area that needs to be covered—national parks and so forth—has increased dramatically. We have had to say to the government, 'Don't look to our members to do anything other than apply fire control measures in the area in which they are involved'—that is, in the working forest, if I can call it that—and we have not seen any movement from the government to replace the lost machinery or the lost work force power. That is happening because of the changes that they are making.

I make one last comment, Mr Chairman, in this opening statement. The area of biggest concern that we have is an area that is known as the Walpole Wilderness Area. As part of the government's policies when it was elected, it wanted to set aside what is called the Walpole Wilderness area, which is an area, I think, of around 350,000 hectares in the south-west Great Southern area of the state. It is not a wilderness by any Australian definition, because one of the ironies of this 350,000 hectares is that they cannot find in it even an 8,000-hectare patch that

meets the minimum requirements for wilderness under the IUCN or the Australian accepted guidelines, so they are having to create three artificial cores to this wilderness by closing roads and tracks and excluding people, and these three 8,000-hectare cores will be part of a 350,000-hectare so-called wilderness area. We believe that within 20 years, if nothing is done and that policy continues, we will see Canberra style fires—that is, fires of the size that devastated the national parks in Victoria and New South Wales last year—in that Walpole Wilderness Area of the Great Southern.

We have had a demonstration of it here. In my own days as minister for the environment, I established a management plan for the Nornalup National Park which included, for the first time in Western Australia, a trial wilderness area called the Nuyts peninsula. It is a small triangular piece of land which sticks out from the south-west coast which has been relatively untouched. It was left as wilderness in a zone ‘national park’, so there was plenty of other access but this small area was put aside for complete wilderness. All access was barred except for walkers. Within a decade of that management decision that whole area had burned out in a devastating bushfire that burned the whole area to the ground, to bare soil, with just the odd black stick sticking up. There is no doubt that because of the topography—it is a fairly wet area for Western Australia, with dense bush—if left unmanaged the Walpole Wilderness Area might look like a jewel in the Western Australian national park crown for a few years, but it will be the subject, I think, of bushfires of the kind that we have seen in the Eastern States if the policies with regard to that area currently are continued.

In summary, the Forest Industries Federation have been very supportive of the fire control regimes which have applied in Western Australia. We have had a very strong supportive opinion of the CALM officers—who have been responsible for that over the last four decades—and the forestry people who have looked after that. We are concerned that for the pressures of biodiversity protection to become paramount, which are now becoming evident in the Conservation Commission and are impacting on the professional officers of CALM, it will mean that those things are likely to change in the future.

We are concerned about the EPA being the body doing the fire management review because we feel there is not the level of balance required in that. It is fine for the EPA to review things, I think, but they should not be the ones setting up the fundamental policy. We are seeing quite a shift in Western Australia towards biodiversity protection at all costs. That biodiversity protection regime does not seem to include people as part of the biodiversity mix that needs to be protected. We are fearful that a lessening emphasis on the protection of people and property, or life and property, will lead to a Victorian-New South Wales-Canberran situation here in Western Australia in 10 to 20 years time.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Pearce. Ms Read, do you want to add anything at this stage?

Ms Read—Not at this stage, no.

CHAIR—Is the Forest Industries Federation affiliated with NAFI?

Mr Pearce—Yes, we are.

CHAIR—You are the Western Australian part of NAFI?

Mr Pearce—Yes, we are the Western Australian people. We represent all of the companies in the timber industry—the hardwood, the softwood and the blue gum plantations. We are quite an integrated group compared to some, but our national representation is through NAFI.

CHAIR—NAFI gave evidence to us in Canberra.

Mr Pearce—Indeed.

CHAIR—You talked about the Conservation Commission not being public servants but being political appointments. Tell the committee what that structure is and what are their specific responsibilities.

Mr Pearce—Up until about three or four years ago we had—for most of the time the fire protection regime has been in place—originally a forestry department, but going back to 1983 the Department of Conservation and Land Management was set up, which was an integrated department taking in forestry, wildlife and other areas. It had an overall mandate to deal with those issues, which it did. Going back to about 1999 the previous government—the body that was the manager of the forests also had the responsibility of getting out contracts for the logging of the forest—tried to deal with the problem of public perception by splitting the department into two: the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Forest Products Commission.

The Forest Products Commission has the responsibility for all of the contracts—the management and contractual selling off of the produce side—but the management of the forest was left with the Department of Conservation and Land Management. At the same time the government set up two bodies to oversee the work of those two departments: the Forest Products Commission, which has a group of appointed commissioners and has a line responsibility for the financial management of the department; and the Conservation Commission, which does not have a line of responsibility for the department, but does have all of the national parks and native reserves vested in it. It actually is the landowner. It has a small secretariat to support it and has quite a significant set of powers for the members of the commission. That has been demonstrated very strongly in the way in which the current forest management plan has been put in place in that it has managed to give a very substantial level of direction to the Department of Conservation and Land Management on every aspect of forest management. That is what concerns us.

I know you have some officers of CALM coming to talk to you today and, without exception, they are all fine public servants and have done a good job for the state. But it is also our view that they are under a very substantial level of pressure from the political appointees in the Conservation Commission who have not shown, in our view, the kind of balance that is required to have a decent set of policies. They see their brief very much as focused towards biodiversity protection and that is their bag.

The minister for the environment set up a roundtable around the forest management plan and we have tried to get a bit of balance with regard to economic and social factors, but we were told by the chairman of the commission, ‘Our concern is biodiversity protection—that is it; that is

what we are here for.' We have no argument with people being responsible for biodiversity protection, but we think it is bad news when people who are responsible for biodiversity protection get to be in charge of everything else as well.

CHAIR—The Conservation Commission have that overall responsibility but only with the national parks and wilderness areas not with work in forests.

Mr Pearce—Mr Chairman, they do not have a direct line responsibility for anything, but they are the policy setters. Our concern is that the kinds of policy views which are being formed by the Conservation Commission are starting to find their way into CALM, which is the on-the-ground manager. Again, we had a report to the roundtable from Dr Neil Burrows, who is coming to speak to you. They are trying to do their burnings in a different way that enhances biodiversity protection. We said, 'We're not opposed to burning in a way that enhances biodiversity protection, but we don't want a situation such as happens, in our view, in the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales, where biodiversity protection means nothing happens in terms of these other values.' That is what we are fearful will happen here. It is not happening at the moment, I acknowledge that openly and squarely, but we see moves in that direction.

There has been a fire management conference. As I say, the EPA is doing a review of fire management policies and we are fearful that, unless the lessons of the Eastern States over the last summer are brought very squarely to people in Western Australia, there will be a tendency to start trying new directions. Because we have not had serious fires for 40 years people start to think there is not a problem. The reason we do not have them is due to the regime, but people lose sight of that regime and think, 'There is not really a fire problem here, so it does not matter if we start experimenting in these sorts of ways.' But that still can lead to a very bad result.

CHAIR—Finally, what was the tenure of the Walpole wilderness before going to wilderness. Was it a national park or working forest? What was it?

Mr Pearce—It was a mix. There were a substantial number of national parks there already and a good part of it was working forest. The current government has created a raft of new national parks in that area and then bundled the areas that are between the national parks into this Walpole Wilderness Area. I sat on the committee which recommended the boundaries. The government set up a review group and I know that a lot of local people in that area are very concerned about the impact of this wilderness area and not just with regard to the fire issues. I think the fire issue is paramount because this is a very large area. It is inaccessible enough as it is, but, given the policies of making it even more inaccessible, that is the area which is going to be the potential time bomb for a bad fire event in Western Australia in the future.

I have my own experience, because I sat down with CALM officers when we made the decision to make that small area of Nuyts peninsula a wilderness area like that. It seemed a good thing at the time but it was a mistake because of what happens to the environment there. When you get a destructive fire which destroys absolutely everything, then you have to start from scratch. We did not protect that environment very well by making it a wilderness. In fact, it had the least level of protection of any part of the forests in Western Australia and paid the price.

CHAIR—When it was put into wilderness, did the fire trail regime change? Were there existing fire trails there which subsequently were either closed or not maintained? What happened?

Mr Pearce—I honestly cannot tell you the details, except there was access to it before by tracks and the like, but they were all closed at the time the decision was made to make it a wilderness zoned area of a national park. Access was to be for walkers only.

CHAIR—Vehicle access was closed off?

Mr Pearce—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—I refer in your submission to the following statement:

The formation of the Forests Department in 1919 saw the adoption of a total fire protection policy which existed for 40 years until devastating fires in the 1950's.

I am wondering how that sits with the finding of the Dwellingup royal commission in 1961. It said:

The Department had control burnt extensive areas each year for the last 40 years and more than ever at the present day.

You are saying there was a total fire protection policy, but the royal commission said that there had been extensive control burning.

Ms Read—Up until the 1950s there was, as far as I am aware, some control—mostly over prescribed burning—and then, once we got to the 1950s, the department changed its policies and implemented further fire regimes. But I do not have the other document with me.

Mr ORGAN—You represent the Forest Industries Federation and you are presenting a certain perspective here. Don't you accept that logging and harvesting threatens biodiversity and ecological sustainability?

Mr Pearce—Absolutely not. Biodiversity protection in the end means not having a loss of species, you protect the number of species that there are. We would make the argument very strongly—we do it here in Western Australia and I think we could make it equally well from other Australian states—that if you look at where biodiversity has been lost in Western Australia, it has been lost less in forest areas which have been subject to logging since the creation of the colony in 1829 than in any other area of the state that has been impacted upon by human habitation.

If you look at the Swan coastal plain where we are now, where our cities and so forth are, the biodiversity loss has been huge. If you look at all of the wheat belt areas, which take in most of the south-western part of the state this side of the more desert areas, again the loss of biodiversity by farming and those sorts of things has been huge. If you look at the forested areas, where they are side by side with areas which have been cleared for other forms of agricultural pursuits, on the one side of the boundary you see a great loss of biodiversity.

We have not been able to find anyone who can point to the loss of any species anywhere in Western Australia as a result of logging in the areas which have been logged. In fact, the areas which are most like the countryside that was here when white people came into Western Australia in 1826, the forest areas are most like they were originally for those which have been impacted on in making a contribution to the Western Australian economy. We certainly do not accept that there is a loss of biodiversity involved in logging. There has been argument in Western Australia about that but, for all the argument that has gone on, no-one has been able to point to a loss of biodiversity.

If you look at other issues like salinity, which is the absolute curse of Western Australia, all of the areas basically in Western Australia from Geraldton through to Esperance are subject to salinity of substantial levels. The only areas that are not subject to this level of salinisation are the working forests or the national parks which form part of that. We are not saying log all the forests. You have a balanced regime, but if you have a proper balanced regime, there is no threat, there is no reason why there should be a threat to biodiversity.

What is a threat to biodiversity is devastating bushfire, because the way the Western Australian—and I think the rest of the Australian—ecology has worked itself up over 50,000, 60,000 years is that it is almost a fire dependent ecology with frequent fires. Some of the mistakes we made in Western Australia early on, like in the Eastern States, was that we came with a European preconception that the way to deal with fires was to put them out. When they came, you put them out. You had different forms of fire brigade to put fires out. I think that is what my colleague meant when she talked about the earlier history, from the days of the forestry department in 1919.

After the Dwellingup fires, what was really suggested was that a kind of controlled burning—cool burns, rather than the devastating hot burns—is a better method of biodiversity protection than a devastating fire at much larger intervals. I must say I personally support that position.

Mr McARTHUR—You mentioned Walpole, and I understand that you had a major fire there in 1961. You make the observation that in your view there will be a Canberra/north-east Victoria type fire. Who do you think would be accountable when that eventually happens?

Mr Pearce—I think the people who make the decision to create that and put the management regime in place would have to carry the accountability for that, but I personally am prepared to carry the accountability for that Nuyts fire. In the end it probably ought to have been foreseeable what happened and, as the responsible minister at the time, I am prepared to put my hand up and say, 'That was my mistake.' But there was not an example of that sort of thing beforehand in Western Australia to point to. Maybe if I had been smarter, I would have seen it. I think current ministers will not have that excuse because they have seen what happens when people like me make errors and they should learn from that. If there is that kind of fire in 10 or 20 years time after we have put the warning squarely before you—the people of Western Australia here today—and I think if people fail to take account of that, then they will have to bear the responsibility for that in the future.

Mr McARTHUR—And does your group continue to put that point of view on an annual basis so that everyone is alert as to your personal experience and what has happened in the

Eastern States, or has that gone as the fires become less apparent over time? Do people become quite complacent, as you mentioned?

Mr Pearce—Complacency is a real concern. People here did sit up and take notice when the Canberra fires happened, there is no doubt about it, but Canberra is a long way away from Western Australia and we have become complacent because when NAFI, for example, asked us to put together the figures with the other state associations for how much of the various states had burnt out up to about January, and you looked at hundreds of thousands of hectares in Victoria, almost half of Canberra, big parts of New South Wales, I think our figure was 610 hectares for that time that had been subject to bushfires. It was tiny in comparison. It got larger later on, I must admit. There were some larger fires in January and February, but if you looked at the size of Western Australia compared to the rest of the country, the amount of area of Western Australia that is affected by these kinds of bushfires was small. But, as you said, that has led to a complacency. People start to think it does not happen. Ash Wednesday: we were not affected by that. People argue that these big bushfires that happen in the Eastern States are something special.

Mr McARTHUR—What would the people of Perth say if you wiped out the wilderness area at Walpole totally? What would be the perception? How close is Walpole to the—

Mr Pearce—No, it is a very remote area.

Mr McARTHUR—In perception terms, how close is Walpole to the electors in St Georges Terrace?

Mr Pearce—It is a long way. It is several hundred miles—I still think in miles.

Mr McARTHUR—In perception terms, it is a bit closer than Canberra, is it?

Mr Pearce—That is right, it is, but you will not get the film because the TV cameras will not be able to get in there, except by helicopter, and the people will be less affected. But if the town of Walpole were to be burnt out by the fire, that would be another Dwellingup, and Dwellingup was—

Mr McARTHUR—That is what I am saying. How far is Walpole away, in perception terms, not in—

Mr Pearce—If the town of Walpole were to burn out, that would have an impact on Western Australian people like Dwellingup did in 1961. That was a seminal event for us in terms of our perception, but it was 42 years ago and people are getting fat and lazy in terms of their view about the dangers of these things recurring.

Mr McARTHUR—We have had other witnesses talk about the change in the American situation in relation to Yellowstone Park being burnt out, and the Bush and Clinton administrations totally reversing their policy and allowing logging in national parks, allowing prescribed burning. Do you think under your regime here in Western Australia there is a chance of that public attitude changing?

Mr Pearce—Do you mean it is changing towards a better fire regime or away from it?

Mr McARTHUR—A better fire regime and maybe even considering logging in a national park, or that public policy is—

Mr Pearce—Because of the debate that has gone on about forests in Western Australia in the last few years, there is a bit of a view that forests are now icons and they should be left alone. That is why I think the green groups are now moving in very firmly to say to the government, ‘Don’t burn. It is ridiculous to save the forest and then go and burn it.’ They have been saying this, I might say, for 20 years, probably longer in the case of Beth Schultz, but they have been having a bit more success I think in their public presentation of the ‘don’t burn’ thing because there has been the argument that we should be leaving a good part of the forest alone. I think people may think that not burning is part of that deal, and because we have not had big bushfires in recent times, people think, ‘Well, what’s the problem?’

Mr McARTHUR—We have the impression that you are winning the argument of prescribed burning more in Western Australia than the Eastern States.

Mr Pearce—I hope that is right but I think the reverse might be the truth. That was an argument that was won back in 1961. There was a political consensus. No party has moved away from that nor has there ever been any significant public voice against that for 40 years but—

Mr McARTHUR—Because of Walpole in 1961?

Mr Pearce—Sorry? No, Dwellingup in 1961. Sorry if I misstated that. Dwellingup is much closer to the city. It is probably about 100 kilometres to the south-east of here, and so it was relatively close to the city. Walpole is right on the very south coast of the state and it is a much more remote here. When I say we have won the argument here, it is an argument that has been won but we are fearful that that success, and the approach the current government is taking to the forest protection, may mean that the gains of the last 40 years will be dissipated in the next two or three.

Mr McARTHUR—What is the smoke that comes over Perth? What is the average elector’s view of what that means?

Mr Pearce—I personally think that most people are prepared to wear it. I was a member of parliament in an electorate right on the south end of the Perth metropolitan area on the edge of the hills where the smoke would come in. We would get a half a dozen phone calls when there was a fire and smoke event. People get irate, and those who suffer from asthma and things like that have a legitimate complaint. But I think most city people were prepared to wear it because they understood the need for it. People still remember Dwellingup. I do myself. I think people were prepared to see the need for it but there are fewer and fewer people of my age in the city who can remember back that far. Certainly the previous government was very sensitive to that and I guess they were doing their own political readings of how it was affecting the electors and it made sense to them not to have that problem. The current government has been a bit more daring in that regard but the program is still well behind.

Mr McARTHUR—You mentioned biodiversity. Could you give us an interpretation of how the Greens or environmentalists interpret biodiversity, relative to what the facts are?

Mr Pearce—They will come in and talk for themselves very shortly—and they probably will do a better job than I will on their behalf—but, from where we sit, biodiversity protection is starting to mean you cannot do anything which impacts on the environment. Biodiversity is happening in the current forest management plan. They really are trying to say that, at the end of forest management, it not just a question of having all the species there that were there before. The forest, at the end, has to be exactly the same as it was at the start.

That seems to be a very unrealistic definition, given the nature of human impacts on the earth. I think they have to be managed and controlled, and we have to leave as small a footprint as we can, but we are starting to get a view in the Conservation Commission—and it is a very ideologically driven view—that there should be almost no impact in a very large number of areas. The government, in many ways, is encouraging that. We have had a strong development ethos in Western Australia over the last 40 or 50 years. Now we are getting a regime where it is good to stop doing things rather than have things done. I think that pendulum maybe was too far one way in Western Australian, in terms of development. It has certainly swung too far back the other way.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You said that the particular view that there should not be any burning and it should be left alone has been pushed for 20 years. Why is it that it has only been in recent times that that view has started to have a real impact on actual government policy?

Mr Pearce—I do not think it has had a huge impact on the general public yet. The Gallop government was elected on a number of platforms, one of which was protection of the old-growth forests. There has been a big forest debate going back two or three years, and it has had the overall impact that I mentioned. There is a view—principally a city held view—that the forests should be largely left alone. The Greens then say, ‘If we are going to save the old-growth forests, it is stupid to burn it. Why save it and then burn it?’ For an ordinary person in the street, there is kind of an intuitive sense to that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you think there has been a bit of a confusion of the issues, in terms of protection and burning? They are not seen as simple issues.

Mr Pearce—It seems quite different, that is right. The Greens argue that if you are protecting it you are not burning it. They will say burning is destroying, so if you are protecting you cannot burn. That is the simple equation.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I am not familiar with the environmental debates here in the west. I have enough of my own out east. Has the debate in Western Australia included the impact of feral animals and weeds?

Mr Pearce—No, not really. It has been done largely at a very political level. The government has made a decision that its future survival depends on having a very green image, so it is seeking to get that everywhere it makes a decision.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you think there is more of an attempt to get the green image right rather than the green management right?

Mr Pearce—Yes, I personally think that. I am still a member of the Labor Party, but I am much at odds with the current government over that approach to life. I think they are being politically silly because, although they are chasing after the green voters as if their lives depended on it, the fact is they were elected on One Nation preferences at the last election, not on green preferences. The One Nation vote has broken up in Western Australia and is gradually working its way back to the Liberal Party.

I think it is a very unsustainable political approach that they are taking. Even the *West Australian* this morning has quite an interesting article which mirrors the view I had myself that, if you try and tie your political survival to the green image and style and you are not producing substantial government, the people will throw you out. I think that is what happens. You are professionals, and you may have a different view of that than I have, but I think the people in Western Australia are starting to think about it that way. I think the problem is that we are dealing with these things at a style level, but the substance is important.

Young people growing up do not remember Dwellingup. They were not alive when it happened. There has not been a fire problem in Western Australia, so if someone was to come along and say, 'We have a better way of doing this that will save the species more and save the forests more,' why wouldn't people be prepared to give it a go? They might well be, but we think the potential for catastrophe is there. What happened in Canberra last year has demonstrated that.

The kinds of policies people are talking about here are the kinds of policies that the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales has been running for a decade, and a decade of those kinds of policies has produced that result. We are fearful. We are not there yet but, if we start those policies now, in a decade we are going to get the same result.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think the examples in Canberra and New South Wales are perfect outcomes of the point you are making?

Mr Pearce—Absolutely.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I hope, for the sake of Western Australia, you do not follow the policy examples from Victoria and New South Wales, because we suffered quite a bit and will continue to do so. You said in your written submission that, with the increased declaration of national park territory, there has been a decrease in personnel in the forest industry; experienced firefighters.

Mr Pearce—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you have a rough estimate of the number of personnel that would have been there several years ago, but are not there now?

Mr Pearce—I did not bring the precise figure with me, but I can certainly get it for you. In general terms, the number of people employed in the native forest industry has declined from 100 per cent to 40 per cent, so there has been a 60 per cent reduction. CALM has a workforce of its own that it uses for firefighting and all of my logging contractors provide their machinery and

their men to supplement that. They are trained forces, and they work under the direction of CALM. There has been no increase in the CALM resource, that we can see, and a 60 per cent decrease in our resource. As I say, I do not have the figures with me, but I can certainly get them for you.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It would be interesting to the committee, because if the so-called protected land has been increased and classified as a national park, but CALM resources have not increased accordingly and there has been a decrease in private resources—the forestry industry—then that is an important issue.

Mr Pearce—In the past, our members have fought in national parks as well where there has been a fire, to create a balanced situation in forests. We have been prepared to take on the responsibility for doing that under our contracts, whether it be in a fauna reserve, a flora reserve, a national park or in a partly working forest, and our guys, when they are called out, will go.

We said to the current government though, ‘Look, the way you’re going about this—a big increase in national parks and a big decrease in our workforce—we are not prepared in the new contracts to take on the responsibility for anything other than the areas of forest that we work in. If you want to have this increase in national parks, you organise to get it done. It is not reasonable to ask us, with less than half the resources, to take on the responsibility for areas which are much less well managed and the working forests as well.’

We are having contract discussions with them now, and that is the position we put very squarely to them. We have not seen an increase in CALM resources to match that, though we have been warning the government for two years that this situation is coming. We have continued to put our membership out there—even though it has declined—to help fight fires in areas which really are not our business, but we are not going to do it after this year.

Mr ADAMS—On the same theme, it is about land management and the changes from working forests to national parks. There seems to be a view coming through that you take national parks and/or public land and lock it up—and that is conservation—without putting a management regime in place. You have just given evidence that there are fewer resources. The view here is that the locking up of an area is conservation—and you have fewer resources to manage that area—and, therefore, we have created something which we are preserving for the future. Is that what is occurring in Western Australia?

Mr Pearce—Absolutely. I do not want to be too critical of the Department of Conservation and Land Management. They are good people and they have done a good job for this state.

Mr ADAMS—I am talking about policy here.

Mr Pearce—In terms of their capacity to manage—they set up management plans and the like—they are not being given the resources that are necessary to manage the great area.

Mr ADAMS—Is there any written philosophical basis from which this policy—this theory—is coming? I am looking for some science that I can base it on.

Mr Pearce—No.

Mr ADAMS—People saying, ‘Here’s some science. If we lock something up and we do not have any management regime on it, we’ll preserve biodiversity forever.’

Mr Pearce—In fact, even in the areas which are picked there is no science applied, because one of our big complaints about the forest management plan was that when we sat down at the roundtable with conservation groups and the people from CALM and the Conservation Commission to work on the forest management plan it was a given to start with from the government that it was policy that all the old-growth areas were to be put into reserves. That was a government policy. I think that was supported by the people of Western Australia at the election; they did not argue with that. But 100,000 hectares of regrowth forest were also put into reserves in a whole series of named forest blocks, which had been agreed on in a vote-winning deal between the Greens and the government prior to the election.

We asked for that 100,000 hectares to be assessed for its scientific value as part of the forest management plan. In terms of it going into reserves we said, ‘Okay, you might have made a deal about it—it might have been in the policy—but there should be a scientific assessment of those areas to see, in fact, if they all deserve to go into reserves.’ We were told bluntly: no assessment. They are going in—full stop. They say, ‘What we are going to do is assess the rest of the forest—that is, your part of the forest, the working part of the forest—to see what other areas we think should be added into this sort of locking-up regime.’

There has been a dramatic shortage of science in all of this, in the way that these new national parks in Western Australia have been set up. It was done by a party that was in opposition and it developed a policy without access to resources, which oppositions obviously lack, and it has just blindly gone ahead and done that and it has resisted a scientific assessment of those areas.

Mr ADAMS—Then we have the situation where there is reluctance to have reduction burns because that somehow affects things. I heard, from my inspections yesterday, that CALM seems to be quite sensitive about there being areas you need to be sensitive about as to what burns go on, the level of burning et cetera, because of some species. I am still trying to find the basis and the science that drives this policy. I have not found it anywhere in Australia yet, and I guess this committee will keep looking. Have you seen it or is there anything around?

Mr Pearce—You will not find it here. I do not want to give a wrong impression on this. The fire control regime to date is not much different from what it was last year, the year before or the year before that. What I am concerned about is the potential change in the regime. I can see the signs of that coming. That is the bit we are concerned about at the moment. The current government is keeping up a controlled burning regime which is pretty much the same as that done over the forty years which have gone before. I am not suggesting that those things have happened yet.

CHAIR—It was put to us at one of the hearings that a management plan ought to be fully in place before areas are declared additional national parks so that people can see up front: this is how this new national park is going to be managed, these are the resources, this is the budget et cetera. Would you think such a policy would be preferable in those sorts of circumstances?

Mr Pearce—I would support that. The legislation in Western Australia runs the other way around. You have to declare the park and then there is a set of steps you take to establish a management committee and a management plan, but declaring the park is the first step.

CHAIR—That is the case in most of the states and that is why this was put to us in areas where similar criticisms were being levelled—that it is all very nice to have these parks but the resources and the management plan are not there. Several years later there is still no management plan and, in the meantime, a lot of the park was burnt out. They were saying, ‘Do the work on the management plan first and demonstrate how the park is going to be looked after before the actual declaration takes place.’

Mr Pearce—I think that is a very sensible approach. There is a kind of law of diminishing returns in national parks. The first few national parks that are created are the real jewels. Then the further you go in terms of creation, less and less importance attaches to them. I think in Western Australian forests now we are getting to the stage where the areas being put into national parks are indistinguishable from areas of working forest in terms of biodiversity values.

CHAIR—My colleague from Indi reminds me it was the bush users group in Victoria that made that particular suggestion. Thank you very much for your evidence this morning and also the submission. We appreciate it.

[10.31 a.m.]

TELFER, Mr Bruce Malcolm (Private Capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. 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 contempt of parliament. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Telfer—Although I am here in a personal capacity, I have had a long association with managing fire at both state and local government level.

CHAIR—We have your submission, which has been authorised for publication, and we thank you for that. I should comment that it was the very first submission received by this inquiry, submission No. 1. That is quite a feat, seeing that we have now had over 450 submissions, which is one of the largest responses we have had to an inquiry. Clearly it is an issue of interest and concern to you. If you would like to make some opening comments, we will then move to questions.

Mr Telfer—Thank you. The first statement I would like to make is in relation to attitudes to fire in our particular environment. I believe the attitude to fire of many people arises from our European culture, which would have us believe that fire should not be part of the environment or, if at all, only under a severely restricted basis. Hence the amount of resources that end up being put into suppression resources. That is the fire exclusion attitude. Those resources are right and proper when intense fires impact on our lifestyle. However, fire is an integral part of our natural environment and needs to be accepted as such by the wider community.

Secondly, knowing the mathematical equation that indicates fire intensity, the only real weapon in the firefighter's armoury—and I would like to consider myself as a firefighter, having many times put the wet stuff on the red stuff—and the only part of that equation that really modifies fire behaviour is that of fuel quantity. Modifying fuel quantity changes fire intensity; thus allowing for safer and more effective firefighting. However, it is easier to provide resources for combat or suppression activities as there is a tangible result; that is, more appliances or a perception of value for money and, of course, it is easy to promote. Unfortunately those appliances and resources will always be needed, but I believe that getting back to the intensity equation is of more benefit in the long term.

Thirdly, I believe that preparedness, particularly at a community level, should be broken down to the lowest common denominator, and that is at each property or land lot. Each property owner or land manager should manage their property in a manner that protects the assets on that property from wildfire—and let us appreciate that environmental values are definitely an asset. The spin-off is that when the natural estate is managed in this manner it provides some security for nearby built environments.

A strategic approach to fire preparedness for a built environment may leave a large portion of that built environment at risk if the strategic options are promoted to the exception of the smaller equations. However, if a building block approach is utilised, should one segment of that building block approach fail to meet any sort of standard then only that property or small portion may face a significant risk. It is probably easier to explain diagrammatically but I do not have that resource available to me at the moment. I believe that if wildfire is considered in that context then we will create the safer communities that we are looking for at the moment.

CHAIR—You say in your submission that you have responsibility for 10 volunteer brigades.

Mr Telfer—Yes.

CHAIR—Under what sort of regime do you have that responsibility?

Mr Telfer—Under the Bush Fires Act of Western Australia, local government is charged with establishing bushfire brigades to protect the communities. Within the Shire of Mundaring, where I am currently employed—

CHAIR—You are employed by a local government authority?

Mr Telfer—Yes.

CHAIR—And there are 10 volunteer brigades within that region?

Mr Telfer—Yes.

CHAIR—Is it outer metropolitan?

Mr Telfer—Yes. It is the urban fringe area, just in the hills to the east of where we are now.

CHAIR—One of the issues that really came to the fore with the recent fires in the Eastern States, particularly in urban areas like Canberra, was whether people should stay with their houses or whether they should evacuate. Certain evidence has been put forward which tends to indicate that houses were more likely to be saved if people were able to stay with them and put out spot fires et cetera. You have had some experience with bushfires and, obviously, working with volunteer brigades in an urban area. Do you have some views about how this should be handled?

Mr Telfer—Yes. The stay at home option is certainly the best, provided the property is prepared for that event and the people are also emotionally prepared for the event. I have experienced the decision—once people witness the actual fire behaviour—to leave at the last minute and I have also experienced people working in the central business district trying to get home during a fire event. In one particular event, I ended up spending more time managing the community than I did managing the fire. If people can prepare themselves emotionally and prepare their property physically, the stay at home option certainly makes the job of the fire manager far easier.

CHAIR—Should there be some protocols with regard to the other authorities? For instance, in some states—I am not sure that it is everywhere—when fires get to a certain level, the police have some sort of overriding power. We saw, particularly in Canberra, police going out and telling people to get out, almost to the point of threats of ultimate prosecution or arrest if they did not do as they were told. What happens in Western Australia in respect of those sorts of protocols?

Mr Telfer—In relation to the large events that I have been involved in, the police have been involved in the incident management teams and the decision of whether to stay or go—or any other option—was discussed with them and implemented, in conjunction with the incident controller. In one particular event at Glen Forrest—a suburb within the Shire of Mundaring—that was implemented. Although people complained about receiving the wrong information, we had evidence from television news footage that the police involved gave exactly the right message to those people. That was along the lines of: ‘If you are prepared for this event, you may stay at home. However, we suggest that, if you are not prepared for it, you relocate to an area that we have set aside until the danger has past.’

CHAIR—What were people saying in that particular instance? That they were told to get out or something like that?

Mr Telfer—No, they were told they may stay at home.

CHAIR—What was the conflict?

Mr Telfer—People were trying to get home, because the fire was due to impact, and the police on that occasion were allowing them to go home and stay if they were prepared for that event. The problem arises, of course, in trying to identify which properties are correctly prepared just as the fire is approaching. We always endeavour to give people the option to stay at home, as the first preference.

CHAIR—In your area, do you have any ongoing education program? At the time a fire is at your back door, a lot of these things become very emotional. It would appear to me that there really needs to be a far better understanding of the likely circumstances. People can make those sorts of decisions more easily if they are well educated. Do you have any education program in your particular region?

Mr Telfer—Yes, we do. Prior to last year, there was a small C-fold type brochure going out advising people what the options were and so forth in terms of wildfire events. However, in September and October last year, within the Shire of Mundaring alone, a drafted document called *Fire and Burning Information* was distributed to all residents by way of letterbox, which gave people not only regulatory information—the information they needed to comply with in terms of burning permits and the like—but also information on what to do in the event of a fire and, if it did affect them, how it was likely to impact upon them and their options at that particular time. That was very well received. We had some publication problems with it, but it will be revamped this year and distributed to all residents once again.

Mr McARTHUR—I want to raise the problem of the interface between outer metropolitan, country and urban. I gather you are close to that argument and the range of skills that the various firefighters have. What is your recommendation to try and solve that ongoing difficulty?

Mr Telfer—Within many of the outer metropolitan local government areas, the volunteer brigades have very sound training regimes. There was a minimum standard established for the training of volunteers, and in most cases it is fair to say that that training standard has been exceeded in the number of modules to get people onto the fire ground. It is not only theoretical training but also practical training and exposure to fire. In our particular area, we require new volunteers to attend at least two prescribed burns before they are allowed to attend a wildfire incident in a combat or suppression role.

We are probably on the right path in terms of upskilling our volunteers. The problem arises that many of these people are employed some distance from their home brigade and, when a fire event occurs, we are stuck with the people that are closest to the station for the initial turn-out. However, that skill option comes into play when a fire is of a longer duration and we are able to bring in those people to supplement our resources.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you think you can use urban firefighters in a rural forest type setting?

Mr Telfer—They are used principally for property protection, as the nature of the appliances that they use makes it difficult for them to leave the bitumen roads. Consequently, the volunteer bushfire brigades have a better capacity to deal with wildfire events in a more natural environment.

Mr McARTHUR—It is interesting that you say ‘not leave the bitumen roads’. A number of witnesses and submissions have made very strong comments that in Victoria some of the brigades never got off the bitumen roads. Are you saying that really the urban people ought to stick to the bitumen, because they know the form?

Mr Telfer—Not just stick to the bitumen—if you were prepared to use cross-agency personnel to some degree and utilise the appliances that are suitable for the different environments. So we would retain the appliances we have but change the personnel to utilise those appliances more effectively.

Mr McARTHUR—If you sent your urban brigade into a reasonable forest fire, what would be your judgment and direction to them?

Mr Telfer—My first option would be not to send an urban type appliance into that environment. I do not believe that it has the capacity—turning circles and the like—to deal with that situation and, if it did happen, I would have to back it up with smaller four-wheel drive units.

Mr McARTHUR—You are a bit nervous of sending urban people into the forest environment?

Mr Telfer—Not in terms of their skill to deal with a wildfire event, but just with the appliances that they have at the moment.

Mr McARTHUR—Did the Linton inquiry impact on your thinking at all?

Mr Telfer—Absolutely. It sent a little bit of a shudder through the volunteers in our area, particularly in relation to the level of training being received and access to the records of the training being conducted. It was probably one of the most accessed web sites on this side of the continent while that was under way.

Mr ORGAN—Could you give the committee a bit of information about how your council manages new developments with regard to protection of houses and individual properties? Do you have in place any planning regime which brings in all those aspects about protecting the places from fire?

Mr Telfer—Yes, is the short answer. All the development undertaken operates under the town planning scheme. Guidelines are also established with the Department of Planning on that. There is a document called Planning for Fire which enables developers, and also residents, to develop their properties to that degree. In my particular local government there is a development promotion unit and all initial development applications hit that particular committee. It represents all the services, such as health, engineering, building and environment. I also have a seat on that particular committee. At the very initial stages we were able to apply recommendations on how that development could be sustainable. From my aspect it is sustainable in terms of wildfire protection.

Mr ORGAN—Is your local government area forested? Is it open, grassy plains? What kind of area is it?

Mr Telfer—On top of the escarpment it has reasonably sized river valleys through it. It covers 644 square kilometres and about two-thirds of that is naturally forested, through both private property and state forest areas; there are catchment areas and other government-held land in that particular area.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have individual properties within forested areas which are an issue for you as a local firefighter?

Mr Telfer—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—You do?

Mr Telfer—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—That is quite common?

Mr Telfer—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—You were a little bit critical here of the so-called green and environment groups. You said they were suggesting that ‘... no fire can be good for the environment or communities.’ I am wondering if you were aware that no green groups or environmental groups are saying no fire totally, of course. Have you talked with environmentalists et cetera in your area about the whole issue of how to manage fire and how to manage these issues?

Mr Telfer—Yes, I have. That is probably an extension of the argument that when the more formal green groups put an argument forward and when it reaches a different level in the community, an individual householder, that a further extension of that viewpoint is taken down that fire must be bad, particularly with new residents in the hills area. We get a lot of complaints about people or brigades or even the Department of Conservation and Land Management undertaking burns and it is perceived that that it cannot be good for the environment. What happens to the birds, animals et cetera? By the time it reaches the shop floor, the extension of that idea tends to be ‘no fire’.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have an education program within your council about the fire regimes and what is happening out there, to let the community know about some of these issues, or not?

Mr Telfer—No. That is at a personal level.

Mr ORGAN—What about the council? Does it have any education program in place?

Mr Telfer—About four years ago council undertook to support CALM in its burning practices and publicly supported CALM. Right on the township of Mundaring is a state forest. In that particular area they perceived the best protection for that community was for CALM to continue with its burning regime and supported that publicly.

Mr ORGAN—Does your council have, in some areas, an interface zone kind of management plan where it is concentrating on areas such as interurban forest interface, or the property interface zone, or is it more focused on hazard reduction?

Mr Telfer—It would be fair to say that there is no distinct strategy of managing that interface zone, apart from encouraging the individual landowners, as I stated previously, to manage their own fire preparedness and fire protection.

Mr GIBBONS—I am interested in the third dot point of your submission where you say:

The Committee may however wish to explore the option of having a small core of seasonal firefighters in each district, utilising volunteer appliances for an initial rapid response strike team to bushfire incidents.

Are you talking about volunteers for this, or would they be paid officers of CALM?

Mr Telfer—I think that idea probably needs a bit more development and exploration. Certainly volunteers at the moment are going about their day-to-day business when their pager or the alarm goes off, which can result in an extended turn-out time. I have 10 brigades in the area, but if there was one where we could have people during the peak period available for immediate turn-out—which, in reality, only has to be during the daylight hours because that’s when the fire behaviour is going to be at its worst—the funding arrangement for that is probably beyond my capacity to develop.

Mr GIBBONS—On another tack, I do not know if you are aware of it, but Australian Defence Industries have designed and built about half a dozen prototype firefighting appliances which are all-wheel drive—there are four wheels but all-wheel drive. They have the capacity to have a major firestorm pass over the vehicle: the crew would be in a capsule which is totally

protected; it can spray foam on the four wheels while that is happening, to enable tyres to stay inflated. If they do not stay inflated, the rims are set below the differentials, which means it could be mobile—not very well but mobile enough to get out of danger. I think the purchase cost is between \$300,000 and \$400,000 per unit. Do you think a vehicle like that would be an asset in say, forest fires, in the areas you have had experience in? You would not want to have a fleet of them, obviously, but maybe one to deal with, say, an initial lightning strike fire, or something like that. Do you think that would be a worthwhile investment for somebody to make?

Mr Telfer—I would much rather have a larger fleet overall than spend that amount of money on one particular appliance.

Mr GIBBONS—This appliance can travel down a highway at 100 kilometres an hour and carry 3,000 litres of retardant also. It is very mobile.

Mr Telfer—Yes. I appreciate that. In the area I am in at the moment if a fire, in terms of intensity, is going to exceed around 3,500 kilowatts per metre of energy then direct attack is going to fail anyway. What I have to instil in the fire managers is the recognition of when that point is exceeded, because a different strategy in terms of fire suppression is going to be required. I would not want any of my firefighters in front of a situation that would require that level of protection for themselves. Certainly I am not going to argue against enhancing crew protection on appliances, but I believe if I could purchase six appliances for the same amount of money I would much rather have the six appliances because the overall firefighting capacity would be enhanced.

Mr GIBBONS—You have just answered my next question, because the Victorian state government declined to purchase those vehicles specifically for that reason. It believed that it would put crews in unnecessarily dangerous situations. I have a different view about that, however.

Mr ADAMS—You touched on two points in your submission: you said that home owners need to prepare to take responsibility for damage to their properties, with assistance from airborne appliances and insurance companies. Could you elaborate on that?

Mr Telfer—Yes. Over recent years, when airborne appliances have been available to us, there have been figures quoted that X number of million dollars of property has been saved, due to the aerial appliances. Given that insurance companies have a vested interest in those properties being saved, one would imagine that it would be a fair call for them to sponsor that level of protection for what they are insuring.

Mr ADAMS—You think the insurance industry is making some gains if large airborne appliances can save property?

Mr Telfer—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—And they should make a contribution.

Mr Telfer—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—Do you have any experience with airborne capacity aircraft?

Mr Telfer—Yes, since they have been introduced in Western Australia I have had an association with testing their capabilities and utilising them at incidents.

Mr ADAMS—Fixed wing, or rotary?

Mr Telfer—Both, yes.

Mr ADAMS—What is your opinion?

Mr Telfer—Certainly in the under canopy, where you are trying to build the fire line, the fixed wing appliances I have found to be very effective. In terms of property protection the rotary wing has certainly been an outstanding success in the last 12 months.

Mr ADAMS—What about the cost? You made a comment to my colleague here about the appliance that is made in his electorate. Because aircraft and airborne appliances are not cheap, what is your opinion on the balance of that?

Mr Telfer—The cost of the airborne appliances, of course, can be shared across a much greater area, and a greater area of the economy as well, as opposed to an appliance which will be stationed in one particular area. The other point is that proper management of the airborne appliances—that is, standing them down as early as possible when they have completed their task—will save money in the long run and make them more available for other incidents. I believe they are a cost effective tool.

Mr ADAMS—Do you think using present appliances that work in other capacities, rather than having designated fire appliances, is the way to go?

Mr Telfer—Yes. Hire them as you need them, I believe is the way to go.

CHAIR—Do you see that using fixed-wing aircraft is a more cost effective method of utilising aerial resources for initial attack of fires when fires first start—for instance, in the case of a fire first starting in a forested area, by lightning strike? Is fixed wing the most effective and cost effective?

Mr Telfer—In terms of the cost effectiveness, there are probably people better placed than I to comment on that. I know there have been a number of studies completed recently into exactly that relationship, particularly between the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, which utilise those, so I would suggest that it would be better to approach those agencies in terms of the cost arrangements.

CHAIR—But as far as the usefulness goes, in the situation of the lightning strike out in the bush somewhere, the early rapid response is fixed wing. You believe that some of the fixed-wing aircraft—the sorts of planes that are used for aerial spraying et cetera, but modified as a water bomber—would be the way to go?

Mr Telfer—Yes, certainly in the first strike option, the fixed wing, particularly in the natural environment, is going to be extremely effective, but from what I have seen in the past 12 months I do not believe there is a lot of difference between the rotary wing and the fixed wing in terms of their first strike capacity. Certainly in the turnaround capacity there is a lot of difference.

Mr GIBBONS—Just extending the vehicle side of it, do you think we need governments from all states, and the Commonwealth, to think very seriously about the types of vehicles that are used for firefighting, be it metropolitan or country? You made the statement that a lot of the appliances made for metropolitan firefighting are totally unsuitable for a bushfire environment, yet the crews are quite well trained to be able to do both. Do you think that governments need to start thinking about, in the future, maybe altering the types of appliances we use in our metropolitan area to make them have a dual purpose? Is that an encouraging way to go?

Mr Telfer—I would say that would be a fair call, particularly in the outer metropolitan areas, the urban brigades that respond in a wildfire capacity. That has occurred to a certain extent. There are a few brigades around here that would utilise appliances commonly known as the 2.4s. That is an option that is being further pursued, and the other way around as well; in terms of the rural environment there is a process to upskill volunteers to deal with structural incidents as well, in the local area. I think we are heading down that path, but perhaps an organisation such as AFAC is in a position to be able to develop that concept.

Mr GIBBONS—I think the problem would be there is not a vehicle that has been specifically designed to do both tasks. That gets back to the manufacturers, of course. They ought to be encouraged to start thinking about designing vehicles that are able to do both tasks so that when a metropolitan fire brigade buys vehicles, they are able to be used in that other environment and vice versa.

Mr Telfer—With the emergency services levy in Western Australia, certainly all appliances are being purchased through a common contract and are being built to a standard based on the risk of where it is going to be based.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your evidence this morning and also your submission. It is very useful for us.

Proceedings suspended from 11.01 a.m. to 11.24 a.m.

BOULTER, Ms Sandra Louise (Private capacity)

BRAUN, Mr Klaus, Principal, ICS Group

SCHULTZ, Dr Beth, Vice-President, Conservation Council of Western Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. I think you were all here previously when I read the formal aspect to do with evidence, so I will not read that again. We have a submission from the Conservation Council of Western Australia. We also have a submission from Mr Braun. We thank you for those submissions. They have both been authorised for publication and form part of the evidence for the committee. Would you like to start with some opening remarks before we have questions?

Dr Schultz—Thank you. I have been involved with forest conservation and conservation in general with the forest management agencies and their activities, including fire management, since 1975. I have been associated with the Conservation Council of Western Australia since about that time. I am a previous president and am currently vice-president. I have worked full time, unpaid, for the Conservation Council of Western Australia since 1990. I have training as a lawyer and practised as a barrister and solicitor in the eighties.

I have made this submission on behalf of the Conservation Council. I have circulated a document listing some issues that I would like to raise but, given the small amount of time available, some of them will be by mention only. I have invited Ms Boulter and Mr Braun to attend because I noticed that there was an imbalance in the presentation of views that this inquiry was receiving in Western Australia. I will note that Ms Boulter and Mr Braun made submissions that were rather insultingly included in the *Community Perspectives About Fire* and not, as they should have been, included in the refereed paper in the glossy first volume publication.

CHAIR—Sorry, can I clarify what you are saying: what glossy publication?

Dr Schultz—I believe this was attached to the CALM submission, the publication of the proceedings of the fire symposium.

CHAIR—It may well have been, yes.

Dr Schultz—I understand, from reading their submission, that was an appendix to their submission.

CHAIR—Sorry, I was clarifying what submission. I thought what you said you were talking about was what the committee had published.

Dr Schultz—No.

CHAIR—You are talking about something provided by the department—

Dr Schultz—A publication that arose out of a fire symposium held by CALM last year. It was done in two volumes: a volume of refereed papers and volume of unrefereed, so-called community opinion papers. I believe that the choice of what went in one and went in the other was unethical and unprofessional.

CHAIR—Right. Thank you.

Dr Schultz—There were papers by Ms Boulter and Mr Braun in this second volume, which is: *Community perspectives about fire*.

CHAIR—Thank you. I wanted to clarify what document you were talking about because I thought you were talking about committee documents.

Dr Schultz—No. My first point is species endangered by frequent fire. I will circulate copies of photographs of these species. The first is the Noisy Scrub-bird which was thought to have been extinct for 72 years and was rediscovered in a long unburnt area in 1961. The second is Gilbert's Potoroo, thought to have been extinct for 115 years, rediscovered in the same area in 1994, again surviving because this area had not experienced fire for more than 50 years, which rather gives the lie to the notion that the Nyungars burnt a third of Western Australia's south-west every three years.

The third is a very interesting new genus, the Sunset Frog. It has survived in long-unburnt peat lands. Associated with that I would like to refer to a scientific paper by Dr Pierre Horwitz and et al, *Fire and Organic Substrates*, again in this volume of refereed scientific papers. This shows on the back—I have copied the photograph—the impact of a single fire on peat lands, removing 1,000 years of biomass in a single, so-called prescribed burn.

The next species I refer to is *Banksia seminuda*, which is vulnerable to fire regimes carried out on a short rotation. It has a long juvenile period of from five to 13 years and, on the scientific evidence, you need to leave at least double the time to first flowering for a fire frequency, which would make the fire frequency for this species between 10 and 26 years. It grows in our south-west, in patches in the forest.

The other interesting points about this document—which I will circulate and would like tabled—are in two paragraphs: one is in the unpublished scientific report where I have bolded the relevant parts and the other is in the scientific report as it was published, having been censored by CALM to remove incriminating evidence of the impact of frequent fire on the environment. I would like to table and circulate those four documents and have them included in my evidence. In addition to that, there is 'The impact of fuel-reduction burning on the frog *Geocrinia lutea* in southwest Western Australia' by Dr Don Driscoll and that is appendix B. I will make these references available to Hansard. I have copies of all of them. The next point is species endangered by the season of burning. It has been said, I think in the CSIRO submission, that most burning occurs in autumn. In Western Australia 60 per cent of the burning occurs in spring, which is the worst time for most species of flora and fauna. The reference that I have submitted is 'The breeding seasons of birds in south-western Australia' by S.J.J.F. Davies. Serious effects on fauna might be expected from burning in spring which, as it is when most of the birds are nesting, is the worst time for birds in Western Australia. That seems fairly logical.

Appendix D, Dixon on flowering plants. This is a very interesting paper by Kingsley Dixon from the Kings Park and Botanic Gardens, the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority. I will note that I am very disappointed that Kings Park was not able to make a submission to this committee. Apparently, I was advised, they were not authorised to do so because their position, which is quite diametrically opposed to that of CALM, was said to be subsumed in the CALM submission. I think that bears further inquiry: why Kings Park and Botanic Gardens were not authorised to make a submission to this inquiry.

Kingsley Dixon and his points about the flowering of plants: again, you need to leave at least twice the length of time for the plant that can only generate from seed for a seed bank to build up and that is your frequency for fire; you cannot have it any more frequently than that. I table that report.

The CALM annual report demonstrates that 60 per cent—this is the last report available, 2001-02—of burns conducted by CALM in the south-west occur in spring. I am saying that we are, in the south-west of Western Australia, dealing with a fire impoverished environment. Burns have been conducted on a frequent, regular basis in the jarrah forests since the 1950s and in the kari forests since the 1960s. We are dealing with—and I think the evidence shows that we are dealing with—an environment from which species that are sensitive to frequent fire have disappeared. In support of that I will submit the table by Dr Stephen Hopper, a director of Kings Park and Botanic Garden, ‘An evolutionary perspective on south-west Western Australian landscapes, biodiversity and fire,’ where he, as a professional botanist and worldwide expert in his field, rebuts or answers hypotheses about fire and flora.

Species of flora that require longer than the five to seven years in jarrah forests or seven to nine years in karri forests will have disappeared from the environment. Likewise, in relation to invertebrates, research tends to look at just the time of the last fire.

We need to look at the fire before that and the fire before that, and I table a paper by Dr Alan York on the impact of frequent fire on invertebrates. You still get richness of species, but they are the species that you find after frequent fire. They tend to eliminate species that recycle nutrients, and this has serious implications for ecosystem health. If we are eliminating the decomposer species from the environment by frequent fire, that will have serious impacts on ecosystem health. The paper by Dr Alan York appeared in *Australia's Biodiversity—Responses to Fire*, biodiversity technical paper No. 1 published by Environment Australia.

You may have heard the ‘Believing the Balga’ hypothesis—that the Nyungars burnt the jarrah forest every two to three years—claimed to be proved by the black rings around the balga. That hypothesis hinges on a single sentence—‘If the balga burnt, then everything else must have burnt’—but there is no evidence presented to show that everything else burnt. The evidence is that, if the jarrah forest had burnt every two to three years, there would be no jarrah forest, because jarrah trees are fire sensitive for 15 to 20 years. If the Nyungars had burnt the jarrah forest every two to three years, there would no jarrah forest.

I table the report by Byron Lamont, ‘Believing the Balga’, where the key to their whole argument is spelt out. They simply say:

Were grasstrees deliberately lit (as apparently done by traditional Aborigines, D. Ward unpubl.), this seems a sure way to ignite the vegetation generally ...

The whole hypothesis hinges on that one sentence, and it does not stand up to the evidence.

The burning in Western Australian emanated from foresters wanting to protect jarrah forests from fires, many of which were due to logging itself; the massive amounts of debris created by the logging. The focus always comes back to forests. We seem to be continually talking about forests. Forests represent one per cent of Western Australia. What about the other 99 per cent of the ecosystems that are all being affected by too frequent fire? Ms Boulter will talk about the fires in the north-west. Most of your submissions, I think, have come from the forestry culture. We focus on forests, and they are only one per cent of Western Australia.

Every spring we get these dire warnings of the horror fire season to come. If there is a lot of rain, there is an enormous amount of vegetation and huge fires. If there is not a lot of rain, it is dry and huge fires. We get this every spring. It is like clockwork. The interesting thing is that CALM's fires burn and damage the very thing that they are meant to protect. I refer to a paper by Perry, Lenz and Watson, 'Relationships between fire, fungal rots and termite damage'. This shows that fires breach the cambium layer, fungi get in and you end up with jarrah trees with pipes down the middle. Jarrah regrowth is full of these trees that are useless for wood production, the very things that the fires are intended to protect. The second paper is by Dr Neil Burrows, 'Fire caused bole damage to Jarrah and Marri.' Fires are causing degradation in standing timber, a massive problem in our forests that are being managed for log extraction.

Tacking on this purpose or priority for burning to protect, maintain and enhance biodiversity, without providing any evidence that the burning is doing those things, is quite a sham. Burning for the protection of life and property and burning for biodiversity conservation would appear to be incompatible.

I will not say very much about 'Defending the culture'. I have mentioned the censorship and suppression of the research findings of CALM's own scientists who question its burning practices and policies, and personal attacks on scientists and community members who question this. I could talk about that at great length, but I will not. It includes activities that are not only unethical and unprofessional, but also unlawful.

In relation to financial incentives, there is actually a burn industry. There are government employees whose jobs depend on lighting fires. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that we get unnecessary burning because the people out doing the burning light the fires on a Friday so they run over the weekend and they get overtime; or do the burning over the weekend so they get overtime. They do not get to the fire in the shortest time, so the burn will get away. The attitude is, 'Well, it will burn itself out.' The CALM workers in the rural community look forward to a good fire so that they will get extra income to pay off their hire purchases. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of that.

CALM buys equipment during fires, when it seems that anything goes. We did a freedom of information inquiry on the Nuyts fire and CALM managed to buy a washing machine during the fire because apparently during a fire anything goes. Burns have been done to use up the CALM budget. We are unable to penetrate the sources of CALM's funding for fire.

I mentioned the vetting of personnel in my submission. Every year in Western Australia someone gets prosecuted for arson and they belong to a bushfire brigade. How do we address that problem? People who are, in fact, arsonists are attracted to these agencies. How do we deal with that?

In relation to the myths about Dwellingup, it was not a Dwellingup royal commission. It was a royal commission into the 1960-61 fires, of which Dwellingup was only about one-third. Controlled burning did not start in 1961, it started in the fifties. I raised in my submission questions of language. This may seem unimportant, but it has wider implications, including safety. I have read two dozen submissions and no-one has mentioned fire shelters. I think Mr Braun will talk about houses actually being fire shelters.

Fire patrols and, finally—my point—the philosophy behind this: what we are dealing with here is an underlying philosophy and an attitude, a world view, the anthropocentric attitude that everything has to give way to human needs, which ultimately is against our own self-interest and our health, safety and wellbeing. I will pass over to Ms Boulter, having grossly overrun my time.

Ms Boulter—Thank you for allowing me to speak today. I have worked at the Environmental Defenders Office for 3½ years as a specialist in planning and environmental law. I have been on leave for two months, and I have been in China, otherwise I would have made a submission to this inquiry on my own initiative. I am grateful that Beth has given me an opportunity today. Recognition of my expertise in planning and environmental law has just been given, with my appointment as the chief director of planning for the Shire of Augusta-Margaret River, which is impacted very much by south-west fires.

Western Australia is a third of our continent, and the resources that we have do not correlate to the resources you have over there, with less space, to deal with. The other unique thing about Western Australia is that it is still 90 per cent crown land. Less than 10 per cent of our land is in private ownership, so our government and our government agencies have an enormous role—a lead role—in managing our land the best that they can, and have the power to influence.

The IUCN, which is a biodiversity commission attached to the United Nations, has recognised that the south-west of Western Australia is one of the world's 25 biodiversity hot spots. It is the only biodiversity hot spot in Australia, so the impact is of enormous international consequence, let alone at national and local government level.

I am going to read what I wrote last night and if you would like to interrupt me, I would be more than happy, but to get through the points I want to make I think it is important, because you do not have a written submission from me.

CHAIR—I would like you to get the statement done—and Mr Braun, I think, has got something—so that we can then spend as much time as possible with questions.

Ms Boulter—The rights and powers of government employees and agencies and agents are found in legislation. The common law and case law precedents fill in the gaps as best they can when the law is silent or ambiguous. Where authority is given to burn our last remaining native vegetation, this authority and its circumstances should be abundantly clear, and it should be undertaken only in the way that parliament has considered acceptable. It is the job of our

parliaments to ensure that these laws are crystal clear. Where this authority is unclear the community and agencies clash, the law is brought into disrepute, civil disobedience ensues and civil litigation for personal and property damage is likely. Wildfire prevention managers are unclear about their legal role and this must be distressful to them as well.

Fire management law in Western Australia—and, I suspect, in the rest of Australia—is at best ambiguous. This means that it is difficult to interpret. The duties, obligations, rights and powers of fire managers are poorly described in legislation, which is numerous. I have published an article. I was invited to speak at the symposium and my paper has been reproduced in *Community Perspectives About Fire*. This volume, volume 2, states that none of these articles have been peer reviewed. This is incorrect. My article was referred by the department to our Crown Solicitor and the paper was reviewed and found to have no errors in it. I would like to commend the papers in this. It is crucial that funding be made available for these papers to be peer reviewed.

I heard one of the members of the committee ask, ‘Where’s the science? What can we turn to?’ CALM have advised in this book that these papers have been peer reviewed. I do not know by whom, and it would be of great benefit to all the community and Australia, because a lot of the law applies nationally, that both these papers are fully and independently peer reviewed. These papers are by scientists. They are not just community papers that have lesser standing. They are scientific papers, and my paper, as far as I am aware, is the only paper that has ever been delivered or published about fire and the law, because it is so complicated. It has also been peer reviewed and published in a national legal journal.

CALM is responsible for the prevention and management of wildfire on CALM managed lands, and I understand this responsibility is about to be extended to all unallocated crown land in Western Australia, but I am not aware of the legal mechanism by which this will be achieved or even if this will be a lawful delegation. Local government is responsible for fire management on private land and pastoral leases, except for major centres, where FESA is responsible. However, these roles are not clearly delineated. I heard a number of references to management plans earlier. You must remember that neither policies nor management plans are binding on the departments that administer them, so just because you have a management plan, it does not mean that the department will follow it, and if the department does not follow it the community cannot take action against the department; they are not legally binding in Western Australia.

The interpretation of the law by CALM employees is often open to challenge. This leads to disputes and unlawful activity, particularly around fire policy. This is hardly surprising because the 1,200-person department that CALM is, as far as I am aware, does not have an in-house legal department or employ one lawyer that its employees can turn to for interpretation—unlike our fisheries department, which is considerably smaller and employs a number of in-house solicitors to write their regulations and amendments to acts.

People die and are seriously wounded by fires. Substantial private property and public infrastructure are destroyed by fire. Burning native vegetation to reduce this risk, while balancing government’s other international and national obligations for environmental protection and conservation, is a policy decision for government—not for the various agencies or people with a vested interest in the burning industry, with the entrenched, antiquated positions found in the various burning agencies. Acceptable risks must be identified and made known to those who

live in wildfire prone areas, just as we accept the risk of having freeways that facilitate road deaths, and underequipped hospitals that do not save the life of every person that comes before them injured. These are policy decisions for government, which may of course be departed from in a particular circumstance.

Following a number of questions to me in my capacity as an Environmental Defenders Office solicitor and the invitation to speak at 'Fire in Ecosystems of South-West Western Australia' and 'Fire and the Law', I submitted an article which I have already discussed, and I have stated that I think these papers urgently need to be peer reviewed. I am also strongly of the view that a similar analysis of fire law from an environmental perspective, as my article is, should be undertaken, along the lines of this paper, and published for each state and territory. If you have a book of fire law, then you look for law reform where law reform is required, and you then can build on the law an overarching policy. It must never be forgotten that burning is just another form of clearing, and we all know what clearing has done to this country. Of all the rivers in our south-west, in this biodiversity hot spot, only one of them has not gone saline because of clearing. Burning is just another form of clearing.

I understand there is no-one here from Kununurra. I have acted for a number of clients in my capacity as an Environmental Defenders Office solicitor and I would like to put the views that they have put to me in that capacity. Satellite photos show a massive red plume of Kimberley soil flowing into the Cambridge Gulf. The soil is departing the Kimberley for the ocean because it is no longer stuck down by the perennial deep-rooted native vegetation that otherwise would bind it through flood, fire and drought, as it always has. About 39 per cent of our land is under crown pastoral lease. Pastoral lessees are prohibited from replacing native vegetation with other grasses, by the terms of their lease, without the permission of the Pastoral Lands Board. However, if native vegetation is burned, feral grasses such as buffle grass take over. The feral grasses are not deep-rooted, nor do they fix the soil to the land through deep roots. They burn more easily and they grow faster, but they support a greater number of stock, thereby increasing the productivity of the land and prolonging what is said by some to be an unviable industry, plus there is a great incentive to burn the native vegetation on pastoral leases and allow feral grasses such as buffle grasses to take over.

What is unclear—and, although I have formed a legal opinion about this, it is open to challenge because the law is ambiguous—is if burning a pastoral lease, either by aerial incendiaries or by allowing a spontaneous burn to continue unchecked, is clearing for the purpose of the clearing control legislation or unlawful destruction of native grasses for the purpose of our land act. Furthermore, even if it is unlawful, there is no-one to prosecute. There are a number of Kimberley antiburning conservation activists whom the committee would do well to hear. I believe they are simply not aware of this process because they live thousands of kilometres away. They do not get to be involved; they do not hear about it; they are nervous; they do not have the resources or the ability or the intellectual stamina to face a committee such as yours.

I heard you mention accountability earlier. This is a question clearly on your minds. It is absolutely crucial to identify the difference between moral and legal accountability. Moral and political accountability is what you face in the electorate. Legal accountability is who is going to pay for what. They are two different issues and they really need to be described. Again, all of the

issues that I am lightly touching on are addressed in this very long article that I have written about the liability of government agencies for escape of fire.

You asked about smoke pollution. The Kimberley is covered in smoke pollution for month after month after month. There is continual burning of thousands of hectares of land—continually burning. If you go up in a plane you cannot see anywhere any more. And you asked Mr Pearce what biodiversity is. It is defined in our laws. You simply have to look. It is defined in international conventions.

CHAIR—Mr Braun, you have something to say?

Mr McARTHUR—We must have some time for questions.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—These two submissions were not submitted. Four hundred and fifty other submissions were.

CHAIR—Mr Braun put in a submission. It is only Ms Boulter who did not.

Mr McARTHUR—It has just been tabled today, Chairman.

CHAIR—No. It was just that we did not have it in our notes. We had it all the time.

Mr McARTHUR—I would like some time for questions.

CHAIR—I am going to try and make as much time as possible.

Mr Braun—Certainly I will drastically change the way I address this committee. What is quite obvious here—and this is really my passion—is that there is a lot of emotion about fire: should we burn more, should we burn less? What is interesting, where I am coming from—from a wildfire risk community sector perspective—is that this emotion about needing to burn 40 per cent of the state forests this year, or whatever, or having things below a certain fuel loading distracts from property risk management. The focus of my submission is that we need fundamental change. I am hoping that we as a community and also you as the committee see through the emotional aspects to the underlying fundamental issues which need to be addressed—see these issues rather than the symptomatic issues—such as whether we need to burn 40 per cent or whether 38 per cent would do, or whether we could use alternative strategies. Alternative does not mean extreme; alternative means different—different strategies to minimise the risk to the community.

There is a lot of hype around in terms of wildfire risk, wildfire safety and what fires do. The media hype does not help that at all. Unfortunately I have been exposed to fire services in my previous life—I was the manager for wildfire prevention in the environment branch of FESA for the state—where comments were made by very senior staff that really what happens in fires is what they see on TV; they disregard factual information or research. From that perspective I would definitely encourage the committee to make sure you take account of factual information.

Since we are in Western Australia probably the most talked about issue is the 1961 Dwellingup fire. That is interesting, because I was not even born in 1961 and that was definitely a long time before I came to Australia. What has been stated is that we need to do more burning so that another Dwellingup does not happen. We heard it this morning and we will hear it again probably in the afternoon. When you look through the report—it was a royal commission—you can see that McArthur, who was probably one of the most valued forest fire behaviour scientists at the time, helped the royal commissioner with the inquiries. Dwellingup started to burn before the fire hit the town; it was an ember attack. I have a photo of Dwellingup here.

The report states that the forests around Dwellingup were hazard reduced below this magic eight tonnes per hectare or eight-year rotation, other than the regeneration area or research area. It is stated that the fire rapidly moved through areas that were burnt the previous spring, or were less than one year old. We could give you lots of these examples, but obviously in the time here we cannot.

I want to look at burning—and I am not suggesting we stop burning; I am really looking for a balanced approach to wildfire risk management. We had a fire at Mount Barker in Western Australia in December 2000 under extreme weather conditions. Unfortunately, I only have here a brief print of some work I have done previously. The Mount Barker area is in actual fact not a forested area as such; it has some remnant vegetation. The fire started through powerlines arcing in high winds. It started a fire in the grass under very extreme conditions. Within a very short time the fire ran into a 4½-year-old jarrah forest that had been hazard reduced previously by the landowner. It was hazard reduced on a big scale—it was definitely a roaring fire when he burnt it. The moment the grassfire—and it was very sparse grass—got into the stand, the stand crowned out, was completely defoliated, with fire intensities of some 20,000 kilowatts. Bruce Telfer earlier on referred to about 3,000 as what we can just put out with a fire appliance—maybe 4,000; it does not really matter. A hazard reduced forest fire is an order of magnitude hotter than a grassfire, which highlights the need to look at alternatives to hazard reduction burning—that hazard reduction burning on its own is insufficient.

That leads to the issue of whether we take a different approach and create safer communities which have the attributes that make them resilient—less vulnerable to wildfire—and display the appropriate behaviour. And I am also talking about appropriate behaviour being displayed by fire and emergency service personnel and the police. In the fire emergency and the forced evacuations in Canberra we saw people arrested, with handcuffs on, sitting on the road verge. How much training do our emergency services have in managing that situation? How much did we do in wildfire risk management training within the emergency services before the event to make sure that the community and the fire service were well prepared?

When we look at the alternatives, one is to create a slightly better community. The situation in Dwellingup and Canberra was similar. If there had been appropriate risk management strategies inside the town sites, it would not have really mattered—within reason—how big and hot the fire was outside. We would have minimised losses significantly. Canberra is an obvious example, where the fire ran well into suburban areas and there was significant separation between the hazard and the suburbs.

Having said that, we can also then achieve a balance between conservation and biodiversity requirements and between hazard reduction burning and community safety. If you create

communities that are resilient, that have the capacity to withstand major wildfires—which will occur, whether or not we burn—then we will have a little bit more flexibility and more opportunities in what we can do in terms of managing the vegetation for biodiversity values. There is obviously a lot of emotion here. Some parties believe, ‘Hey, the bush can take it all the time,’ and some parties do not. Senator Robert Hill, in, I think, the year 2000, made the following statement:

A report last year valued these global ecosystems—and our ecosystem is one of them—at \$33 trillion per annum—more than the global gross domestic product.

I would assume that globally we have exactly the same values—that we have corresponding values nationally, and in Western Australia. In order to maintain these we need to act now to preserve the environment. It is not something that just the Greenies are talking about. We need to talk about it as a society, as a community. By being a bit smarter, by being factual, by being better informed about wildfire risk management, we may just allow the space to maintain biodiversity in areas where it is needed.

CHAIR—Thank you. Before I go to the first question, both Dr Schultz and Ms Boulter made comments about submissions. Can I assure you that this inquiry was very extensively advertised, as all parliamentary inquiries are. Hundreds of letters were written to all sorts of organisations and bodies hoping that that would filter down as much as possible. I think we were quite successful because this inquiry has attracted amongst the most submissions that a parliamentary inquiry has received, from a very broad range of people. But ultimately if people do not make submissions we cannot, in our democracy, force them.

Mr McARTHUR—Dr Schultz, have you inspected the north-east of Canberra or Kosciusko National Park?

Dr Schultz—No, but my daughter was in Canberra and so I had a certain feeling for it. She is also a bushwalker and she has told me of her first-hand experiences in those areas.

Mr McARTHUR—What is your assessment of the damage in those three fires?

Dr Schultz—Severe, but given maybe 50 or 100 years without fire it would all recover. The problem is not just that fire but the fire before that and the fire before that. There is also the problem—and I do not know about the Eastern States—of decreased rainfall. Rainfall in Western Australia has decreased by 20 to 25 per cent since 1970. CSIRO says it is going to decrease further in the next century, maybe up to 60 per cent. So we have this severely drying-out environment, and if those areas do not get appropriate rain and get another burn—and some of those areas burnt again within a very short time—the impact for biodiversity and conservation will be very severe.

Mr McARTHUR—What do you think the impact on biodiversity is now, after those fires?

Dr Schultz—It would depend on when the previous fire occurred and the one before that, and it would depend on what sort of rainfall we get. Supposing this is one intense fire and there has not been a fire for—I do not know what the seeders need or what the resprouters need in times of becoming fire tolerant, so depending on that—50, 100 or maybe 200 years, it will all recover.

But the problem is that we are imposing or allowing fire after fire after fire and then looking only at the last fire and not the fires before that and saying, 'That's the fire history.' The fire history is all the sequence of fires, how frequently—

Mr McARTHUR—Let us stick to the question. The question is: what do you think has been the impact on biodiversity of the Canberra fire, the fire in the Kosciusko National Park and the fire in north-east Victoria which burnt 1.4 million hectares?

Dr Schultz—As I said, I do not know. I would need to know when the previous fire occurred and how long before the next fire occurs.

Mr McARTHUR—Are you saying there has not been much impact or there has been a dramatic impact as a result of this fire?

Dr Schultz—Of course; it has burnt everything. But the impact on biodiversity will depend on when the previous fires occurred and when the next fire has occurred. That is the answer.

Mr McARTHUR—The 450 submissions overwhelmingly are supporting fuel reduction burning. Why is it that you are suggesting that it is not a scientifically based operation in the interests of biodiversity when overwhelming numbers of the submissions we have received have supported that concept?

Dr Schultz—I would submit that Professor Whelan's submission did not support it, Dr Horton's submission did not support it and the CSIRO submission did not support it. As for individual community people, if these off-the-cuff individual submissions are to be given the same weight as the submission of a professional like Professor Whelan or CSIRO, then there is something seriously wrong.

CHAIR—Do you mean Professor Whelan of the University of Wollongong?

Dr Schultz—Yes.

CHAIR—I might suggest you read his evidence to the inquiry.

Dr Schultz—I will read his evidence. I am not saying we should not do burning, but it needs to be smarter and people need to be told that there is a trade-off. People need to be told that the burning that is being conducted now has, I believe, already resulted in loss of species and will continue to result in loss of species, and the papers that I have submitted in evidence will support that submission.

Mr McARTHUR—You say in your paper that there are myths about hazard reduction burning, one being that they are mild and controlled. It would seem to me—and this was the observation in north-east Victoria, Kosciuszko and Canberra—that they were very hot in the wildfire. What evidence do you have that hazard reduction burning has got hot?

Dr Schultz—I think Mr Versluis this afternoon will give you evidence that a burn that occurred in Sharpe block down in Walpole—

Mr McARTHUR—One burn?

Dr Schultz—Many burns get a great deal hotter than they are intended to be. That is why I have a problem with calling them prescribed burns. They do not follow the prescription. They get very hot and they burn more than they are intended to, for a whole range of reasons, including some that I suggested, and the people conducting these burns see no problem with them getting away and burning more than intended or getting hotter than intended. If you want, I can give you photos of where a prescribed burn, a deliberate burn, has caused crown scorch or actual defoliation. It happens.

Mr McARTHUR—How come the evidence before this committee, both on the ground and from witnesses, suggests that fuel reduction burn has been a very big factor in the wildfire not getting too hot, in not getting a canopy burn and, generally, in reducing the impact in the total forest burn? How come that is the position of most witnesses and from our own observations on the ground?

Dr Schultz—Again, I notice that we always come back to forests. Not all the burns breach the prescription, but some of them do, and they are the problem ones. Let us be honest about this. You light a fire in this environment, and there are so many fluky things like wind, the temperature soaring—and the poor old Bureau of Meteorology put in a very defensive submission—that you are putting that environment at risk when you light a fire, and we need to be smarter about it, as Mr Braun says. Yes, we need to do it; there will be sacrificial areas. But let us not pretend that these fires do no damage. The fires as they are being conducted do cause environmental damage.

Mr GIBBONS—Thank you for your submissions, all of you. I appreciate that Mr Braun has offered some alternatives, which leads into my question to Dr Schultz. I take it you would rather see no ground reduction burning.

Dr Schultz—No, I have never said that. This is one of the myths that are generated by our opponents.

Mr GIBBONS—All right, I appreciate that. We have to do it smarter, but what else could we do? What sort of recommendation would you like to see this committee bring forward to limit the dangers that bushfires create? We have seen what has happened in Canberra where your daughter lives: 500 homes damaged, four deaths. We have seen people in Linton die. It is a very serious problem. What sort of recommendation would you like to see this committee bring forward to the government or the state governments? What would you have us do?

Dr Schultz—Mr Braun suggested some things: fire-wise dwellings, planning, construction and, moving back from there, fire-wise surroundings. The CSIRO submission had some very good research into wooden decking, accumulation of debris in eaves and under steps and things like that. So there are fire-wise planning, fire-wise dwellings, fire-wise surroundings and then, moving out from there, a reduced area. But there are different ways of reducing the flammable vegetation and it is not necessarily through fire, because you get this immediate response from the fire weeds, whether it is exotic weeds or our plants, which respond massively to fire. You get a very quick build-up so that the protection offered by this burning reduction is very short-lived. All these things have to be looked at. We will have sacrificial areas where we forget about

biodiversity and where we are going to have to reduce the flammable vegetation. How wide that has to be is another problem, because the distance that embers can travel in a wildfire is absolutely frightening—kilometres and kilometres and kilometres—and, as Mr Braun said, Dwellingup was on fire before the fire got there.

Mr GIBBONS—Would you advocate permaculture on a long-term basis, where we try and encourage species that do not readily burn? I understand that some Australian species of trees do not burn at all. Would you advocate that sort of a solution in addition to what you have just said? Bear in mind that that does not happen overnight. We are talking about a culture change. It might take 100 years to achieve what you are suggesting.

Dr Schultz—I think people are looking at that already. I noticed that in one of the submissions they have already prepared recommendations of species to plant in your garden that will be better than others if you live in a fire-risk area. That is one of the things that could be looked at. But, if we are looking at protecting our natural biodiversity, in a biodiversity treasure-house such as the south-west of Western Australia that is not the way to go. There are areas in our natural environment that need to be protected from fire. The Noisy Scrub-bird and the Gilbert's Potoroo need vegetation that has not been burnt for 40 to 50 years. The natural environment itself needs to be protected. That has to be looked at, as well as life and property.

Mr GIBBONS—I would have little difficulty agreeing with you if it were not for lightning strikes, because we could preserve a big block of bush where those things live, but it can be struck by lightning and completely burnt. Do you accept that?

Dr Schultz—Lightning is very convenient to blame.

Mr GIBBONS—It starts a lot of fires, unfortunately.

Dr Schultz—Yes, it does.

Mr McARTHUR—It started fires in north-east Victoria—80 lightning strikes.

Dr Schultz—In relation to the famous Nuyts fire in Western Australia that Mr Pearce spoke about, there is a strong belief among members of the local community that that was arson, and it actually burnt in an area that, under the management plan, should have had a reduction program. It was rather ironic that the burn started in an area which, if the management plan had been followed, would have had reduction. It is blamed on lightning but there are local people who think that it was actually arson. There was a wildfire in D'Entrecasteaux National Park that I firmly believed was started by lightning; then I hear people doing research down there who say, no, again that was arson.

Mr GIBBONS—But arson is not the cause of all of them.

Dr Schultz—No.

Mr GIBBONS—The ones in the north-east of Victoria were definitely lightning strikes.

Dr Schultz—But in Western Australia most of the causes of fire are human: either arson or escapes.

Mr GIBBONS—The ones in the ACT were started by lightning strikes in the Brindabella Ranges.

Dr Schultz—As has been pointed out, we need to get on to them harder and quicker.

Mr GIBBONS—Yes.

Dr Schultz—If it starts in a remote area, the attitude is ‘Let it burn itself out’. Maybe that is not the way to go. Maybe in some of these areas we need to move in very fast and very hard, and not just in the plantations. CALM move in very fast and very hard. If a plantation is going to go up or immature karri or jarrah is going to go up, they move in very fast, but if it is down by Lake Quitjup in D’Entrecasteaux National Park they say, ‘Let it burn itself out,’ and it ends up burning 7,000 hectares.

Mr GIBBONS—You will not have any disagreement on that from this committee.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Dr Schultz, to inform you of what happened in the Eastern States this summer, I had over one million hectares of my electorate burn and there were over 80 lightning strikes, and, unless one is so bold as to label God an arsonist, I do not think there was any mischief in the ignition of those fires.

There is one particular issue that comes up time and time again, and that is the issue of biodiversity. There seems to be a bit of confusion as to what it actually means, but I do not want to discuss that now. The wildfires, or what some call feral fires, that occurred in the Eastern States not only burned as wildfires traditionally burn but actually scorched the earth. They were so hot in some areas that they burnt asphalt. An opinion has been expressed by some that the impact on biodiversity of those sorts of fires is less than the impact on biodiversity of prescribed burning. One of the people expressing that opinion was Professor Whelan. Would you agree with Professor Whelan?

Dr Schultz—I have lost track of the question.

Ms PANOPOULOS—It goes to the argument that the impact on biodiversity is greater through prescribed burning than through a wildfire burn.

Dr Schultz—It depends on what the prescription is, doesn’t it, and it depends on the wildfire. Again, it is the sequence and how frequently they occur. Frequency, intensity, season and extent are the four issues.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you share the concern of many people about biodiversity?

Dr Schultz—The current burning regime in our state—

Ms PANOPOULOS—No, not about burning; about biodiversity generally.

Dr Schultz—I think all Australians are proud of our biodiversity. We do not want to lose species.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In relation to your reliance on some of the scientific submissions and dismissing some of the non tertiary educated submissions as being off the cuff, could I put across the view of a bit of a cynic? When Professor Whelan from Wollongong, who you mentioned, appeared to give oral evidence to the committee, he admitted that the scientific research that he had relied upon to reach the conclusion that there was a worse effect on biodiversity through prescribed burning than through wildfires did not actually conclude that. The whole assumption of his paper was an opinion not based on scientific evidence. For others reading some of the scientific submissions as well, I would advocate a healthy dose of cynicism and also put on the record that the experience of people who have lived in areas for generations—managed and controlled the land—who are able to provide not only anecdotal evidence but also maps of the types of vegetation, is also very important.

Ms Boulter, you talked about clearing—and about burning being similar to clearing—and what that has done to the country. Would you say that there should not be any burning? By what proportion should burning be reduced?

Ms Boulter—I do not have a scientific opinion—I am a lawyer—and whatever my environmental position is is not relevant to this inquiry. The law needs to be clear. When you have a law that is clear for everyone, that is the starting point for managing fire issues in Australia and, in particular, in Western Australia. When the law is ambiguous, it is apt to be interpreted in a way that suits a particular purpose, and that allows for departure from what the parliament intended in its law making, and its agencies intended through their policy making.

In relation to my view about what clearing should occur, I refer to the national action plan and all the concerns that everyone in Australia has about rising salinity, clearing of native vegetation and clearing of trees. You are reflecting that, as a government, in your policies and in your national action plan. I can only say that that is a policy hopefully flowing on from clear legal guidance to the community.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you believe that the department cares about the environment, or do you think it is out to slash and burn it?

Dr Schultz—Which department?

Ms PANOPOULOS—CALM.

Dr Schultz—I think CALM cares about the environment. I think that they are trying to modify their burning, but the message is not getting down to the ground. We have had very good briefings from senior CALM staff in Perth—very interesting—and the reason that they have not been doing as much burning and reaching their 200,000 hectare target is because the seasons are too dry. They have not been able to do the burning. They are trying to do mosaic burning—small mosaics—which is much more difficult. There is a whole range of reasons that clearly show that they have a concern for biodiversity. Tacking onto every burn that they do—as priority 1 or priority 2—that it is for the protection, maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity is not good

enough. They have to provide the evidence that shows that the burn will protect, maintain and enhance biodiversity.

Mr ORGAN—Thank you for your submission. This committee has received over 450 submissions from a wide cross-section of the community—so-called experts and non-experts—and I personally find it refreshing to hear some of your evidence here today. As you would be aware, we have been receiving a lot of evidence and submissions from forestry industry areas, from volunteer firefighters and things like that in the fire management areas. Personally, I think this inquiry needs to be a bit more balanced in what we are talking about with regard to protecting the environmental biodiversity.

My colleague's question here, even after your submission, 'Do you support no burning?' shows that even when people do front up and say, 'No, we're not supporting no burning; we're supporting a sensible and measured approach,' the message is not getting out there. The green environmental groups are very clearly being marginalised here.

Thank you for an obviously very hurried submission and lots of information coming in. I think it would be good if the committee could, over the next couple of months, have a look at some of this evidence.

Ms Boulter and Dr Schultz, you mentioned that forests were only one per cent of Western Australia, and that is a concern that I had in coming here. We have heard a lot about fire management regimes by CALM in the south-western areas, but there is another 99 per cent that we have not heard about. What do you feel is the way forward for government over here managing that other 99 per cent? What is the answer going to be, rather than the whole focus here being on CALM and those south-western forests?

Ms Boulter—I think the savanna grasslands north of the Kimberley are a crucial part of our biodiversity. What I hear from my clients in the north-west—up around Kununurra, where the concerns about the burning are occurring—is that there are not the resources up there. A changed approach to fire management that is seen at the head of department level is perhaps starting to come through, but it is not reflected and being implemented on the ground by agents, who have perhaps been working there for 20 years doing things the way they do. There are not resources to rotate staff up there, which would be wonderful, or bring down community activists to address groups like you.

I take your point that there have been a lot of submissions, and I take your point that it was widely advertised. I was the remote and regional solicitor for the EDO. Some of these people do not get the daily paper and are not on the Internet. They have enormous concerns. They are also holding down jobs, as they have to earn an income, so they cannot hand-write a submission in time perhaps or do not feel confident enough to bring to you their concerns. There are two people in Kununurra who would give you a great perspective on the problems up there.

Mr ORGAN—You feel that this committee has not been getting a measured, even-handed perspective on what is really happening out there?

Ms Boulter—I have been in China and I have not looked at all the submissions. I have been advised that what you are hearing is not a balanced, across-the-board view of the burning issues

in Western Australia—and I mean ‘burning’ in every sense of the word, with no pun intended. Fly to Kununurra in the burning season: you will not be able to see a thing.

There is a health issue and there is an issue with the way that it is monitored. There just are not the resources. The pastoral lessee rings up the local shire from 1,000 kilometres away and says, ‘I need a burn permit.’ They say, ‘Sure, I’ll fax you one.’ Hello? Who is assessing it? Who is checking? Who is saying, ‘Is this necessary?’ It is only legal if it is for hazard reduction. But if he is burning for some other reason you would not know. Even if it is an unlawful reason, who is going to do anything about it? Who has the power to prosecute? Who has the power to implement the good laws and the good policies we have? Where are the resources to implement them out there, 2,000 kilometres away in the wild west?

Dr Schultz—The agency, CALM—which has responsibility for our Wildlife Conservation Act and the protection of all native flora and fauna in Western Australia—needs to have more people who are not foresters. They need ecologists with expertise in ecosystems other than forests. I would agree with previous submissions in that they need more resources so that they can take on more people to implement better fire management policies in the 99 per cent of Western Australia that is not forest.

Mr ORGAN—Are you suggesting CALM has a conflict of interest in that it is managing both logging and harvesting of forests and also managing the parks and wilderness service?

Dr Schultz—The Forest Products Commission manages the sale and extraction of logs. CALM manages state forests as well as all the conservation estate. But I think they are still top-heavy in the area of foresters. Up until the seventies, the old forests department could not employ anyone with a degree other than forestry. That was changed. Forestry was amalgamated with Parks by the CALM Act, which happened in 1985. Until the Court government in 2000 split these apart again, we did have a very serious conflict of interest in that the same agency that sold logs and other forest products was also responsible for protection of all native flora and fauna and monitoring and policing the logging operations.

Mr ORGAN—But we have been told that there is no conflict between forestry and biodiversity protection.

Ms Boulter—Do you mean legally?

Dr Schultz—Between logging and—

Mr ORGAN—That is what we are being told here.

Dr Schultz—Yes, I did hear Mr Pearce say that. It is not true. There are a number of species that have become extinct from the forest region. Extinction cannot be put down to one cause. Logging and burning have certainly contributed to the extinction of certain species, plus there is the old saying, ‘Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.’ The fact that they do not have reports on loss of species because of logging and burning does not mean that they have not gone. We still do not have a comprehensive flora and fauna survey in the south-west.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have anything to say about Mr Pearce’s comment about the wilderness areas not necessarily being—

Dr Schultz—Yes. It is partly to do with the topography in Western Australia. It is very flat and you can put roads anywhere. That is the reason that we could not find an area bigger than 8,000 hectares.

Mr ORGAN—Has previous logging been one of the causes for the—

Dr Schultz—Of course. All this land was managed by the forests department and that department was set up to provide logs to industry. It put roads through, it supervised logging and it sold the logs. That is why there are roads everywhere—to facilitate the logging industry. That is why they could not find an area larger than 8,000 hectares that does not have roads in it. I think Mr Versluis, if he has time to speak to you this afternoon—he is on the Walpole Wilderness Advisory Committee—will have a few things to say about the Walpole Wilderness Area.

Mr ADAMS—Thank you for your evidence. We are really talking about land management, aren’t we? We are talking about how we manage land. It is humans versus biodiversity, which we have touched on a bit here today. I am interested in how you think we manage that, because you are certainly in there for biodiversity. I think we will have some pressure on us to make decisions about human beings versus biodiversity. There is the argument that, if it comes down to humans or biodiversity, biodiversity will be sacrificed. Do you have a view? Do you want to comment on that?

Mr Braun—The interesting aspect is that we are still looking at some dramatic issues—how many percent should be burnt or can be burnt? Less or more? With regard to your question about humans versus biodiversity, I am quite passionate about saying ‘Let’s do it together’. It is not one against the other; it is joined. I believe that, by moving away from the hype to better informed issues, there is a huge opportunity to join the needs of the community, community safety and sustainable communities with sustainable environments. Really, by having a fundamental change to proper wildfire risk, rather than hazard management, we will achieve that. There will be compromises, but we will achieve it.

Mr ADAMS—Of course. That was in your submission and I was going to ask you about it, Mr Braun. You spoke earlier about the comprehensive fire risk management approach, and you spoke about it then. What is the cost of that? How do you get there? Do you want to elaborate a little on that?

Mr Braun—Yes. We had a project which we completed fairly recently with the city of Albany, which is down south. It is a local shire actually, not a city. It is 150 kilometres across. We had exactly that problem. They have a very proactive council that wants to know where they will be in 10 or 15 years. They have high biodiversity values and they have high community safety risk issues. The implementation, in fact, is cheaper than what it costs to maintain a massive response force and a significant hazard reduction burning effort. That is just in terms of implementing it. The savings are even bigger when we look at the reduction in risk and sustainable economies. If, on top of that, you add biodiversity values—whether we can quantify it or not, I do not know; that is another story altogether—the savings are incredible.

Mr ADAMS—But who is going to carry the political risk to implement that sort of change?

Mr Braun—In this case the local council, with some 30,000 residents, is leading the way in Western Australia. It requires leadership. It requires no drastic changes with crazy ideas; it just requires fundamental changes and well-informed decision makers.

Mr ADAMS—They are not going to close fire stations or anything?

Mr Braun—Not at all. They maintain their fire services and they increase training. They increase awareness—not just in the firefighting but also in the risk management aspects. In the way we hire firefighters for fire brigades, we might have to hire wildfire risk managers as well, not just a few fire response—

Mr ADAMS—Are we talking about changing the culture of the community?

Mr Braun—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—I come from Tasmania where people stay in their homes. This seems to be a new phenomenon that is starting to emerge.

Mr Braun—And put systems in place. In this case we have a communications system, a consultancy system, between conservation groups, friends' groups for reserves and the local fire brigade. We need to break down those barriers. We can do things together. Each one needs to understand the other's needs. That way, in the long term, there will be massive savings in both the cost of implementing fire protection and the savings in terms of minimising risk impact.

Mr ADAMS—Sure. We probably still have a long way to go.

Mr Braun—We definitely have.

Mr ADAMS—With regard to the ownership of property and what we have done over the years, Ms Boulter, you are basing your submission on the law and the lack of law, basically. We have grown up to deal with fire with a whole range of philosophical reasons as to why we are where we are at the moment. You are suggesting that we start to define that in law with regard to who has started a fire or who is responsible for the fire, the suppression of the fire et cetera. That must be a complex issue. I have not read your paper, but I certainly will.

Ms Boulter—The paper does describe it. There is no doubt that none of us have a right to burn our native vegetation without the authority of the law. Government agencies and their employees only have their powers from legislation. They need to be able to look to that legislation to see what their powers are. If that legislation is ambiguous then that (a) leaves them a bit doubtful about their role and (b) allows them perhaps to espouse a view that the law says such and such—but it actually does not, quite clearly. A view may be promoted that I have the right or the power to burn this particular land in this way because the law says I can, but in fact the law does not say that. It may, at best, ambiguously infer that.

The other thing is that the law is different in Western Australia for fire management on private land, on crown land, on crown land that is unallocated crown land, on pastoral lease land, on a

managed reserve and on an unmanaged reserve. The law is different for each one of those areas. Who is responsible for what? That is the starting point. You, as a government, are empowering government agencies to burn land on your behalf. That power needs to be very clearly stated, and at the moment it is not. It is ambiguous, so then it is open to interpretation, and, as I said, you get people arguing about what it means, you get civil disobedience and you get agencies taking on jobs that perhaps they are not empowered to do. Then you have litigation because someone says you cannot do that. That is when you are exposed to damages, because an agency has gone off and done something it is not empowered to do and something has burnt down and then the agency is sued for damages.

I was not saying that you need more law. I think the law needs better integration and the ambiguities need to be clarified. That is in Western Australian law, but a lot of the law that I have addressed in this paper is the common law which then applies, which fills in the gaps where we do not have written-down law.

Dr Schultz—There is a point I would like to make about that. Many people assume that CALM is responsible for fire management on all sorts of lands, but it is not. Poor old CALM has the finger pointed at it when it is not CALM that is responsible.

Mr Braun—Mr Adams, to come back to your concern about implementation and fundamental change. The Western Australian 2000 fire in Mount Barker was really a mini-Canberra—we did things smaller that time; usually we do things bigger. We had a community living in a low-hazard area but, because of the behaviour and actions of residents as well as the fire emergency services and police and so on, they were at extreme risk when the fire impacted on them. The standard strategy would be more fire trucks, or better fire trucks, better everything, and more hazard reduction burning. That is the old, traditional approach.

Neither of those would have made any difference on that day. If you had focused on helping the community be more resilient, including vegetation management, including education and behavioural issues, it would have made a significant difference. That would have been at a much lower cost than fire trucks and burning and it is not even discussing biodiversity values. That may highlight how simple it could be, providing we have some visionary leadership in terms of fundamental change. Canberra would have been exactly the same, unfortunately.

CHAIR—I want to go back to that point about law, Ms Boulter. The committee received quite extensive evidence in both New South Wales and Victoria, but I think particularly in Victoria, where land-holders were totally burnt out as part of the fires. It was pretty emotional evidence from people finding it very difficult, six months later, to come and tell us about their story of losing everything—and I mean everything—from fires that started on public land. We also had evidence that some of those fires perhaps should have been put out a lot more quickly—they were not attacked—and also the evidence was that perhaps they would not have been as intense and as big if some fuel reduction had been done, which had not been done for some time.

Those people received no compensation at all, not even for the fences that adjoined the public land. Is that a part of the law that you are saying is just not clear? Or would it be your view, in those situations, that those people probably are legally eligible for some compensation?

Ms Boulter—My view is probably not relevant in that I am just putting a legal position but the legal—

CHAIR—You did not want to make a comment before about environmental things because you said you were a lawyer.

Ms Boulter—Yes.

CHAIR—I have asked you a legal question now.

Ms Boulter—Whether there ought to be compensation is not a legal question. That is a policy decision for government.

CHAIR—Can I put it in another way, then. Is it your view that the people who are responsible for that public land, the government agencies, are culpable in some way legally?

Ms Boulter—They may well be culpable. The way they would be culpable is if an employee were off on a frolic of their own, as the legal phrase goes, so that the employee misunderstood the legal rights and obligations in terms of their job and went out and burnt in a way that was unlawful. Then the landowner may well have a claim against the department. If a department is complying with a policy, following a policy they have about fire burning and something happens which causes property damage, then legally the landowner is unlikely to be able to avail themselves of common-law damages, because the case law says that if a government agency is implementing a policy then it is unlikely to sustain a common-law action in damages.

But you have to remember that written-down laws prevail over the common law. The state governments or the federal government could pass a law about compensation for landowners in that situation. As far as I am aware, it is the common law that prevails in Western Australia because we do not have a written-down law about it. The common law would say, 'If they were following a policy, they would not be entitled.' Whether they should be entitled probably is not a question that I am qualified to answer.

CHAIR—If it could be shown that the policy was to let the lightning strike burn and not attack it quickly and that then became the fire that burnt out the landowner, what you are saying is probably 'Tough luck'.

Ms Boulter—A court may find that that is the government policy; it is a valid policy; it has been approved by the government, then that is what the government wants. Courts do not like to interfere with the operation of government. If it is an approved policy, that may well be the answer to the court. I am not saying there are not exceptions. It is a very difficult area of law. I have only skimmed over it and I have spent a page on it in the paper, but basically the landowner who has been totally burnt out will be looking for a way that the agency has not complied with its statutory obligations. If they cannot find that it has not complied with its statutory obligations, then they will look at its policies and see if it has departed from its policies. Have I answered your question?

CHAIR—Thank you, yes. We probably could have some more questions but unfortunately with such a huge number of submissions and so many parts of the country to visit, I am afraid

we will have to call it quits there because we will run out of time otherwise this afternoon. Thank you for your submissions and your additional information, which will all form part of the evidence we will use as we work through.

Ms Boulter—I want to make sure that this article is included.

CHAIR—I am pretty sure it was part of the information provided by the department, but we will take an additional copy.

Ms Boulter—This peer review one is slightly different from the one that was in the department's publication.

Mr ORGAN—We have a copy of that one.

CHAIR—Okay.

Ms Boulter—That is the main thing. I would be happy to come and address the committee on any legal aspects in a broader way if that were wanted.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

[12.44 p.m.]

UNDERWOOD, Mr Roger John, Chairman, The Bushfire Front

CHAIR—Welcome. Your submission has been received and authorised for publication and is part of the evidence. I invite you to make some opening comments and then we will have questions.

Mr Underwood—We greatly welcome the opportunity to make the submission, because one of the Bushfire Front's principal objectives is to have an inquiry into bushfires in Western Australia before there is a major disaster, not afterwards. This represents a significant opportunity for us and a good thing. We are disappointed that the whole committee is not here today, but we understand the reasons for that and are grateful to those of you who have travelled to Western Australia.

I have made some notes which support my verbal submission today, and I am happy to table them with you. Perhaps they could be passed to members who are not here today. The members of the Bushfire Front are experienced forest and bushfire managers and scientists. Our concerns are not sectional or parochial, nor driven by ideology. What we want to see is a system of bushfire management in south-western WA. We are not focusing today on the rest of WA. We want to see a system that effectively minimises the occurrence and the impacts of large, high-intensity bushfires. It is our view that high-intensity fires threaten the environment, as well as threaten lives and other human assets.

It is very easy to define the essential elements of a best practice fire management system. There are six or seven of them. There needs to be a policy at the national level and at state level; there needs to be clear legal accountability for bushfire planning and for outcomes; we need to have a professionally led organisation which is responsible for fire management; we need independent monitoring and public reporting into bushfire outcomes; we need ongoing research and development; and we need effective programs of community education.

We believe that WA is uniquely placed to be able to demonstrate and implement a best practice bushfire management system. We are better placed than are the people in the Eastern States. This is because, compared with the Eastern States, our summer climate is highly predictable; we have an excellent record of research into bushfire behaviour, bushfire ecology and bushfire practice going back 80 years in this state; and we have 80 years of professional experience. Our forests are relatively uniform. We do not have the mountainous terrain that they have in the Eastern States.

Furthermore, we have field-tested in Western Australia two alternative systems of fire management. From the 1920s to the 1950s, there was a system in which very little prescribed burning was done. From the late 1950s and early 1960s onwards, the fire management system incorporated prescribed burning. What we found was that, in terms of meeting the overarching objective of preventing community and environmental damage by high-intensity fires, the former system was a failure and the latter system was a success.

We cannot claim to currently have a best practice fire management system in Western Australia. What do we see instead? There is a mishmash of legislation and policy, there is no clear accountability for outcomes, and fire management is partly the responsibility of a government agency and partly the responsibility of numerous uncoordinated local government authorities.

For various reasons, CALM has not been able to maintain an adequate level of fire prevention work in recent years, and there is a backlog of fuel accumulation. There are other problems that you would have heard about with respect to the availability of experienced trained staff, firefighting equipment and trained operators. Finally, as you have heard already, huge unroaded wilderness areas are currently being introduced into south-western forests. Whatever your view about the rights or wrongs of wilderness, the certainty is that bushfire management will become even more difficult in these areas than it is already.

In WA, as in the USA and as in the eastern states, there is mounting pressure towards greater emphasis on fire suppression and less emphasis on fire prevention. The problem with focusing on suppression is that suppression will always fail when there are multiple fires in heavy fuels under severe weather conditions. In WA, there is no capacity whatsoever for independent monitoring and public reporting of bushfire outcomes. This means that the public and our political leaders are generally not aware of the exact state of play or they only hear what they are told by agencies with a position to defend or environmentalists with an ideology to promote. What we need is an independent organisation charged with assessing actual performance against objectives and targets and reporting annually to government and to the public.

In general, the Western Australian public is poorly informed about bushfire management and bushfire science. The European idea that all fires are bad still predominates. The question of Nyungar burning is interesting but irrelevant, because the merest understanding of natural fire frequencies through lightning-caused fires and the way fires will develop in fuels in the absence of suppression indicates how frequently the forests would have been burnt pre-European settlement.

Unfortunately, opposition to prescribed burning has now become well embedded in some sections of the community, and people are convinced that it is doing serious harm to the environment. This poor level of understanding has permitted a situation where bushfire policy is being dictated by people who are not threatened by bushfires. What we have seen in the last two years in WA is an increase in the number and size of serious high-intensity bushfires. These fires cause defoliation, loss of soil, pollution of waterways, death of wildlife and huge volumes of smoke. The fact that these fires did not burn into suburbia meant that they attracted little media or political interest, but the key thing about them is that they gave an indication of what was ahead.

We support CALM's fire management policy, particularly their fuel reduction burning program. We believe that their burning is professionally conducted, is based on credible research and takes into account the need to protect the environment, as well as human values. However, CALM are subjected to significant external pressures and constraints, and these have resulted in less burning being done and in fuels building up.

This is not just our view. CALM's own internal review, known as the Muller report, confirms the serious situation which has been allowed to develop. It points out that the fuels in south-western forests are now heavier than they have been at any time since the 1950s. The largely bushfire-free era enjoyed by Western Australians since the 1960s is drawing to a close.

It is our view that firefighters will generally be able to contain most bushfires in most seasons with the current level of fuel reduction burning and if current standards of suppression capability do not further decline, but if fuels continue to accumulate they will be unable to handle multiple fires, even under normal weather conditions, let alone under the sorts of crisis conditions that you get when there is a heatwave at the end of February, when there are lightning storms or when there is something like Cyclone Alby. In these situations, as has been shown dramatically in the Eastern States, firefighters are simply overwhelmed. No numbers of fire appliances—airial or ground—can handle them, and the result is large, intense fires driving into rural communities.

We see a number of south-western towns very clearly being threatened by fire. For example, Denmark, Walpole, Pemberton, Margaret River and Yallingup are all at risk, and we believe that nearly all of the outer suburban areas in the ring around Perth are vulnerable to serious fires driving in from the forests beyond. Mr Chairman, we are well aware that we are addressing here a federal inquiry, not a state inquiry, so we have concluded our report to you with some recommendations that we believe you can take back to the federal parliament.

We believe that there is a significant need for a national bushfire policy in Australia and that this should be promoted. As part of that policy, the federal government should try to develop a memorandum of understanding or some other form of agreement with the Western Australian state government which sets out the conditions under which federal funding is given to WA for fire management work. We believe that federal government funds should be given to WA, but the situation under which they are given should be that there is a proper best practice fire management system in place which emphasises prevention as well as suppression and is subject to independent audit and public reporting of outcomes compared with objectives and targets.

We believe that the federal government should continue to fund bushfire research, including research undertaken over here. From the standpoint of addressing the concerns of people opposed to prescribed burning, a priority perhaps should be to clarify pre-settlement fire frequency through studies of grasstrees and modelling actual fire occurrence. We believe the federal government should continue in its current role of facilitating national officer level and scientist level liaison, and liaison between Australian and international fire and land management services. We think that the federal government should develop a public education campaign aimed at informing Australians about the real nature of fire in the Australian environment and its natural place, as well as the threats.

Finally, Mr Chairman, there has been some discussion today from several of the previous witnesses about the Dwellingup fire. Three members of my committee were present in Dwellingup on the night the town burnt, and they are all present in this room today. We are not speaking from a theoretical perspective; we are speaking from the perspective of our own personal experience in these matters. I table my notes.

CHAIR—Yes, thank you. You would have heard that Dr Schultz was particularly concerned about prescribed burns that escape and burn a lot more than they are intended to or burn a lot hotter. Mr Braun, who also gave evidence, in his submission said that existing bushfire management practices and systems appear to be adequate for some 95 to 98 per cent of fires. He says that it is really only two to five per cent that might escape or burn more than they are intended to. That is how I read it anyway. What is your experience or your people's experience with prescribed burns and the adequacy of managing them?

Mr Underwood—Prescribed burns are relatively easy to manage in a jarrah forest. They are relatively difficult to manage in a karri forest, where there is a complex mixture of fuel types and forest types. It is not usual to see prescribed burns in a jarrah forest—which occupy most of the Western Australian forest area—running into problems. Occasionally, there will be unforecast weather conditions that might lead to problems. The thing to remember is that, even if a prescribed burn escapes, it escapes under prescribed burning weather conditions, so the escape—although it has to be rounded up and dealt with—is not usually an intense fire.

CHAIR—Do those figures that Mr Braun uses sound—

Mr Underwood—I am not sure exactly what he is saying there. He could be saying something that I agree with and that is—an old saying amongst fire managers—that it is 10 per cent of the fires that give you 90 per cent of your problems. If he is saying that, I agree with him. Generally, the firefighting services in WA are able to cope with the other 90 per cent of the fires that occur. When you get bad weather conditions, heavy fuels and multiple fires, that is when you run into big strife.

Mr McARTHUR—You raised an interesting issue of fire management from the federal perspective. You would be aware of section 44 in New South Wales, where if the fire becomes category 2 or 3 the Commonwealth will contribute to a natural disaster fund. How do you see that scenario of states having a disaster and then the federal government contributing quite often large sums of money, if aircraft are involved? Do you see a role for the Commonwealth or do you see this attitude that suppression then becomes the key issue rather than prevention, because of the large funds that could flow from the Commonwealth?

Mr Underwood—I will answer that question in two ways. Within the network of bushfire managers that I deal with, the fact that the federal government steps in and provides money when a fire reaches a certain point is regarded with a little bit of behind-the-hand laughter, to some degree. The thought is that it does not matter how we go in setting up our thing; if things go bad the feds will always pay for it. There is that side of it.

The second side of it is that I do not believe that the federal government at this stage takes a proactive enough stance in saying to the states, 'Yes, we will help to fund your firefighting, we will help to fund your post-fire reconstruction and we will help with disaster relief, but we will do it provided you can demonstrate to us that you have established an effective fire management system, a system which can be independently audited as being effective and meeting best practice requirements as we set them out.'

Mr McARTHUR—That would be in fuel reduction burning and in attacking the fires proactively when they first—

Mr Underwood—No, it is wider than that. A best practice fire management system starts with legislation and policy and includes a lot of other things, including fire prevention work and fuel reduction work. I am looking at it as a system—

Mr McARTHUR—It would appear to the committee, though, that in the Canberra situation there was not an aggressive attack on the lightning strike at McIntyre's Hut. There were questions about the amount of fuel reduction burning undertaken. Do you think you could put that into legislation, in terms of the federal government's position?

Mr Underwood—I am not sure how you would put it into legislation. I do not know the answer to that question.

Mr McARTHUR—Could you put it into a policy position, do you think?

Mr Underwood—Yes. I think it can be taken into a policy position very readily. The question of legislation I am not so sure about. I would be happy to think about that and come back to you later.

Mr McARTHUR—It seemed apparent that suppressing the fire in the first instance was not a key prerogative of the Canberra fire authorities, and that is supported by the recent statement. How do you see the accountability of the various government departments and ministers in this whole argument? If a fire gets away, who could be accountable if they had not undertaken prevention activities?

Mr Underwood—At the last count here, there are five different ministers in the Western Australian government who have fire responsibilities of different sorts. There is a minister for the environment, there is a minister for emergency services, there is a minister for police, there is a minister for planning and there is a minister for local government.

Mr McARTHUR—What would be your recommendation?

Mr Underwood—Our recommendation is that there be one minister within cabinet who is clearly accountable for bushfire planning and for bushfire outcomes.

Mr McARTHUR—Would you have that in legislation as well?

Mr Underwood—Yes.

Mr McARTHUR—What about those groups who have another view on that who are not accountable? Do you have a view on them?

Mr Underwood—I think it is easy to have a view on something where you do not have to do it yourself or are not held accountable for the results. I think there is a growing tendency in several areas in Western Australia at the moment where people have quite powerful influence over what is done but cannot themselves in any way be held accountable for what happens.

Mr McARTHUR—In the final outcome in a major bushfire?

Mr Underwood—Yes.

Mr GIBBONS—I have just one question, and it is not a very pleasant one. We have had evidence from other states suggesting that some of the professional firefighters were a bit reluctant to suppress fires initially, because there was an opportunity for them to earn some more money in overtime. Nobody has suggested that CALM officers were involved in that sort of practice. I personally find it very offensive that there are people who have suggested that. I think it is just rubbish. These people put their lives on the line in a lot of cases. I understand that your experience is as a fire control officer—that is part of your background?

Mr Underwood—Yes.

Mr GIBBONS—Have you ever seen evidence of that?

Mr Underwood—I have never seen it, and I reject it totally.

Mr GIBBONS—Good.

Mr Underwood—It is a very nasty allegation. I also point out that the people making the decisions about whether or not to attack or how to attack a fire are generally not the people who are earning overtime. They are usually officer level people who are employed in a professional capacity. They are not people employed under an award, where they get overtime for extra hours. If you went to any regional office in CALM or any control centre run by the fire and emergency service, you would find that the senior people making the command decisions are not people who earn overtime.

Mr ORGAN—I see here that you are the former general manager of CALM.

Mr Underwood—Yes.

Mr ORGAN—The membership group obviously has a lot of experience there in forest management and bushfire management. You stated in your introduction that people are convinced that prescribed burning is doing serious harm to the environment. Why did you make that statement? Do you think they are wrong?

Mr Underwood—I hope I said ‘some people are convinced’, not ‘all people’. Yes, I believe that if prescribed burning is done professionally—and what that means is that there is a variation in the regimes from one year to the next, in terms of the time between fires, the season of fires and the intensity of fires—all the evidence I have seen is that a professionally designed, prescribed burning program is not a threat to biodiversity or the environment. We have heard some evidence today about species. The Noisy Scrub-bird, for example, was declared extinct in Western Australia 20 years before the forests department came into being in 1920, so it is hardly likely that its extinction was caused by the prescribed burning by the forests department. The subject is very tricky because ideology about forests enters into the equation every time you deal with this. There are people who have an ideological position with respect to letting nature take care of itself, and that affects their attitude towards prescribed burning.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have an ideological position on burning?

Mr Underwood—My ideological position is that burning is a tool which can be safely applied and which will help to protect Western Australians from damage from high-intensity bushfires.

Mr ORGAN—Does your group contain any environmentalists or conservationists?

Mr Underwood—We are all conservationists.

Mr GIBBONS—Good answer.

Mr ORGAN—I know you say that, but, from the list of your members and their experience here and from reading your submission, there is not a lot of mention here about protecting biodiversity and ecological values and things like that. A lot of it is—and rightly so, to a certain degree—focusing on protection of life, limb and property. That is one area, but it does not appear that your group has a broad community perspective.

Mr Underwood—I think that is quite wrong.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have evidence to present?

Mr Underwood—In the first place we are all members of the community. We live in the community, so we are part of it. In the second place, the fact that we may not be members of an environmental activist group does not mean that we do not have concerns for the environment.

Mr ORGAN—Do you have concerns that there has been too much burning of the forests?

Mr Underwood—I do not have concerns that there has been too much burning. I do believe that over the years the approach to burning has evolved and has become better since the 1950s and 1960s and that is a natural progression, as professional people have adjusted what they have done in relation to the inputs from experience and from research. To see the sort of approach that is taken towards burning now, you only have to look at the way the CALM burns are designed to minimise the impact of smoke coming into the city. This is something that has only come in in the last 10 years, but it is extremely well done and is an indication of the way the system has been changed to meet certain other new objectives.

Mr ADAMS—Thank you very much, Mr Underwood. I wanted to make sure we got that cleared up: that your organisation is not opposed to looking after biodiversity and that you do not believe that a fire prevention regime destroys biodiversity.

Mr Underwood—We have confidence that CALM, in its prescribed burning, is taking into account the need for environmental and ecological requirements, and we support that.

Mr ADAMS—Regarding your point about trying to find an umpire or someone to give the tick to Commonwealth moneys coming into Western Australia, we picked up yesterday some feeling in the south in relation to people hanging onto their individual firefighting brigades et cetera. I get the feeling, though, that there is some move towards more professionalism and trying to upgrade in that direction. Is there a will to have more professionalism and more training within the volunteer brigades right through the west?

Mr Underwood—Yes, I think that is a trend. It is a trend that I have observed over 20 or 30 years.

Mr ADAMS—Is that accepted? You are asking for some accountability. For accountability you need to have some control mechanisms from a state minister. You were saying that there were five ministers involved. If you got that down to one minister, you would have to give him an act and some management apparatus so that he had some control over what is occurring. Are communities ready for that?

Mr Underwood—I think that in general in Western Australia the community at the moment has been lulled into rather a sense of complacency about bushfires. We have not had a serious loss of life and a serious loss of suburbs yet. We did not hear much about the Victorian fires in Western Australia. There was very little in our newspapers and on the TV over here about the Victorian fires, although there was a fair bit about the Canberra fire when it happened. But very few Western Australians really got to know about the extent and the severity of the fires in the national parks in Victoria and New South Wales. I think that generally there is a feeling that we do not have a bushfire problem over here.

Mr ADAMS—You do not think the community would accept getting one minister to control the fire apparatus of Western Australia, or they are not willing to do that?

Mr Underwood—I think they would accept it.

Mr ADAMS—You think they would. Is that the direction we should be moving in?

Mr Underwood—I think there would be opposition from some sources, but that is predictable in any move to rearrange political institutional arrangements.

CHAIR—As a former general manager of CALM responsible for fire management across the state, do you have any comments to make on the evidence we heard before from Ms Boulter with respect to the Kimberley and regimes in that part of Western Australia?

Mr Underwood—I am very familiar with the Kimberley and the Pilbara areas, where there are quite vast areas, many of which are subject to fire quite regularly. What did not emerge in what was said earlier was the impact of lightning fires in that area and particularly in the Kimberley. The Kimberley fuels are generally grass fuels that generate during the wet season. They are green at the start of the dry season and they cure over the dry season. At the end of the dry season, in about October, you have a sea of dry grass all through the Kimberley. At that stage, when the subtropical monsoons start to move in, you get vast lightning storms. They cause innumerable fires through there. On top of that, many pastoralists still burn to produce green pick for their cattle. You have a combination of some pastoralists burning and natural fires going on and, yes, there is a serious problem. It impinges on the conservation estate in the Kimberley because fires burn into it from the pastoral properties.

I am not aware that people like CALM do much deliberate, prescribed burning in the Kimberley or the Pilbara. I think they would do some small amounts to make strategic strips or to burn around park headquarters but would not do broadscale burning of the sort that perhaps was an impression given by an earlier speaker.

CHAIR—That would be similar to what occurs in the Top End of the Northern Territory as well, would it not?

Mr Underwood—Exactly the same, yes.

CHAIR—Would there be a certain amount of cultural flow-on within those pastoral properties from Aboriginal burning of those types of grasslands, dating back a long time?

Mr Underwood—Yes. The evidence is, as I understand it, that the Aboriginals did a lot of burning in those grasslands. They did it quite cleverly, a lot of it; they knew where to burn and where not to burn. But there was certainly a lot of burning done.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your submission and for your evidence today.

Proceedings suspended from 1.15 p.m. to 2.20 p.m.

LEWIS, the Hon. Alexander Ashley (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Mr Lewis, welcome this afternoon. I know you were here earlier when I read the aspects to do with evidence. While we did not have a formal submission from you, it is certainly recognised that you have chaired a number of Western Australian parliamentary inquiries into the management of national parks and state forests—a report of the fire review panel conducting a review of the Department of Conservation and Land Management prescribed burning policy and practice and wildfire threat analysis March 1994 being one of those matters—which is why we thought we would like to hear from you today. But you have subsequently provided to the committee a few different dot points, so perhaps this afternoon, in the time we have, you would like to start off with some opening remarks and go through those things and we will follow that up with some questions.

Mr Lewis—Thanks, Mr Chair. I think a little bit of history is probably good, especially for parliamentarians. My family have been in nature conservation in Australia for over 100 years in three or four states. We have also had a fair bit to do with National Parks and Wildlife. As anybody from New South Wales may or may not know, the national parks authority in New South Wales was set up by a Lewis and another one took an interest over here. So the reputation I have for being rather outspoken and also for being pro-forest and all sorts of other things is not quite fair. I would like to put that on the record before we start, because my only interest now is in looking after what we have. Conservation and preservation are two totally different things and we ought to recognise that.

I have major worries about the centralisation of the control of fires. I noticed from the Canberra report and from what I heard on the air that Mr Koperberg was getting a hammering last night because he did not do certain things and somebody else did not do certain things. I believe if the people nearest the site of the fire can handle the fire, so much the better—whether that be prescribed burning or major bushfires, I believe it is true. I do not believe people 600 or 700 kilometres away can control a fire efficiently. I believe we have to have a lot of faith in government officers, whether they be foresters, National Parks officers or whatever. Also, there is a vast number of farmers throughout Australia who have fire experience and who are not being used and not being looked after. I have attended fires in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, so I know a little bit about the fire front. I was horrified, in my last two visits to New South Wales and Victoria, by the lack of burning—just simple burning. You can go into the scientific answers, but when the fire brigade headquarters of one area has wild oats two or three feet high right against the building, I do not think that shows a knowledge of what fires do and how they do it. Quite frankly, I think that most of this is because of the centralisation of fire control.

I believe that fire control should be thrown out to the areas. Maybe Roger Underwood and I would clash about shire councils, because I think shire councils are very close to looking after their own dunghill, and I believe they should have some authority—which they did under the old Western Australian bushfires act. I think my dot points illustrate the problems of fighting fires and the lack of equipment. Successive governments have belligerently listened to the Chardonnay set in the cities and listened to them and not to the practical people in the bush, so we have no heavy equipment. We hear a lot about quick response. With no culverts and no tracks, there ain't much

chance of getting a quick response. We certainly have had a number of fires. I think that, in the south-west, about 20 a year were started by lightning. I wonder about the use of aeroplanes and helicopters. They both have some use, but I wonder about the cost efficiency of using them and the way of using them.

As to conflict management, I saw this when I did that bushfire committee review of prescribed burning in New South Wales. The conflict between foresters and people running national parks in New South Wales was very obvious. When some managers thought it should be burnt and others thought it should not—both lots of people had scientific degrees—the practical bloke went ahead and burnt it. Other people just went into a corner and said, ‘We’ll leave it,’ and that was the area that was burnt. This came up time and time again. We went to areas in parks and forests throughout New South Wales. It is a very worrying thing. I do not know what national park it was, but Dick Smith had a house at the end of the gully and was very worried. A lot of that national park was burnt. I said, ‘But why didn’t the fire go up there?’ They said, ‘Oh, well, Mr Lewis, the problem there was that there was a burn last year that burnt down there,’ and they indicated where it burnt. Then they said, ‘The burn last year stopped the fire burning Dick Smith’s house out.’ It was plain to my committee, to themselves and to anybody that had an objective look at it that that burning was helpful. You cannot get away from that.

I believe the committee should look at the long term. It should look at California and the erosion caused by not being able to prescribe burn or do any burning, because, as you probably realise, parks in America have to have a law passed by Congress before they can do any prescribed burning. That would mean California going back to Washington to ask. It would be like Perth asking Canberra for something—it would be impossible.

I have given you all the rest, I think, that is self-evident. I believe that we should listen to professional managers, and I believe there are a number of professional land managers around. Unfortunately for the conservation movement, most of them at the moment are foresters, because the conservation movement as yet has not brought forward people with sufficient land management experience to give us a program for working in the future. That is what I believe we should be about. Most of this is my idea, but most of it has been gathered over a number of years of taking evidence from a number of people. Some of the evidence has not changed at all.

I read in the local newspaper about myths. I went through the so-called myths—there were seven or eight—and I found about 10 places where the myths were based on inaccurate information. This is where I think your job is pretty tough, because the information you are given by some people is not accurate. You have to challenge that, as I had to do when I was making decisions, and get to the basis of what is truthful and which scientists and academics to listen to. I am not an academic. I have nothing; I have no degrees. I am a ‘BEF’ or a ‘BE failed’. We had evidence given to one committee about a certain piece of land by a graduate student who said that this had happened on this piece of land. When we checked out the piece of land, the piece of land she originally used and the piece of land that was quoted to us were totally different pieces of land. That is how careful I believe parliamentary committees have to be. I do not envy you your task. If there are any questions I can help you with or if there is anything I can do to help the committee I will, because I believe that we do not have much time. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you. As you would know, the whole purpose of conducting hearings and asking questions about submissions is to try to get the full story.

Mr GIBBONS—Mr Lewis, you have made some pretty dramatic statements in these dot points. Quite a few of them have been contradicted by just about everybody else who has provided evidence to this committee over the last couple of days. Your first dot point is that control should lie as close to the scene as possible. We had evidence yesterday that that is the case. Fire controllers out in the area are normally people who have been in that area, live in that area, know it intimately, and they have control of the way the fire operation task is done.

Mr Lewis—You were at Manjimup yesterday.

Mr GIBBONS—Yes.

Mr Lewis—It is totally different. Dr Schultz said 90 per cent of Western Australia was not dealt with. I was dealing with 100 per cent of Western Australia, because there are a lot of farming areas outside that. Manjimup is not bad. They still do not have complete control because CALM are not always right. I am not a CALM knocker, as some people are; I try to support them as much as I can. But there are a lot of other people that know a hell of a lot about fires. I think my career has shown that I fought the old forests department about various things so that the neighbouring people could get a say on fire.

Mr GIBBONS—We were in Manjimup yesterday, as you say, and we will deal with the other 90 per cent of Western Australia, all of which would be covered by some form of local government agency, I take it, and that form of local government agency would have some form of firefighting capability, at least in a coordinating role. Would that be the case?

Mr Lewis—It should have, in theory. Unfortunately, we have a thing called FESA, which has come in as an overwhelming monster, in my opinion. I will give you one quick example. I had eight inches of green grass just 50 kilometres south of here. The rains had come. FESA's overall rule was no burning until a set date. I rang my local shire and said, 'That's ridiculous.' They said, 'FESA has instructed us.' Then I rang somebody who had something to do with FESA and got it altered. But that did not make much difference to me. It meant a certain difference to the protection of my property for next year. This is happening all around. If the farmers I talk to are not allowed to burn their roadsides—and they are dead scared of FESA, as are the shires—then we are going the wrong way about it.

Mr GIBBONS—You also appear to be a little critical of the use of aviation firefighting applications. I take it you have some concerns about rotary wing and fixed wing?

Mr Lewis—I am worried that politicians as a whole get all thingy about aeroplanes and helicopters. The money that is spent—which could reasonably be spent on other things, such as prescribed burning and training people to know something about fighting fire in the bush—is being wasted on aircraft because of quick, knee-jerk reactions. The press get a lot of the blame, too, as do the prime ministers and premiers, who seem to sign off on anything when there is a fire. Aircraft have a position, but it is not as great as the press states.

Mr GIBBONS—But wouldn't some form of aviation resolve a lightning strike fire immediately that it happened? Some of the aircraft have, we have been told in evidence, a capacity to put out a major lightning strike fire. If they were able to be used, that solves a problem immediately, so that we do not have an argument about build-up of ground fuels. There

is no fire to burn if that first strike capability is there. Aviation seems to me to be a way of doing that very effectively and in a very environmentally friendly way, especially if it is using just water.

Mr Lewis—Yes, it all sounds very good.

Mr GIBBONS—Thank you.

Mr Lewis—I go back to evidence I got from Koperberg, who said the greatest problem he had, using aeroplanes, was having somebody on the ground to control that. It is all right in many states, like New South Wales and Victoria, because you do not have much ground to cover, but the south-west of Western Australia is a pretty big area in which to (1) get the plane there, (2) get it there quickly enough and (3) be able to get in to the source of the fire. Successive governments in Western Australia have given away the timber industry, and so the timber tracks and culverts do not allow a manager to get in there to control a plane. I am just giving you my point of view, which is a bit different.

Mr GIBBONS—Yes, I appreciate that. Thank you.

Mr ORGAN—In your submission you have given a copy of the annual report of the forests department of 1978. Were you a politician at the time?

Mr Lewis—Yes, in 1978. I went into parliament in 1972.

Mr ORGAN—Under the heading ‘Protection: Fire’, it says:

All of the 1 997 605 ha of land under the control of the Department—

that is, the forests department—

was protected from fire.

Over the page it talks about prescribed burning, and says that, in 1977-1978, about 270,498 hectares of land was prescribe burned. So, back in 1977-1978, about 270,000 hectares were prescribe burned, and the forests department was saying that all the land under their control was protected from fire. As to the current regime, CALM are working around similar figures, aren't they? They are talking about—

Mr Lewis—Hang on; can we answer that one first. Really, a quarter of a million hectares would protect the two million. The CALM people are not people that want to burn everything every year. They are protecting, and the protected area was the quarter of a million. Now go on.

Mr ORGAN—It is just that it is an interesting statement of theirs:

All of the 1 997 605 ha of land under the control of the Department was protected from fire.

I assume they are basing that on the prescribed burning regime. It is quite interesting to be able to make a statement such as that.

Mr Lewis—Being practical, I would think it was pure commonsense. You have one-eighth protecting the other seven-eighths. If you burn every eight years you have had a burn eight times, so none of the stuff that you are protecting is going to be over eight years old.

Mr ORGAN—Isn't it rather a simplification of the whole statement if you can say, 'If we just burn basically a quarter, therefore everything is safe, everything is protected'? There is a lot more to protecting life, limb and property than just prescribed burning.

Mr Lewis—Sure. This afternoon you might have an opportunity to meet the head of the CALM fire service, and he might take the committee out. The flippant way that some people deal with this! When I was chairing the committee, I asked some of the witnesses that were dealing with CALM; you know: 'Prescribe burn this.' To understand the work and the research that goes into what area is burnt and when it is burnt, I suggest, Mr Chair, that the committee go and have a look at it. A lot of the conservation movement people, when I asked them, had not been—and, by the standard of their submissions so far, have not yet been—to see exactly how absolutely particular CALM are when they are trying to organise a burn seven, eight or nine years ahead. I would suggest that, if you get on to one of the CALM people this afternoon, they would arrange for the committee to go and see how it is organised, because I honestly think you deserve to see it.

Mr ORGAN—Are you saying that you believe that CALM, in their burning, do a lot of research into the environmental and other impacts of the fire regime they are putting in?

Mr Lewis—I would think CALM do the only research, really, in Australia. The rest of the people are trying to beat bushfires. CALM are trying to do a management plan for the future. This is where I come from, too, because I believe we need the managers.

Mr ORGAN—Just quickly following up on that, are you aware that in September 2001 there was a review of fire operations in forest regions managed by CALM and that one of the findings of that review was that fire scientists or ecologists from the science division had rarely been directly involved in the planning process? This is basically refuting what you have just said; that there is a lot of research and so on by CALM. If CALM is not—

Mr Lewis—Is that the Schuster report?

Mr ORGAN—This is a report by Chris Miller. If the statement is that they are not even consulting their own fire scientists or ecologists from within their science division and they are not actually out there consulting the broader scientific community—

Mr Lewis—Does John Howard consult you when he does something?

Mr ORGAN—No, but you did make the statement that the conservationists and all should be going in and looking at the detail with which CALM goes into these sorts of things.

Mr Lewis—That is right, and they certainly would not be going to every scientist in CALM.

Mr ORGAN—But this is an independent report and it is clearly stating that they are not even using their own scientists or ecologists.

Mr Lewis—I would argue about that from what I have seen. I have been out of the picture since 1989, but the green movement and people that did not know anything about management became involved and tipped forestry in this state upside down. They are going to cause a number of deaths, and those deaths will be on those people's shoulders, because there is no way, I believe now, that you are going to stop raging bushfires and the death of a number of people. I do not give a damn how much money the federal government throws at this committee. You have got yourself into a position. The people that have been pushing this angle of anti-forester, anti-manager for so many years are going to cripple the south-west of this state. I might not sound pretty intense about it but I feel fairly intense about it.

Mr ORGAN—I do not want to add anything to that intensity—not at this stage.

Mr Lewis—I have told two premiers of different political colours, and I lay it at their shoulders. Sorry, Mr Chair.

CHAIR—That is okay. The committee did get a very good briefing from CALM yesterday as well about their processes of forward planning for prescribed burning and we will be hearing further from them this afternoon.

Mr McARTHUR—You raise in your dot points whether the green movement are for preservation or conservation. Could you just answer that?

Mr Lewis—I can't, no. You would have to ask the green movement. Quite frankly, I do not think they know what they are for. They give evidence—I am just sitting back as an old chairman now—and from their evidence it seems that they want to leave things as they are. We are talking about biodiversity, we are talking about growth and we are talking about moving on. I just cannot find where the green movement come from, because they do not understand management. They claim they do, but they have never, in any of the committees I have chaired, given a rational management plan.

Mr McARTHUR—You go on to talk about old-growth forests or alternatively old graveyard forests. Would you like to help us with that?

Mr Lewis—Yes. When the fire goes through it will be old graveyard forest.

Mr McARTHUR—And the fire will go through under what scenario?

Mr Lewis—Coming from the Western District, sir, you would know that you do not know what sort of weather you are going to get. I started fighting fires in 1939 on Black Friday at a place called Toora in the Western District in Victoria, outside Willaura; I was a seven-year-old pumping water to the fire. Nobody could tell me then, nobody has been able to tell me since, but Victoria did, for a lot of the time, put protection along their roads, their haystacks and things. You saw the fire train that I put in the notes. Take the fuel away and you will probably protect the area from fire. We are not taking the fuel away from down in the south.

Mr McARTHUR—You are making a quite dramatic statement to the committee, though: that old-growth forests will be burnt in the longer run because they have not been prescribe burned and they have been left alone and unmanaged. Is that what you are saying to the committee?

Mr Lewis—The forests department, CALM, whoever they are, have not been allocated enough money. If you go through those reports of mine, you will find where we have cried for extra money for prescribed burning of the forests. Not wholesale burning. You read this myth stuff where it is burnt every two or three years. We heard about the noisy scrub bird. The forests department found that it was there and prescribed that area as a no-burn area.

The forests department and CALM have done a superb job, and they are conservationists. Unfortunately, the uneducated have forced them out of the conservation societies. People in the state like Bruce Beggs and Clea Jenkins were all members of the conservation society, but were forced out by people with very little knowledge who wanted to take over; the city set who wanted to look after the city without any knowledge of the bush at all. We had dressmakers—God help us!—locking themselves up in the bush because they knew more about the bush than the foresters.

Mr McARTHUR—Why do you think the city has such an influence on these policies that affect—

Mr Lewis—Mainly because of the press and articles like that. The myths are all based on preconceptions and not on real knowledge. I can prove wrong most of the myths in that article yesterday and I can show you where the scientists they are using were wrong.

CHAIR—You talk about the conflict between managers of forests and national parks. The committee went to Tasmania. There is a formal protocol in place there between the three agencies. Are you aware of that? Do you see that as something that is worth while?

Mr Lewis—I think Tasmania is fairly well advanced. Remember, I have not been active for a long time, but they certainly were as far as fire, national parks and the training of rangers was concerned. Their ranger training scheme is the best in Australia. I think they work together pretty well. I found very little conflict when taking evidence in Tasmania, but in the other states I did.

CHAIR—Is what you are saying that the sort of cooperation to which you have just alluded is something that ought to be pursued in other states?

Mr Lewis—If you are talking purely about fire, if you take up whatever Mr Underwood's group's idea is Australia-wide we have a system and then we are going to get somewhere. I realise that, as federal parliamentarians, it is a hard job, because getting states to agree on anything is a hard job, but I believe this is important enough for you to do it.

CHAIR—Good; we like a challenge!

Mr Lewis—I will read your report with great interest.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time this afternoon.

[2.51 p.m.]

McNAMARA, Mr Keiran James, Acting Executive Director, Department of Conservation and Land Management

SNEEUWJAGT, Mr Richard John, Manager of Fire Services Branch, Department of Conservation and Land Management

WALKER, Mr Alan William, Director, Regional Services, Department of Conservation and Land Management

HYNES, Mr Craig Anthony, Director, Fire Services Country, Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia

MITCHELL, Mr Robert James, Chief Executive Officer, Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia

SMITH, Mr Ralph Douglas, Manager, Wildfire Prevention, Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. 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 contempt of parliament.

We have the Western Australian government's submission, which has been authorised for publication and forms evidence. I thank the Western Australian government, and particularly, the Department of Conservation and Land Management, for their hospitality and the informal briefings and inspections yesterday in the Manjimup area backgrounding the committee in the topography, the issues and the practices of the region. It was very useful. Clearly, the Western Australian experience is different from that of other parts of Australia, so we thank you for that. If you would like to, you may make some opening comments and then we will have some questioning.

Mr McNamara—Thank you, Chair. We were certainly pleased to be able to assist with the arrangements yesterday, and I am glad to hear that they were very helpful to the committee. Our department, together with FESA, is jointly responsible for the submission that has been put in on behalf of the WA government. Speaking for CALM, we are responsible for the management of conservation reserves, our national parks, nature reserves and the like and state forests, an area of about 24 million hectares throughout the state or about nine per cent of the state.

We are also responsible for the conservation of biodiversity throughout the state, on and off the lands we manage, and have recently been given additional responsibility for some aspects of fire management across the 90 million or so hectares of the state that is unallocated crown land or unmanaged reserves. Much of that is in the arid interior or in the north of the state.

We certainly take our fire management responsibilities seriously in terms of the values of the land we manage and our good neighbour responsibilities. Also, the protection of human safety is a first priority. We are a strongly regionalised organisation, as you saw evidence of in Manjimup yesterday. We are also an organisation with a strong scientific research division and capacity and with partnerships in research, including in fire research through the CRC for bushfires and other such partnerships.

Our fire policies and practices in fire management are presently under review by a range of processes, and those are touched on in our submission. I would be pleased to elaborate on those and any other matters in our submission, of course, in response to your questions. There is inevitably a focus, both in state examination of these issues and in your committee's examination, on park and forest management issues in areas of forested ecosystems and in the areas in proximity to our major population centres. We, as a conservation agency, also have very significant concerns about the fire regimes that operate in the interior of this country and in the north of this country, in terms of the size and frequency of those fires and the adverse ecological consequences that those fire regimes are having.

Mr Mitchell—The Fire and Emergency Services Authority is a statutory authority, established on 1 January 1999. It brought together the then Fire and Rescue Service, the Bush Fire Service, the State Emergency Service, the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service and the emergency management services area, which is a policy arm. It has 1,100 paid staff. It has 25,000 volunteers that it has responsibility for, either directly or shared with local government. Of particular interest today is the fire service component. We have regionalised resources and offices from Kununurra in the north to Esperance in the south. There are about 830 career firefighters and about 20,000 volunteer firefighters in this state, both urban and bushfire fighting volunteers.

I just ask the committee to bear with me on two issues: one is funding. This state has had for years a funding system of volunteers and emergency services which has been inequitable, where some people pay and some people do not, and on the receiving end of that money some fire services are well supported and others are poorly supported. I am pleased to say that on 1 July this year we introduced the emergency services levy, which is broader than just fire but, for the benefit of fire, it will over the next four or five years increase the capacity of our volunteers right across the state to be properly resourced with firefighting appliances and, just as importantly, protective clothing. That has been a significant issue and one that we will see the benefits of. We already are seeing them.

The other issue that I know the committee will have heard of, and I would like to bring up at the beginning, is the liability issues that volunteers face. I believe that this state has implemented the best liability protection, probably comparable to anywhere in Australia, for its volunteers—not just fire volunteers, but SES, VMRS volunteers—in that the acts now are very clear that they are protected from liability issues, provided they act in good faith. I understand that the 'good faith' bit has never been tested, and that is good. I think, in a sense, it means that things have not got to the litigation stage, and our legal advice is that the good faith issue really is a very powerful part of the legislation and it would really require somebody to act almost dishonestly not to be protected by the legislation. I think, with a proper analysis of legislation, you would find that West Australia has very significant coverage for its volunteers and emergency services personnel generally.

CHAIR—Does anybody else want to say anything at the outset? If not, we will just go on to questions. We did get some evidence yesterday where some of the volunteers were saying that, because it has not been tested, it makes them very nervous. There was a feeling that the words ‘in good faith’ may not really mean anything, but I take your point that you have just made from a legal point of view. Is there a role, in that case, for maybe some stronger education and awareness for those volunteers? I am sure that the last thing you want to see or we would want to see is volunteers gradually not becoming volunteers because they feel they might be liable in some sense. Is there more that can be done in that area?

Mr Mitchell—There is always more that can be done. I must stress that we have a very consultative process within the fire industry here. Bushfire fighters are represented on numerous committees—from what we call regional committees to district committees to the lead agency consultative committees—and these issues are discussed broadly at those meetings. It is hoped that one of the major mechanisms of communication is back through those bushfire fighters to their local brigades and members. But obviously there is more that can be done and we will ensure that it is done, to the best of our ability.

The other issue that you raised was that there was a sense that volunteer numbers were becoming a problem. I think that is true in some parts. I think there is a drift away from rural centres to urban centres, and we have seen some parts of the state—some small communities, I should say—struggle to maintain volunteers. Under the historical arrangements, a town may well have had a Bush Fire Service and a State Emergency Service and may have even had a Fire and Rescue Service. We introduced legislation and the government has passed that legislation and we now have eight what we call combined emergency service units in towns where, because of the dwindling number of volunteers, it is easier for that community to form a combined unit to do a wide range of activities. That is becoming more popular and, in a sense, we have seen numbers of volunteers grow in those areas where we have introduced that new system. So I think there are many mechanisms to deal with the perceived dwindling numbers of volunteers.

CHAIR—Within the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, Mr Smith—who is here—is the Manager of Wildfire Prevention. How does that role work in conjunction with the CALM people in determining prescribed burns and various things? Although you are within one organisation, can you tell us how the two organisations work together on an issue like that?

Mr Smith—Do you mean in hazard reduction burning?

CHAIR—Your role is wildfire prevention.

Mr Smith—That is right.

CHAIR—If we are dealing with prevention—

Mr Smith—I will give you an example, if you like.

CHAIR—Sure.

Mr Smith—CALM and FESA have joined together to undertake research on a standard wildfire threat analysis through the state so that we are both operating off the same data set and

can make value judgments that are consistent throughout the state. We have sought research funds through the Department of Transport and Regional Services research grants proposal. That has only just recently been approved and that will be created over the next two years.

CHAIR—That is the federal department?

Mr Smith—That is right, yes.

Mr ADAMS—Is there any protocol between you and CALM dealing with how you suppress wildfire?

Mr Smith—Yes.

Mr Sneeuwjagt—We have a memorandum of understanding between the two agencies as to how we would respond—the arrangements. Many of our fires are joint fires. It is rare to have large fires that you would say one agency only would have responsibility for. We have had agreements about how we would deal with it—the communications, the control systems—and they get reviewed every year. In fact, we are about to re-sign the previous one. We also have an arrangement through what are called interagency executive groups whereby at the fire level the senior members meet on a regular basis and then there are strategy subgroups, one of which is the community safety one that you were asking about. We have others on operations, another one on training, another one on GIS and so on. The aim of that, of course, is to work consistently, to use best practice from each of the agencies to apply those in a consistent manner throughout the state.

Mr Hynes—I will just say something further on those cooperative arrangements. Right throughout our consultative mechanisms in the state, including those required through the Bushfires Act, like bushfire advisory committees and our consultative committees within FESA, CALM are represented on all those committees, along with the FESA representatives, and that interaction occurs from the bushfire brigades right through to the interagency executive groups, where we have joint communication and coordination of our policies and procedures. One further significant document is the Westplan Wildfire document, which is jointly authored and administered or conducted by FESA and CALM.

CHAIR—Have you submitted that to us?

Mr Walker—That was one of the appendices to the government submission.

CHAIR—Who acts as the incident controller in that situation?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—The protocols deal with that. It depends on who has the most at risk or has the capacity to undertake it. We do not have a prescription like that. It really depends on each fire, but we have protocols as to how we deal with it so there are no fights and we can identify that early. Generally you might have an incident control team which might be a mixed team, with membership from both agencies, plus the local government. We are not very precious about that. We think whoever has the best capability, who has the ultimate responsibility, would have the primary role.

Mr ADAMS—Who pays the piper?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—We tend to be self-funded so we pay for our own staff. If we are involved in supporting a FESA fire, for example, CALM would pay for its own staff.

Mr ADAMS—You do not have any arguments over that?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—We haven't so far.

Mr McNamara—And because of their faith in the systems that operate, the government have consistently given us supplementary funding in the budget process when it has been necessary to meet wildfire costs.

Mr GIBBONS—We took some evidence from a couple of areas yesterday that expressed concern about some new changes to legislation in relation to the slip-on firefighting units on utilities. They were quite critical of them. Apparently a lot of the people who use it believe that it is not in their interests or worth their while to even consider using the slip-on type apparatus, because of the regulations. I suggested that perhaps the regulations are there to make sure that that apparatus does not inadvertently come off the vehicle. The way it was put to us was that the apparatus was to be a permanent fixture—that is, permanently fixed to a particular vehicle—with the idea of making it portable, so that it can be attached to various vehicles. Is the legislation such that that apparatus must be fixed to the chassis, while not necessarily being a permanent fixture? In other words, is there some method of locking it down?

Mr Hynes—That issue is related to a post-incident analysis of a wildfire, where there was a problem with a slip-on unit detaching from an appliance. As a result, a fatality occurred. It was incumbent upon the organisation to review the slip-on units, which are a significant part of the firefighting fleet of the state, particularly in pastoral type brigades. Our advice now to local governments is that the slip-on unit should be fixed to the chassis. That was the instruction that went through our consultative groups, and you may be referring to a miscommunication of our advice.

Mr GIBBONS—They were of the view that that method of fixing to the chassis was a permanent arrangement. In other words, that vehicle then becomes totally used for firefighting, whereas at the moment the slip-on units can be slipped on various vehicles, which gives them a bit more versatility. Does the regulation mean that the apparatus must be fixed and locked down but not necessarily permanent?

Mr Hynes—It is not a regulation or a statutory requirement. FESA, in its capability of dealing with local governments, advises on the standards and specifications for appliances. We are now advising that problems with the slip-on units need to be corrected, and they should be fixed in a secure manner that can sustain a rollover. It may mean that they need to be fixed to the chassis. This is an item that has only been raised in the last month. We are still coming up with a final specification through the consultation process.

Mr GIBBONS—The spirit of that is to have this apparatus able to be locked down but not necessarily permanently welded. That is what we were told yesterday.

Mr Hynes—Yes.

Mr ADAMS—There has been some communication misunderstanding about that.

Mr Hynes—I think the communication mechanism works very well. In fact, that advice was only given at our last consultative committee through myself. That is now going back through to the brigades, and we are dealing with the matter quite well.

Mr GIBBONS—There were also some reservations about changes proposed to the trailable units too. Is that the subject of a review too? It seems to me that the trailable units are very versatile. They can be towed with a variety of other vehicles.

Mr Hynes—I am not aware of a specific problem being raised. The only thing that we have an issue with in relation to our trailer units is that, when travelling on open roads at speed, the control is affected by the weight load. It is probably not our preferred method of having a fire appliance.

Mr GIBBONS—It seems to me that there are millions and millions of dollars tied up in firefighting appliances in metropolitan fire brigades all around this country, which are vehicles designed specifically to deal with urban fires and virtually useless for dealing with scrub and bushfires. Wouldn't it be worthwhile for the people who plan the purchase of this type of equipment to ask the designers to build a vehicle that would do both? I am not an engineer, but I would imagine it would have to have height and ground clearance—which would not make any difference to an urban firefighting appliance—manoeuvrability, a small turning circle and be able to travel at a fast rate. Would that be worth looking at, so that vehicles could do both?

Mr Hynes—I believe that is what we have arrived at in Western Australia. Again, through our consultative process of getting the users to become involved in the development of appliances, we now have a very good set fleet of standardised appliances, which has now been achieved, particularly with the introduction of the Emergency Services Levy, where we have some control in the specifications. The fleet starts at a fast attack, light tanker type approach and goes through up to heavy rural tankers of significant water capacity. In our volunteer brigades, we are now replacing those with typical urban appliances, with they option—based on the risk—of a four-wheel drive tanker appliance, BA equipped. We have addressed that—and that is through the feedback of our volunteer groups and the end users.

Mr GIBBONS—Are you aware of the Australian Defence Industry designed FireKing vehicle? Have you had a look at that?

Mr Hynes—Yes.

CHAIR—This is the advertising part!

Mr Hynes—We are aware of that vehicle. CALM and FESA are both affiliated with the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and had a fair run through a couple of conferences and seminars, where we looked inside the equipment. We consult with other agencies. It is not seen as the appropriate appliance for the types of hazards we approach.

Mr GIBBONS—I understand that the South Australian government has a different view. They just ordered 15 of them, mainly for their plantation forests. For the record, they can travel down a highway at 100 kilometres an hour, carrying 3,500 litres of fire retardant. They are all-wheel drive and are made in Bendigo.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You made the comment, Mr Mitchell, that it is a good thing that there has not been litigation to determine the parameters and meaning of the phrase ‘in good faith’. The converse seems to be happening, in that a lot of people think that is a bad thing because they do not quite know what it will encompass. Some may say that it is an overreaction—and I am not making a comment either way—but the reality is that there is a very serious concern there. Linking it into the slip-ons and tying it into the Emergency Services Levy, people are now afraid that increased government involvement in funding will correspond with increased regulation. Volunteer brigades and councils that have been accustomed to running very successful operations on the ground with minimal interference from Perth are now going to ask, ‘Will we still be covered if we continue to run it as we think fit and not as the guys in Perth think fit?’

Mr Mitchell—My opening comment that I thought it was good that it had not been tested was a comment to suggest that we had not had a situation, and I am pleased we have not got to that point.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I understand.

Mr Mitchell—I understand some of the reservations of the volunteers, in particular. If we take the slip-ons as an example, I think we would be remiss, following the death of a volunteer in an incident recently where this became an issue—and it became the likely cause of a death or an injury—if we did not advise local government that there has to be a better way to do these sorts of things. We do not just make edicts on these issues. We have vehicle design committees that are made up of volunteers and career people that sit around and determine the standards that should apply to them. It is not us telling them what to do; it is participation in the design process. I understand the fear. The Emergency Services Levy is not about taking control; it is more about providing sufficient funding for all volunteers to have decent equipment, decent protective gear and to get the standards right across the state. Those standards will not be imposed by us. They will be developed by volunteers representing volunteers, working with us in doing so.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I was quite impressed yesterday with the explanation given by CALM about the pattern of burning. The application of technology was also quite enlightening. In light of what appears to be a lack of knowledge about the procedures that CALM follows and the planned mosaic burning within the community—or within some parts of the community—what do you think you can do? I am a very hard person to impress but I was impressed with the professionalism and the sophistication. There is a problem out there where people think, ‘CALM has prescribed burning; light a few matches here and there and let it go,’ and they kick up their heels and think, ‘Hurray! We’ve burnt another few thousand hectares,’ and that is not the case. It is very contrived in a lot of ways. How do you think you can better get your message across? Is there anything that you can do, as a department—or that the government can do?

Mr McNamara—That question can be answered at many levels, I think. Consultation and communication are always important tasks for us—and challenging ones—across the whole range of what we do. Thanks for the complimentary comments to start with. We work on a

whole range of publication and communication strategies. At the higher level we have embarked on, over the last several years, the internal review which we have published, along with the department's response to it. That is the Muller review, which was referred to in some questioning with the previous witness.

We hosted the fire symposium on south-west ecosystems last year, and we subsequently published both the scientific component of that and the community presented papers. I know they were provided in the submission we lodged with the committee. We are now embarking on a formal Environmental Protection Authority review of our fire policy and practices. That review will be, once again, done in a public way and done by a body the community at large and the media place a lot of confidence in, in terms of their credibility and so on. They are very public processes.

At the more detailed level we do statutorily based management plans for our parks and forests and reserves, which involve statutory community consultation. We regularly do that through advisory committees and so on. Then I think we can flick to another level again, which is about individual burn plans and liaison with local bushfires committees—or fire committees of local authorities and the like. My colleagues could elaborate at that level.

Mr Walker—I would just like to add that to some extent the scientific underpinning of the planning and implementation of a managed fire regime in the south-west is still a work in progress. We have settled on the principles and the objectives for how we are going to manage biodiversity and other values through our fire management program, but the proper underpinning of that, the scientific underpinning for what happens in practice, is still to be written up and peer reviewed. The form that will take was subject to discussions earlier today about the importance of having the proper scientific peer review of the methods that are going to be applied. To that extent we have not got to that point yet, so we are not at a point where we can communicate with confidence the full extent of the way we are going to go about implementing this planning and management approach.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Even before you get to that planning stage though, is there a lot of ignorance about what you actually do and how you do it?

Mr Walker—The way we are attempting to do that is to consult, as the acting executive director has said, through a range of interaction and engagement with the community. We attempt to do that at a number of levels. We need to pitch that information at the appropriate level for those audiences, and we are doing some of that. We would say we are probably not reaching as many people as we would like to at present. We need to build a communications plan that is going to reach more people more effectively. But that, like the fire and biodiversity project, is still to some extent a work in progress.

CHAIR—Why would you not have something in a document like that which tells people—and I am not trying to put words in people's mouths here—the reason you have these magnificent forests is that they are protected; they are protected in various ways and one of the ways is prescribed burning? I have just had a quick flick through—and I did look at this yesterday—but I do not recall seeing anything in that about it. Why not be right up front?

Mr Walker—Yes, that is certainly a very digestible format. Also in the package there are a couple underneath where you are: there is a landscape special edition on fire management, which is written also in a style, hopefully, that is fairly consumable and readily understandable by a wide range of people in the community. That is a widely read publication. We do attempt to spread the message about fire management through that type of publication. Again, it is not a full audience; it is a portion of the total audience, and we need to improve on the ways of reaching a wider audience.

CHAIR—I was just thinking that when marketing the forest as a place to visit—you argue to the committee that prescribed burning is all part of protecting our forests—perhaps when people are being sold the location that they should be visiting, at the same time they should be told, ‘You can visit this, because we do these things.’ That is a bit of free marketing advice, I suppose.

Mr McARTHUR—Firstly, can I thank CALM for the very good visit yesterday and acknowledge the free flow of ideas and dialogue and on-site inspections. I do observe that your department and your government have had dialogue with this committee, along with the state government of Tasmania. New South Wales and Victoria declined to make any contact with this committee by way of submission or comment. In terms of the fires, could I just raise the issue of whether the fire authority have a philosophy of aggressively dealing with a fire when it first emerges. Do I presume that to be the position?

Mr Mitchell—From our position, yes.

Mr McARTHUR—So there is no way that you would let a fire burn once there is a lightning strike or a Canberra type of situation; you would aggressively attack the fire?

Mr Mitchell—Depending on where you are in the state. But if you are talking about the high-risk areas, the south-west corner of the state in particular, then yes, we would aggressively attack the fire.

Mr McNamara—If I can just add to that, the situation does vary across the state. We get large fires, as I alluded to earlier on, in the interior—the Kimberley and so on—that burn at times for months.

Mr McARTHUR—Different scenario.

Mr McNamara—Clearly they are not responded to in those sorts of ways. We also respond and seek to respond quickly and aggressively. The only qualification I would put against that is that we will always retreat to an appropriate line or a boundary for safety reasons—and also taking environmental reasons into account.

Mr McARTHUR—In terms of the problem of good faith, liability and volunteers, have you shared some of that legislation with other state jurisdictions?

Mr Mitchell—Yes, we have, through the Australian Fire Authorities Council in particular. We share most significant issues that deal with volunteers across Australia.

Mr McARTHUR—Do you feel you might have arrived somewhere near a solution on this issue?

Mr Mitchell—I think ours is as good as any. The words ‘good faith’ worry people. In a sense, if there was a way around that one, then I think you would take all the fear away. But it is a very difficult one to get around, because I do not think that a government or a piece of legislation should say that you have no liability if you behave recklessly or foolishly or dishonestly.

Mr McARTHUR—But this has been shared—that is what I mean.

Mr Mitchell—Yes, it has.

Mr McARTHUR—A number of submissions have raised this issue as an impediment for volunteers participating, particularly in north-east Victoria where they saw other issues.

Mr Mitchell—Yes. We have shared it across the AFAC group. I do understand that there is concern still in different parts of Australia and there is still concern here. I do not think there is an answer to that concern in Western Australia, except that we need to communicate better about what good faith actually means. As I have said, you cannot legislate to take all risk away, despite the behaviours.

Mr McARTHUR—Can I go to the CALM group in terms of what lessons were learnt from Canberra, Kosciusko National Park and north-east Victoria. As you hear the information flowing back to Western Australia—and some of the on-site lessons that were learnt in terms of prescribed burning, aggressive attack on lightning strikes, the whole gamut of discussion that we have heard over many days—what have you picked up professionally from those three major fires?

Mr McNamara—I think we obviously look closely and learn from other jurisdictions. I am not inclined to comment on more recent fires where reports and inquiries are current and we have not yet had the opportunity to look properly at the outcomes and reports of such fires. In terms of a broad approach, though, shaped over many years, we do include in our approach a considerable emphasis on prescribed burning, and probably to an extent that some of our counterparts in the Eastern States do not. We in the government have stuck by a strong reliance on our approach to prescribed burning.

There was a remark when the previous witness was here about the aerial component of fire response. We certainly have increasingly used aerial capacity in the last few years in Western Australia, both in the metropolitan outskirts and into the south-west forests. That aerial response certainly has a role to play, but it is not a panacea for dealing with fire. It is certainly not an answer on its own in isolation from our detection and ground response systems and our prescribed burning program. Once again, my colleagues might be better placed to elaborate.

Mr Walker—We probably all have a brief comment to make. My take on Canberra was the scale and extent of the ember attack, as seen through our own eyes on television but also through the eyes of people like Phil Cheney, who said, and I think I am quoting him fairly accurately: ‘The book is being rewritten on fire behaviour in intense fire conditions where we are dealing

with very dry fuels and very heavy fuels.' That is of concern to us because there are some places where those conditions exist. Despite our efforts to reduce those risks there are still those places.

I felt as if we were to some extent last year a little lucky. There were circumstances when a Canberra type fire could have occurred on the outskirts of Perth. The width of fuel reduced buffers or some form of modified fuels to be able to cope with an ember attack of that ferocity is something we need to plan for in the future. I do not think we have planned for that sufficiently well at the moment.

Mr Sneeuwjagt—I will comment on an earlier question about the initial attack. We are very aggressive about attacking fires. You may hear some evidence to the contrary, but we take into account a lot of factors, such as: What are the values at risk? What is the fire behaviour? What are the risks to the firefighters? What are the impacts of our suppression on the ecosystem and things like dieback and the like? Every fire will have its own set of circumstances, but we also know that, whilst the fire is small, if you can get to it quickly you can put it out. That is why we have, we believe, world's best practice in detection, using both aircraft and towers. We have good access roads in this flat terrain of ours and we have our forces located such that they are able to deal with fires relatively quickly, particularly around high-value areas. You may hear to the contrary, but our approach is very aggressive. However, there will be times—and very often—when we will have to fall back. If we can fall back to areas which have had a recent burn then we are more likely to be successful.

Mr McARTHUR—I want to raise the issue of accountability. A number of other witnesses have said that one of the difficulties is that nobody is quite accountable for the outcome of the fire. The early comments from Canberra suggested some difficulty with accountability. Would you like to give us a view as to whether ministerial accountability would be helpful in making sure prescribed burns were undertaken? I notice the Victorian government are under some strain in terms of the Auditor-General's report in terms of the lack of prescribed burns. What if we had accountability direct to a minister in this area, not across the board?

Mr McNamara—In terms of the department's operations and the department's prescribed burning programming targets, I am accountable to the Minister for the Environment.

Mr McARTHUR—I am only talking in terms of the outcome of a major bushfire that emerged because there were insufficient known practices to prevent the spread of a wildfire.

Mr McNamara—There has already been a response that referred to interagency arrangements and lead arrangements. I stand to be corrected by my colleagues, but the accountabilities would flow from the land on which the fire occurs or emanates and the lead agency arrangements for responding to that fire.

Mr Mitchell—The emergency management arrangements in this state are pretty clear with regard to what we call the hazard management authority; in other words, the agency or the body that has responsibility, depending on where something occurs and what occurs. In a sense, we have CALM and we have FESA and we have local governments—all bodies which have responsibility at various times, depending on the incident and where it occurs. Accountability depends on whether it is on land we are responsible for directly and if we are in charge of the fire then there is direct responsibility through me to the minister.

Mr McARTHUR—We have a major argument before the committee about prescribed burns. The suggestion by a number of witnesses is that there are insufficient prescribed burns and that that in the long run will bring about a catastrophic wildfire similar to Canberra and north-east Victoria. Who would be finally responsible for that, in the current set of arrangements?

Mr Walker—There are two elements to that, as I see it, in terms of accountability: one is the accountability for setting a program, and the extent and breadth of that program to achieve the level of hazard reduction that is perceived to have a beneficial effect in terms of wildfire threat. There are several levels of our department where the accountability for meeting the intent of the policy, as designed to do that, is going to be met. You then have to go to the level in the field where people have to make decisions on a daily, weekly or monthly basis to go ahead with an individual prescribed burn and to be the person to authorise the match to be dropped that will commence that prescribed fire.

There are criteria within which we work in order to meet the prescription that has been set, and no matter how far you are behind in the program—in spite of your best endeavours—I would not ever advocate to someone to take a greater risk in initiating a prescribed burn because of the conditions on the day. That still has to be the judgment of the person on the ground who is going to make that fairly hard decision about whether or not the conditions are suitable for that burn to go ahead.

That is really where I think we have some confusion about the reasons the department has not met its prescribed burning targets ‘in recent years’. There are a number of reasons why and we have explained in our submission why that is the case. Weather is the overriding factor and there are other constraints. In the end it comes down to the decision that has to be taken by the people in the field to initiate a prescribed burn and to then be able to ensure that that burn meets the prescription that has been set and has a low risk of escape. That accountability is felt by the people at those levels. They all feel a level of accountability for—

Mr McARTHUR—I am really raising it at the senior level. There is a political debate about the amount of prescribed burning. What other witnesses have said is that if prescribed burning does not take place we will have a wildfire of massive proportions similar to Canberra and north-east Victoria. Some of the witnesses in those areas have put the blame on the lack of prescribed burning. They have made that observation. I am just raising the point as to where the accountability will lie if prescribed burning is reduced more and more, when witnesses have said a major fire will emanate.

Mr McNamara—The Department of Conservation and Land Management has not reduced its planned prescribed burning levels. What we have had is a shortfall in achieving those levels in recent years in particular because of the succession of very dry years. Last financial year we achieved in total about 150,000 hectares, against a target of 200,000 or a bit more in our south-west areas. I can only reiterate that I am accountable to the minister for that. The minister is accountable to the parliament for that. To the extent that we do or do not reach our targets, there are reasons of operational safety, and weather, as Mr Walker has explained.

Mr ADAMS—There is a statement from parliament. The minister makes a statement in relation to that.

Mr McNamara—The minister has quite strongly and publicly made a number of statements over the last financial year, the last fire season, in support of the need to do as much as we can to achieve our prescribed burning targets and has done so both publicly and in statements to the parliament, and that is in our submission.

Mr ORGAN—I have a question to FESA first. We had some evidence yesterday from Kojonup Shire Council about the FESA levy and the impact that is having. One example was a member of a volunteer fire group who, as a farmer with five or six parcels of land, gets five or six rate notices and, basically, has to pay five or six levies. This one person might have his own firefighting equipment and be an important member of the local volunteer group, and was feeling a bit put off that all of a sudden he was paying, even though he is an important part of the firefighting group. I am wondering if you are aware of some of the bad feeling that is out there in the community—it is on the *Hansard* record now—and how FESA could possibly address that.

Mr Mitchell—I am very aware of Kojonup's feelings and have been for some considerable time. There are 142 local governments in Western Australia and the vast majority of them support the levy and, in fact, are pleased with the results of the levy to date. I must also say that it is also not just a fire levy. It is not a fire levy; it is an emergency services levy. It is about road vehicle accident rescue, it is about floods, cyclones, winter storms, bushfires and house fires. It is a very broad based levy. Some people only see it as a bushfire levy. It is not a bushfire levy. That is a very small part of the total package. It is a total package levy. The only bit that is missing, as far as my organisation is concerned, is the volunteer marine rescue service, and it seemed fairly difficult to include them in a land-based levy, because their rescues occur off land.

Mr ORGAN—You are obviously aware of that. I have a few questions for CALM. You have talked about your prescribed burning regime and on page 6 you have a graph of what has happened from 1985-1986 to 2002-2003, with a little over 100,000 hectares burnt last year. I see that graph, and then on page 7 there is a statement from the minister for the environment on 8 May, where he says, and I quote:

Since the season began, the department has faced approximately 600 wildfires that have burnt through 754 000 hectares between Geraldton and Esperance.

Even though your graph says what you had planned to burn, you had not reached that number. Can you tell me how much was burnt in that region of your responsibility? Was it more than the 200,000 planned?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—Yes, the figure for the 754,000 to wildfires really relates to fires that CALM firefighters were involved with. One of those fires was the one that you heard about yesterday at Ravensthorpe, some 340,000 hectares, which was really not a CALM fire, but we were supporting it, so those figures tend to be a little bloated. They are certainly not in the south-west. We have a bit of confusion in this. There is the south-west land division, which is actually the triangle between Geraldton and Esperance. When we talk about the south-west forests, which is where we are talking about our prescribed burning program, the graph there is slightly out of date. As we said, we have achieved about 150,000 hectares, and in that same area we have had wildfires this year of about 100,000 hectares, about 15,000 of which was off our estate. That figure needs to be compared with the general average, which is around 10,000 to 15,000 per

year. Last year was a rather extreme exception, certainly the largest area burnt by wildfire in the south-west since 1961.

Mr ORGAN—Within the south-west forest region, can you give me a figure as to how many hectares have been subject to fire, either prescribed burning or wildfire?

Mr McNamara—We reached about 150,000 hectares in round figures of prescribed burning in the area in question, and wildfires burnt—and the figure is in our submission—133,000 hectares. I just comment, though, that while future planning will certainly take account of what has been burnt by wildfire, we do not see the two figures as adding up to exceeding the prescribed burn target, because the wildfires are not in a pattern or in locations equivalent to what we would plan.

Mr ORGAN—So basically 280,000 hectares have been burnt in the south-west forest in those two regimes and in this graph, which is very public, it is showing just over 150,000 and you are not going to account for that. I would put to you that that is a misrepresentation of what has been burnt and that the public should be told that 280,000 has been burnt and not 150,000. Why wouldn't you publish that? Why would you present it as only 150,000 hectares of the south-west forest being burnt rather than 280,000?

Mr McNamara—I believe what we have done in our submission is present what we do in terms of prescribed burning, and the graph that you refer to on page 6 of our submission illustrates the figures for the prescribed burning program. The submission does give the statistic for wildfire area burnt as well and it is routine practice for the department in its annual report to publish both prescribed burning and wildfire outcomes, number of fires, areas burnt, and the like. They are two different aspects of what happens in fire, and it is legitimate to show them separately, but we certainly do not go about putting one on the table and not the other.

Mr ORGAN—As you would be aware, this committee has not had a lot of support from state governments. We have not had any presentations from national parks of New South Wales, Victoria and even from Tasmania. Mr McNamara, can you put your hat on in regard to your responsibilities regarding management of national parks and wildlife and wilderness areas in Western Australia? How is CALM addressing the increasing concern out there in the community that it is not managing national parks and wilderness areas in an ecologically sustainable manner and is in fact burning too much?

Mr McNamara—I would take the view that I have had the hat on all along, in the totality of my role as acting head of the department. The department, as I have alluded to in my opening remarks, has an active program of research. We have a strong research division. As I have also alluded to, we have been through quite an open process or a series of review processes that are next heading towards a very open review by the Environmental Protection Authority in which all these issues will again be pursued.

We go through each of our national parks. We go through the formal management planning process. That is a public process. The management plan is in fact signed off and endorsed by the Conservation Commission of Western Australia, which is a statutory body under the CALM Act. It is made up of nine members, all community based, no public servants, and they are the ones

who recommend the management plan to the minister, and we have to satisfy a range of audiences and a range of values in the way we go about sorting out our fire policies.

If you asked me whether what we do is perfect in ecological and biodiversity terms, there is a variety of opinions on that. It is not perfect, and I do not know how it ever can be, when you have to balance up ecological concerns alongside life and property concerns. We have to make a series of compromises in various directions and different places at different times. We now have a process under way under the government's old-growth forest protection policy of planning for the Walpole Wilderness Area, a collection of seven national parks across about 350,000 hectares. Now that that area is to be managed uniformly as national park and will not have some of the logging production that was in amongst parts of that area in the past, the planning will be different, and I fully expect that the outcomes, in terms of the prescribed burning regime, will be different in that area from what it has been in the past, but they will still have to take account of good neighbour values and life and property.

Mr ORGAN—Earlier you mentioned the Kimberley fires burning for months. We have heard a lot about the south-western forest over the last day or so. As an east-coaster, I must say I have a bit of concern about what is happening in the rest of the state. CALM seems to have a lot of responsibility—for the whole state, basically—so what are CALM's plans for managing some of those areas that, to Australia as a nation, are obviously of high environmental tourist value et cetera? Is that a real issue that you are facing at the moment?

Mr McNamara—It is a major issue and a major challenge. In my wide range of interaction with the Commonwealth I have highlighted that there is a third of the continent in this state, and a tenth of the taxpayer base of the nation paying for the land management that goes on in this state. That is a fundamental challenge for us. If you want to translate that within Western Australia, we have most of our population in Perth and the south-west; very few in the Kimberley and the interior. The fires that start in much of that country burn over huge areas, they burn for months at a time, they recur far too frequently, and, when combined with grazing by introduced herbivores, they are causing significant concern in terms of decline in our mammal fauna and biodiversity generally.

We are a party to the CRC for Tropical Savannas Management that has been doing some work in that area, and my colleagues might talk about a fire project within that that is collaborative with FESA. We have, in fact, redirected some existing resources into the Kimberley this financial year, specifically to address the interaction of fire and grazing and its effect on biodiversity. We have moved about a quarter of a million dollars of our own resources into a permanent allocation to that area. Is that enough? The answer is no, but it shows that we regard the problem seriously. The collaborative project with FESA is something that perhaps one of my colleagues could speak to.

Mr Sneeuwjagt—I can indicate the sort of work that is going on from a fire perspective. Obviously, we do not apply the sorts of fire prevention activities that can be afforded in the south-west, to the Kimberley and the Pilbara. What we have to do is use strategic systems such as aircraft, using their ignitions to get lines of fire early in the season. At that time, those fires do not spread very wide, so you get a strip development. That is done very closely with FESA, who have responsibility for doing exactly the same thing on pastoral leases and vacant crown land. It is a seamless arrangement, whereby officers from FESA and CALM are in the same aircraft. We

share the costs and we make sure that the burns that are undertaken are strategic and not looking at just one side of the fence. Are they effective? They are getting more effective. We are getting much better at it. There are literally hundreds of kilometres of these sorts of buffers put in. It is still a minuscule section of the whole landscape. Our aim is to prevent the big fires from getting any bigger, and we think that we are starting to get effective. In fact, figures of a 15 to 20 per cent reduction in those sorts of fires is what is now showing up.

Mr Walker—The Department of Defence has been instrumental in providing funding to our department. They contract us to do fire management work on defence lands. That work has been extremely helpful in developing some of the techniques, using technology, remote sensing, and other techniques that are going to be necessary in that part of the world to achieve the sorts of outcomes that we are looking for. The ability to be able to implement, on a trial basis on defence lands, techniques that we now see can be more broadly applied has been very helpful.

Mr Sneeuwjagt—FESA also undertakes a number of campaigns through the Pilbara and Kimberley region each year to reduce the number of avoidable fires—the arson fires or the careless camp fires that get away—to complement that sort of pre-suppression activity. It is a public-centred community awareness campaign.

Mr ADAMS—With 140 local governments all running their own fire service, there are a lot of generals. Does that disperse the opportunity of getting a more professional training regime, the equipment and a process in place to go forward in Western Australia?

Mr Mitchell—On the equipment side, I think your assumption has been correct up until now. There is now, or will be over the next five to 10 years, sufficient money to ensure all the equipment is appropriate and standardised across the state. That is a direct result of the levy.

Mr ADAMS—One coupling will fit every truck?

Mr Mitchell—One coupling will fit all, yes. All those sorts of issues are being addressed and are well on the way to being implemented. They are in the final stages of implementing those sorts of standards. On the issue of 142 local governments, the ones in the centre of the city here are hardly active in fire management, but there are probably 100 local governments that are in one way or another. In the more high risk areas around the urban fringe here—Denmark, Albany and so on—over the last few years we have introduced what we call a fire management officer. This is a fifty-fifty shared arrangement—funding, I am talking—between the state government and local governments, so those local governments are now getting more professional people involved. We are involved, and in many cases we become the employer of that fire management officer.

Incident management has been an area of concern, but we changed the legislation, I think, two or three years ago to allow local governments to transfer incident management responsibility across to professional firefighters and properly trained people. There is a lot being done, particularly in the higher risk areas of the state, to increase the level of competence.

Mr ADAMS—And it is the levy that will give you the finance to achieve that?

Mr Mitchell—The levy will certainly give us the finance to achieve all of the equipment upgrades and protective clothing upgrades, which is very important. I have to say, up until this year a lot of local governments in this state provided some good support and some very poor support to their brigades, to the point where all the protective clothing in some areas was done by fundraising. It is an issue that I do not think is acceptable in this day and age, and the levy takes care of those sorts of issues. The issue of fire management officers is one that we introduced three or four years ago, again in Mundaring, and it has grown since, and we will continue to resource those and expand them in the high-risk areas.

Mr ADAMS—We have received some evidence this morning that there had been some species lost through forestry in Australia. I did check with the chair, and I think the evidence on the record is that there is no scientific evidence to prove that any species has been lost through forestry operations in Australia. With the wide debate that has gone on, that has been the outcome. With farming, it is a totally different position. But I want to ask you—and maybe Mr Walker can answer this—is there any scientific evidence? You have had some seminars where you have drawn together, I take it, people involved in this argument and debate in the state. Is there any scientific evidence that your burning regimes, your reduction burns, have meant the loss of biodiversity in any of the areas that CALM has to look after? And biodiversity, as I understand it, is about having an area big enough for a species to renew itself and therefore keep going into the future; it is not so much about protecting one jarrah tree here which can be re-represented somewhere else. Could you answer that question?

Mr Walker—The short answer is that I am unaware of any individual species or ecological communities that have become threatened by frequent fire or by prescribed burning regimes in the south-west. As I think you heard this morning, there are a number of species that have a preference for longer intervals between fires. The Noisy Scrub-bird and Gilbert's Potoroo were given as two examples of that, and the department's management has reflected that. We have attempted to implement a regime in the areas where those species exist that will provide that sort of habitat. We have also translocated the Noisy Scrub-bird into parts of the Darling Range, where there is not the same history of long unburnt areas. The Noisy Scrub-bird appears to have re-established quite well so far, in a program over about three years in areas that do not have the same long interval between fires, but we have more to learn about that.

In terms of some of the species that occur in wetlands and in areas where there are deep peat deposits, we need to adopt a more precautionary approach in ensuring that those habitats are afforded proper protection, for fairly obvious reasons. Similarly, where there are species known to us that have longer periods of time to first flowering, and there is the need to take those life attributes into account in the interval between fires, that is part of the biodiversity project that we are building at the moment, which will take into account the special needs of particular species.

I would also have to say, though—and this is a generalisation—that many of the species that require the longer intervals between fires occur in riverine areas or riparian areas—moister areas in the landscape—around rock outcrops and so on. We would not aim to burn those every time the area is burnt. We would plan for a longer interval in those parts of the landscape in a prescribed burning regime. That is very much a generalisation and a simplification of what happens, but where we understand and know that there are special needs of species or ecological communities we are building that into the fire regime.

Mr McNamara—Biodiversity is addressed at community scales, ecosystem scales and species scales. There is a lot we do not know. There is a lot we will never know, I suspect. We are increasingly looking at invertebrate communities and non-vascular plants—the non-flowering plants and those sorts of things. There is no doubt—and this is not a forest-specific or a south-west specific comment—that altered fire regimes are one of the threatening processes affecting biodiversity across large parts of this nation. It is also the case that there is no single fire regime that suits all components of our biodiversity. It is an area where our researchers will still be asking the same questions a long time from now.

Mr ADAMS—Also, evolution occurs as we go along. Would you agree with that?

Mr McNamara—Evolution occurs over long periods, of course.

Mr Walker—The survival of species like the Noisy Scrub-bird and Gilbert's Potoroo in quite restricted parts of the state is not solely attributable to the fire history. It is also attributable to predation by animals, such as the fox and the cat. In a regime of predator control, through baiting or some other means, the fire regime required for the long-term survival of those species might be quite different. However, as I said before, we are taking a precautionary approach to that and attempting to keep those habitats in a long unburnt condition.

Mr Sneeuwjagt—I was going to make a point about predation. There have been studies undertaken looking at the impact of repeated fires. We have applied fox control on top of that and found that prior to fox control the numbers of some of our smaller mammals were very low. Their trapping success was very low. Once fox control was introduced, the numbers increased dramatically, irrespective of what fire regime was applied. Fire obviously has an impact, but I am not sure in those cases that it is the most significant impact. It is more likely to be predation.

Mr Walker—When we recognise that a different fire regime is required, that is applied. On the Swan coastal plain, where there are mostly woodland species—banksia woodlands and tuart woodlands—we recognise that frequent fire will increase the risk of weed invasion and other threatening processes associated with frequent disturbance, so we adopt a very different regime for fire on the Swan coastal plain, where a different regime would be more appropriate.

Mr ADAMS—I am sympathetic to the issue of the size of the state and the amount of money you have to manage it. Tasmania has similar problems with built environment—very old and significant to the heritage of the country—in trying to preserve it, and also some areas of land which we have in World Heritage. I take it that you see that the Commonwealth government has a role to play in assisting land managers in the future with fire protection et cetera. Do you have any ideas you could give to this committee for which funding would be helpful?

CHAIR—That sounds like a loaded question.

Mr GIBBONS—Nice try!

CHAIR—That's the GST, isn't it?

Mr McNamara—My mind has turned to that. If my treasurer were here, he would be talking about various imbalances that the state strongly believes are in place, and I share those views, I

think. I used to be a Commonwealth public servant, too, some time ago. I think there are some important roles. Mr Sneeuwjagt mentioned research. CSIRO, amongst others, has played a role in that area. I think there are important national research issues and questions that the Commonwealth should invest in, through organisations such as CSIRO and through the CRCs program, for example. That is at one level.

The Commonwealth has also provided some assistance with aerial capacity over the last couple of years. Similar to my view about a lot of what happens in the natural resource management area, dealing with fire management, dealing with the proper application of fire to the lands that are in the state—to its national parks, its state forests, the private lands and other lands—dealing with fire response and so on are core activities that need to be funded through recurrent funding at state level. One might always like grants, but they are not responsibilities that are amenable to short-term programs, grant programs, one-off programs and the like. It really is a matter of the states having sufficient funding in the overall scheme of things and then applying those funds to their various responsibilities so that they are available in a secure, ongoing and core way for those programs.

CHAIR—Coming back to the question of intervals between burns: I think it is true to say that part of the reason there is a negative perception about prescribed burning is that some people believe that it is happening constantly in a specific area; that it is being burnt all the time. In an ideal world, with the type of planning that CALM does, for the next 100 years if you did not have a wildfire, for instance, and you were able to implement your prescribed burning program, what would be the shortest period of time between burns for any part of the area that you have responsibility for and what would be the longest?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—In the last 10 years, the shortest would be about five or six years. There are very few cases, but they would be particularly around high-value town sites. We do not have a rotation.

CHAIR—That is the sort of thing I am trying to get at, because there is that perception. That is why I asked the question.

Mr Sneeuwjagt—We rarely target an area for repeated burns on a rotation. There are some, particularly around town sites, as I mentioned, where you cannot avoid that, but that is in the minority. Generally, we offset burns so that one burn might be done in year 1, the adjoining one might be done in year 3 and the one beyond that might be done in year 8, or something like that. There is actually a differentiation to give you some chance. If you concentrated in one area and did nothing else in the rest, once that one area becomes old enough to carry fire, then you have very limited protection. It does not make a lot of sense, from a protection point of view, to keep targeting one area.

‘Frequent fires’ gets bandied around and everybody has their own perception about frequent fire. Somebody might consider a frequent fire to be every 30 years and others every two to three years. In the forest situation, in the 34 years I have been involved, I do not think we have ever done that. We might have done one or two years along railway reserves in the past, but that does not happen now.

CHAIR—So over the next 100 years—if you were able to implement your exact plan year after year—the shortest possible time between a specific area getting burnt might be five to six years, near towns, and that would not be very much. What is the longest?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—In some areas, for biodiversity, you might want to target one type of vegetation and come back to the same block two years later and target another vegetation type. You might come to that same area but burn different parts of the landscape. For biodiversity that makes a lot of sense, according to some information we have.

CHAIR—And the longest period?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—We leave some areas. We have left a couple of areas for more than 60 years, because it is very important for research. We have a significant number of designated areas, where we have planned not to burn in the foreseeable future.

CHAIR—In answering questions of Mr Organ, you mentioned what you did burn under prescribed burning and after a wildfire. When a wildfire takes place in a particular year, does that automatically adjust your plans for the next year?

Mr Sneeuwjagt—Absolutely, particularly if it is of a significant size. If it is only 10 to 20 hectares, maybe not. But it is the size and its location, yes. It makes no sense, obviously, with the limited opportunities we have, to reburn something right next to it, after a wildfire. It is an automatic part of our review and future planning that we take account of past fires, current fires and our achievements in that prescribed burning program.

CHAIR—One of the criticisms that has been levelled not only in Western Australia but everywhere, as working forests—when I say ‘working forests’ I mean areas that have been available for forestry activities, such as harvesting—have been taken out of that regime into national park, whether it be national park, wilderness et cetera, is that the resources are not being made available to look after them in the same way that they were looked after as part of the forestry regime. I understand that quite a number of areas have fallen into that category in Western Australia over the last few years and many more are to occur, apparently, in the next few years. What were the resources? Are you able to give even an example?

Mr McNamara—Certainly.

CHAIR—What has occurred with those particular resources? Take into account that some of the criticism is that the logging contractors and people like that had equipment—bulldozers et cetera—that are not there any more. How do you see what you are being given to look after these areas?

Mr McNamara—I suspect it would be a rare head of a state agency who would sit in front of you and say that he would not like more resources. If we just set that aside for the moment, governments of both persuasions in Western Australia have recognised this issue. My department has taken responsibility for eight regional parks in the Perth metropolitan area and been provided with additional funds for their management in recognition of a range of management needs, including fire.

We have, similarly, purchased considerable areas of land in the pastoral rangelands with Natural Heritage Trust assistance. Equally, the previous coalition government and the current Labor government have honoured the increase in budget that was put in place to manage those. Would we like more? Yes. But there has been specific budget allocation as land has been taken from one form of tenure into the conservation estate.

The Gallop Labor government was elected with a policy of protection of old-growth forest and it included the creation of 30 new national parks in the south-west of the state. It is fair to say that that area of the state would previously have been managed utilising the funding that accrued to the agency through the timber harvesting activity. That revenue is clearly no longer on the table. The government recognised that and, in its first year in 2001, allocated an additional \$25 million to the department over that financial year, the first financial year, and the out years of the budget process—\$25 million over four years: \$16 million recurrent and \$9 million capital. That allows the department to meet its responsibilities to manage those areas, including for fire management.

CHAIR—How did it compare with the money lost?

Mr McNamara—It is more than adequate to deal with those areas in terms of the management required, compared to what—

CHAIR—But how did it compare with the money lost?

Mr McNamara—I would have to look up those figures.

CHAIR—But you believe they are something in the order?

Mr McNamara—Absolutely. The management requirement is not the same. We were managing for logging activity previously in amongst those areas and we no longer have to do that, clearly. We were also managing for a range of other outcomes but the fire regime is different—and is expected to be different—if we turn it into national park status. But we certainly take the view that the allocation is a reasonable and adequate one for the function that we have been given, in terms of managing those areas as a national park.

Both the previous government and the current government have also provided some extra resources to the department progressively over recent years for extra firefighters, for the aerial capacity and, similarly, for FESA in the aerial capacity area. We have advised our minister and our minister has advised the parliament during the last fire season that our staffing levels, our equipment levels—equipment from other sources, including industry—and our access to staff from the Forest Products Commission have been adequate to meet our fire model. I hope the level at which we defined the response capacity which we need to have was explained yesterday.

We review that situation each year and we are reviewing it currently in light of the last season having been one of the heaviest or worst in the last 40 or so years. I have advised my minister that we do now have some concerns going forward about the capacity, in terms of equipment and so on. That is a matter of current review by us and will be addressed by us and by our minister in the coming several months.

CHAIR—We are running out of time again, I am afraid. We could have more questions, but we will have to pull it up so that we can finish this afternoon. Thank you for your time this afternoon. As my colleague from Corangamite said, it is refreshing to have some cooperation and direct input from a state department. We appreciate that. Thank you for the submission and the assistance with our inspections yesterday.

Proceedings suspended from 4.17 p.m. to 4.28 p.m.

DUNCAN, Mr Andrew David, Board Member, Western Australian Farmers Federation

McMILLAN, Mr Andrew John, Director of Policy, Western Australian Farmers Federation

NICHOLL, Mr Colin Jeffery, President, Western Australian Farmers Federation

CHAIR—I thank you for your patience. We are running a little late. I hope it has not caused you too much of a problem. Welcome this afternoon. I will just read the formal part because I am not sure you were all here earlier on.

While the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and 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 contempt of parliament.

We have received your submission and we thank you for that. It has been authorised for publication, so it is now on the public record and forms part of the evidence this afternoon. Would you like to make some opening remarks and then we will have some questions.

Mr McMillan—Thank you very much for the opportunity of addressing the committee. Colin has asked me to make the opening remarks so I will launch right into it. Our submission has been kept reasonably brief and to the point because we realised that we would get a hearing in due course. We would like to take this opportunity just to briefly outline three key points that we have raised in the submission, and then we would certainly welcome questions from the committee, particularly to Colin and Andy, who are both practising farmers—to Andy, in particular, because of his longstanding involvement in the Rural Bushfire Service and other issues like that.

First of all, I would like to point out just as a matter of interest that we do a lot of submissions on all sorts of issues that come across our desk. My responsibility is primarily environmental. Standard procedure is that we would go out to our zone network to ask for input from our members, and we base the submissions on the input that we get. For this submission the membership input was tremendous, greater than anything else, and that includes issues like property rights and water security. It is obviously a very major issue on the agenda of farmers around the state, given that we had some fairly serious burns in the last summer.

The first point we covered in the submission was the problems we had with fires emanating from government land and the perceived lack of fire management practices on that land. The second was the lack of credibility given to local firefighters and their local knowledge—the dictatorial attitudes that government fire bodies take when they are managing fires. The third is the concern for the future: that is, the increasing reliance on volunteers in rural areas cannot go on forever. Western Australia is no different from anywhere else in the country. Rural populations unfortunately are declining. Margins are being squeezed the whole time in farming operations, which just does not give farmers the free time available to take on things like fire.

Fire management is essential, obviously, but it really puts a squeeze on other aspects of the farming operation.

As to the expectations on volunteers, it just seems a never-ending thing that the public good is always dragged into these debates. Someone has to pay for that public good, and farmers are getting to the end of the line as far as their capacity to service these demands is concerned. With that, I will just leave it, and invite the committee to raise the issues that the submission brought forward.

CHAIR—Thank you. In my view, as an individual on this committee, local knowledge has been one of the things most commented on in every state and territory we have visited as part of this inquiry: local knowledge is not being respected and utilised anywhere near as much as maybe once upon a time. The evidence was fairly overwhelming in New South Wales and Victoria, particularly in the ACT—and you have mentioned that in your submission. How do you see local knowledge and experience being utilised by the various agencies in a better way?

Mr Nicholl—The agricultural scene has changed. I have been farming for some 44 years. Andy has been farming for half that time, for 22 years. We have been in a developing area where we have had a lot of clearing fires. The land is now cleared. There are very few clearing fires; in fact, it is almost impossible to run a clearing fire at all. We have also seen changes in the ownership of the government land, the reserves and so on. In Western Australia, at the beginning of July, I think, CALM took over all the DOLA land. With that I think there has been a lag by a lot of these government agencies, particularly CALM, in acknowledging or accepting responsibilities that go with the ownership of land. When private farmers own land or anyone else owns land, there are certain responsibilities that go with that.

The problem in the interface is that each shire has its own fire officer. There is a chain of command right back to the executive officer of the shire. I believe that the local fire officer should be the supreme commander on agricultural land and on government agency land if that is the natural course, or there should be some understanding if CALM believe that they want to pick up the total control of fires on their land. The state of Western Australia is a very large state and there are small parcels of land dotted right across the agricultural areas. My farm borders quite a bit of CALM land and lightning has started a fire there. The sooner you can put a fire out or control a fire, the smaller the task. We have done that, but with the environmental laws today that have arisen, where you would naturally go and do something without thinking, you could quite easily now end up by contravening an environmental law that was not a consideration going back a few years.

CHAIR—And is that with respect to taking some machinery onto that land to access—

Mr Nicholl—That is right—endangered species or something like that, yes.

CHAIR—In other states we have found that the criticism is that the local people know that, when a lightning strike hits, you have to get in and get it out, but they were prevented from doing that by various authorities that had control of the land. They were not talking to them and saying, ‘We saw some of the fires.’ What you are saying is that local people, through the local fire control officer, ought to be able to make the decision to get in and get it out, rather than having to go back through some sort of centralised system.

Mr Nicholl—That is right. He should be able to make that decision without any fear of repercussions. Another good example of that is one of the biggest fires, going back to the early nineties, the Forrestania fires. There were lightning strikes beyond the rabbit-proof fence and local fire officers were reluctant to go in there and do something about it without getting permission from CALM. I farm at Hyden. The rabbit-proof fence was east of Hyden. By the time they got that permission, the fires had burnt from the rabbit-proof fence to almost Norseman. There was more land burnt out there than there was in that same year in New South Wales.

Mr Duncan—When we talk about local input, we have to go back to basics. We have to have local input into the development of ongoing management plans. One of the big issues at the moment is that, apart from some designated national parks and other specific areas of crown land, there are not ongoing management plans. There should be a five-year plan developed for all crown land within the state and it should be reviewed on an ongoing basis. We have to see that issue as separate to the issue of the management of the actual fire itself, but they are related. There has to be local input. It is absolutely crucial.

CHAIR—Mr Nicholl, you mentioned that the land adjoining your property—presumably meaning vacant crown land—has gone from the Department of Land Administration.

Mr Nicholl—Yes.

CHAIR—That is vacant crown land. It is now under the control of CALM.

Mr Nicholl—That is right.

CHAIR—It is still vacant crown land?

Mr Nicholl—Yes.

CHAIR—Its status hasn't changed in that respect?

Mr Nicholl—That is right.

CHAIR—Have you seen a change in the administration of that land as a result of the responsibility going from one department to the other?

Mr Nicholl—It has only just occurred, in July this year, so there would not be a time line there. But I think the nearest CALM office is at Narrogin, which is nearly 200 kilometres away.

CHAIR—Maybe I will put it this way. While it has been under the control of the other department, what activities have taken place with respect to firebreaks, fire trails and those sorts of things?

Mr Nicholl—No activity at all, but what we are up against now are the environmental issues. Where DOLA did not have any interest in the environmental damage to biodiversity in any way—flora and fauna—CALM does. CALM is backed up by very powerful environmental laws and the personnel within CALM tend to promote the environment as being their No. 1 charge.

CHAIR—Looking after the biodiversity is not such a bad thing, though.

Mr Nicholl—It is not a bad thing, but, if you look at the back of our submission, the protection of human life, including your own, is the first issue when you consider fighting a fire, then the protection of property and then the protection of the environment. They are the three things, in that order. I think in the minds of a lot of CALM personnel it is the other way around.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Nicholl, you said you have been farming for about 40 years.

Mr Nicholl—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Is that on the same land that you are on now?

Mr Nicholl—Yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is the land that adjoins the crown land?

Mr Nicholl—That is right.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Have you observed any significant changes in the vegetation—the presence of weeds or just the vegetation generally—in that crown land over those 40 years?

Mr Nicholl—Not in the way of weeds, but we do have problems with vermin—rabbits, kangaroos and things like that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Have the numbers of those animals increased over time?

Mr Nicholl—Increased, and at one time the Agricultural Protection Board had the opportunity of controlling rabbits. The Agricultural Protection Board no longer has that responsibility. It is left now to the private landowners, whether they are farmers or whatever. We control rabbits on our side of the boundary, but I am not aware of any rabbit control program carried out on the other side now.

Ms PANOPOULOS—You are not allowed to go onto the crown land to deal with problem animals?

Mr Nicholl—We control kangaroos on our side of the boundary by shooting. We would not be allowed to go onto CALM land to shoot. I would not be prepared to do that because of the risks of fines and so on.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Getting onto that issue of fines, do you have any recent examples of farmers being sued because they have breached some environmental law?

Mr Nicholl—I do not know about being sued.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Fined.

Mr Nicholl—Yes. There was a farmer pursued at Shackleton by CALM. This was about a drainage matter, but it does show us that they are dinkum. It was the intervention of our organisation that I believe, at the end of the day, achieved a settlement between CALM and that farmer.

Ms PANOPOULOS—There is also in the written submission a statement about particular burdens of fighting fires—the physical, emotional and financial burdens. I would like you to tell us about some of the financial burdens that farmers have—firstly in actually participating as volunteer firefighters, and the financial burdens, as you perceive them, of particular land management practices on crown land and the financial impact on farmers.

Mr Nicholl—Most of the fires, certainly in the agricultural areas, are fought using farmer owned firefighting gear—trucks, trailers and the like. They have to be maintained. We give our time at no cost in order to protect our property. If we do not, the results are considerably worse than that. The majority of farmers, though, do take protective action on their own farms. They do protective burning, clearing firebreaks and the like.

Ms PANOPOULOS—On average, what would be the cost to a farmer of being involved in the volunteer brigade? I do not mean the time that you give. I mean equipment and maintenance of equipment.

Mr Nicholl—It would vary substantially. I have a four-wheel drive truck that doubles as a spray rig in the wintertime. Rigs like that are probably worth \$50,000. We have two properties that are some distance apart. We also have a small firefighting trailer and we normally have one unit on each farm so that we can get a quick response. I have never totted it up, but something like two days of creating firebreaks around our properties is the bare minimum.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What is the financial impact, if any, of changed land management practices?

Mr Nicholl—Do you mean on a farm?

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes, the financial impact on a farm.

Mr Nicholl—There is a lot more cropping done today. With the old practices, there used to be a substantial amount of farm land that used to lie to summer fallow. That no longer occurs. We have much tighter margins. We have to use our land a lot more wisely than we did in the past. I do not know whether Andy would like to add to that.

Mr Duncan—I am a little confused by the question.

Ms PANOPOULOS—We have talked about the increase in vermin in crown land adjoining farm land, and there have been issues in the Eastern States, with the alleged mismanagement of crown land and how that has impacted on farmers, whether they have had to spend more money dealing with the weeds that come out of national parks, the vermin, fencing issues et cetera. Are there any of those issues?

Mr Duncan—Yes. In the context of Western Australia, we are probably looking at two completely different situations. One is the west coast, where we have the principal forest areas which CALM manages quite intensively. In the mid to eastern wheatbelt areas, we are getting into what we call the mallee country. The reality is that the government agencies have not managed the mallee country as intensively. To give you an example, I am from Ravensthorpe shire and we had a fire last year which, I think, ran for about 70 kilometres over the space of 10 days.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Was that a wildfire?

Mr Duncan—Roughly 300,000 hectares. I think Rod Daw may have had some input yesterday about it. This fire was by no means unusual. Over the last 20 years we have had several fires of the same size. From my perspective, I probably had direct involvement during seven of those 10 days. Unfortunately, in half of the shire I am in we have seen property numbers decline from 120 land-holders to 30 over the last 25 years, so the numbers of people are not there to share the burden. The other side of the equation is that most of those people that are left are employing one or two people full time. Those people are then dragged off to the fire too, at the expense of the employer, who is myself or another party.

Where it really hurts is when we see a government agency roll up. The guys come from the west coast and are paid overtime and double time and God knows what time, and we are working in a volunteer capacity on publicly owned land, not privately owned land. There is a direct cost. To quantify it would be very difficult, but it is quite significant. As to the cost of equipment to a farmer today, Colin has touched on a truck, which is probably second-hand, but for a brand new four-wheel drive with a slip-on unit you are talking at least \$50,000 to \$55,000 being driven into the bush, basically. You are trying to wreck it on publicly owned land.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And all of that cost is borne by—

Mr Duncan—The cost is borne by the land-holder. There may be some fuel allowance, and there is provision for insurance if there is major damage. In terms of the labour and basics, there is no recompense; none at all.

Mr Nicholl—There have been cases where farmers driving along the road where a fire has started have stopped to assist, only to find the fire has turned back the other way and they have lost their vehicles that have been parked up the road away from the fire.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are there any financial incentives or discounts to volunteer firefighters?

Mr Duncan—No.

Ms PANOPOULOS—For example, in relation to the purchase of equipment, is there a waiving of stamp duty or anything like that?

Mr Duncan—The shire takes out insurance, which covers basic vehicle damage. In the more eastern wheatbelt shires, the provision of equipment to brigades has been on a very haphazard basis to date. You are probably aware that we now have a compulsory levy in Western Australia,

which is calculated on a rate basis. I am not quite sure how far this money is going to go. Within Ravensthorpe shire, it is estimated that that levy will raise \$60,000 per annum. We have just completed a five-year plan, where we have identified \$750,000 worth of need over the next five years. That is for basic equipment purchase. That is not unrealistic and it is for second-hand equipment, not new equipment. The need is far greater than the potential source of the income. I would say that in most mid to eastern wheatbelt shires, there is a very big deficit in heavy duty equipment which is suitable for putting into bush.

Mr GIBBONS—What do you predominantly farm in the shire that you come from? Is it a wheat area?

Mr Duncan—Historically it was probably 30 per cent cropping and the rest livestock. Over the last 10 years it has probably gone to 60 or 70 per cent cropping and 20 or 30 per cent livestock.

Mr GIBBONS—Do you burn the wheat stubble?

Mr Duncan—There is very little stubble burning done now.

Mr GIBBONS—Why is that?

Mr Duncan—Primarily wind erosion. That is a huge issue, and it is a fact that stubble moisture retention is—

Mr Nicholl—Adding to that, agronomic practices have changed. The machines today with knife-edge points can handle stubble, whereas the machines 15 or 20 years ago could not.

Mr GIBBONS—You would use your firefighting equipment to burn firebreaks and clear the ground in fuel reduction areas.

Mr Nicholl—Yes.

Mr GIBBONS—You said before that you were concerned that there was no five-year plan, or very little planning, in fire management. That is not what we have been told by CALM. I do not know if you were here when they gave evidence, but we spent yesterday down in Manjimup, where they had a series of displays up on a wall and they went through what they do, when they intend doing it and why, which very much looked to me like a plan. Obviously, your organisation has plenty of dialogue with them.

Mr Duncan—I think we have to separate the West Coast forest areas from the eastern mallee. There is a vast difference. The reality is that CALM has very few resources in the eastern wheatbelt. To paint a broad brush picture—and I stand to be corrected—the Fitzgerald National Park, which I think is one of the three biggest national parks in the state, has a formal fire management plan which resulted from significant wildfires going back probably 15 years. That plan is reviewed, I think, on a five-year basis. There are other reserves right through the mid to eastern wheatbelt areas which do not have formal fire management plans. I was involved recently in the development of a fire management plan for Magenta and Dunn Rock reserves, which are two quite reasonably sized reserves.

Then we get into the issue of UCL, which DOLA has basically had the ownership of. FESA had a fire management role and have put some money into it and CALM now have a managerial role. That land does not have a formal fire management plan at all. That makes up the biggest area by far. I think the sad reality is that there has been a reluctance by CALM to fast-track fire management plans on the more eastern reserves, because with a fire management plan comes responsibility. If that fire management plan is then not adhered to they are possibly left open to litigation by adjoining land-holders. I think it is fair to say that, when it comes to the mid and eastern wheatbelt, CALM do not have the resources. They may have them for the West Coast, but they certainly do not have them for the mid and eastern wheatbelt.

Mr GIBBONS—Your organisation has a good rapport with them? They are accessible and you have raised these issues with them. How often do you meet with them?

Mr Nicholl—We meet with them on a needs basis.

Mr GIBBONS—When was the last time you met with them to discuss the requirement for a five-year plan for your region?

Mr Duncan—Within the area where I reside, there is ongoing dialogue, to the point where we have finalised two more fire management plans very recently. Within CALM now, we probably will see over the next perhaps five to 10 years the development of fire management plans for most of the eastern wheatbelt.

Mr GIBBONS—You mentioned that the number of people on the land out in your area has reduced by almost a third.

Mr Duncan—Yes. If we go ahead and look at the next 10 to 15 years, I think we can cut that in half again.

Mr GIBBONS—Why?

Mr Duncan—Basically the economics of forcing, to put it bluntly, the weaker—or the smart ones—out and property amalgamation has resulted in the running of larger properties. It is a major issue. If we look ahead 10 to 15 years from now, we have concerns about maintaining the basics of a bushfire brigade to fight fires on private property, let alone publicly owned property.

Mr GIBBONS—If these farms have got bigger because of the unfortunate demise of some of the others, surely they would be responsible for fire management on their own properties.

Mr Duncan—Yes. Each shire has a set of by-laws which local land-holders have to abide by, and they vary between shires.

Mr GIBBONS—We heard before that one of the problems has been different rules in different areas. I understand you have a huge acreage in your farming district. How many shires would be represented? It is about a third of the state, I take it. Is that the figure?

Mr Duncan—No. I am a little confused. Are you saying there is a difference between shire by-laws?

Mr GIBBONS—Is there a difference between shire by-laws?

Mr Duncan—There is.

Mr GIBBONS—Is that a problem for you?

Mr Duncan—There have been some subtle differences between shire by-laws, mainly in terms of the provisions for firebreak implementation and maintenance, but I think, to be fair, that is basically a thing of the past. I do not see it as an issue.

Mr McARTHUR—Can I go back to the relationship between the private landowners and Parks. We have had witnesses who have been very upset about the fact that if a fire is started by a private landowner and gets into parks then legal action may ensue, but if the fire starts in public land—Parks, or CALM land in Western Australia—that it is very difficult to obtain redress from the state government or the authority. Would you care to comment on that observation?

Mr Nicholl—Litigation is always very expensive and not always effective or conclusive. There was an area of litigation between farmers at Merredin—I do not think that it involved public land—and I know that dragged on for quite a number of years. At the end of the day, I know the farmers that were involved with that got very little out of it. I think in the majority of instances, certainly between farmers, it is virtually bump for bump. Andy might be able to better answer that.

Mr McARTHUR—No, it is not an issue. A number of witnesses have been very upset about it, particularly in Victoria, where fires have been set alight in parks and they have had no redress, yet they have been quite strongly attacked when a fire had started in the private sector.

Mr Nicholl—I will go to Andy, because last year, with the Ravensthorpe-Esperance fire that started in public land, there was a fair bit of damage done to farms.

Mr Duncan—I am not aware of any situation in Western Australia where a government agency has taken a private land-holder to task because of a fire that has originated on private property. The unfortunate reality is that by far the most significant fires are caused by lightning strikes which happen in inaccessible or remote areas; usually in publicly owned bush which is very hard to access. They do end up being the bigger fires and invariably they come out onto private property. I think the reality is that most people will resolve the damage with their insurance company and not take the government agency to task, for the very reason that Colin mentioned: if you are talking about a financial outlay, it is just not worth going down that line. But the sad reality is that not everyone is insured, either.

Mr Nicholl—With the Forrestania fires referred to earlier on, Western Power lost the power line that ran from Kondinin to Bounty Mine, and \$1 million worth had to be replaced. To my understanding, Western Power wore that cost. I do not think their insurance policy covered it. It was just under \$1 million and their insurance did not come in until it was over a \$1 million loss. Western Power wore that and their customers would have worn it in higher costs.

Mr Duncan—I think there is a reluctance generally by private land-holders to pursue the litigation line because they realise down the track it may backfire on them from the other party.

Mr McARTHUR—Yesterday CALM informed us that if the prescribed burn did get onto private property, they settled with the landowner in regard to fencing, and did it immediately without any legal discussion. I was encouraged by that point of view. It was quickly sorted out, department to individual on an informal basis, so that was encouraging, compared to what other witnesses have told us.

Mr Nicholl—There is another issue that is concerning farmers and that is the WorkSafe issue—training and staff and so on. I am to a large extent, as most farmers are, self-trained in all these things. This will be highlighted, as just last harvest there was a youth on a farm who ultimately died as a result of fire, and I dare say there will be a coronial inquiry into that. With the more stringent WorkSafe laws coming into place, if a farmer uses his staff to fight a fire and they have not been instructed and things go wrong—and it might only be a rarity that things do go wrong—it does expose a farmer to enormous liability. The court or the coroner has yet to decide what is going to happen in this recent case.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Does that mean you would advocate actual training, increased training, for volunteers, or not using staff?

Mr Nicholl—It is risky, but bear in mind that, particularly during seasonal times like harvesting and seeding and so on, farmers do rely heavily on casual staff. As the laws become much more draconian in areas of WorkSafe and so on and there are requirements for employers to ensure that their staff are trained in all aspects, if you take a person on for a short time and train them in every aspect of the job and in firefighting and all the rest of it, by the time you had been through all that—

Ms PANOPOULOS—The harvest would be over.

Mr Nicholl—Yes, that is right. I was going to say that and I thought, no, that might be a bit too ridiculous, but it is looming in the back of my mind. This has come up very quickly; every five years these laws are revisited and tend to be tightened. It is a concern of mine. I have employees and in the past I have taken them and had them under my control, but where you get fire there is sometimes confusion, and they do get away from your control. It is a growing concern amongst farmers as to just how they would be situated. It is all right until someone gets injured.

Ms PANOPOULOS—If you were faced with that situation, would you think twice about taking some of those casual employees with you, preferring to send them to the house with the pets and the children?

Mr Nicholl—Yes. I would do an assessment of the urgency of the situation, taking into account whether it is threatening your property or whether it is miles away and you are attending to help someone else. I would be more inclined to go on my own and leave them behind. We generally give them basic training on how to start the firefighting pump, how it works and all the rest of it. You need to do that, but to give them the full training that I guess would be required under some of the work rules is really beyond the ability of a farmer.

CHAIR—The question I am going to ask is to follow up on the insurance issue. Evidence that we took in other states was that quite often farmers are only partially insuring fencing. For instance, they might only insure internal fencing, and not external because it is adjoining public land, where the risks are deemed by the insurance companies to be higher and therefore there is evidence of differing insurance rates for that fencing. Is there any information you can give us as to that situation in Western Australia?

Mr Nicholl—I would say the majority of farmers are only partially insured.

CHAIR—For fencing or across the board?

Mr Nicholl—I do not insure any fencing. I pay out an enormous amount of money for insurance now—probably in the order of \$20,000 in the course of a year—and I bear a large share of the risk myself. I would love to have it totally insured, but, in trying to balance farm budgets and so on, we insure the high-risk and the high-value things. We insure our crops; we insure our homes; we insure our motor vehicles, like a tractor, a header and so on, that cost \$300,000 to \$400,000. A lot of the other things, like fences et cetera, we certainly do not insure in our case.

Mr Duncan—I am not aware of any differential rates within Western Australia between fencing crown land and internally—own fencing, private property.

CHAIR—And farmers covering fencing by insurance?

Mr Duncan—I would have to concur with Colin. I have three properties and I do not insure one bit of fencing, and I join crown land and privately owned bush.

CHAIR—What is the ballpark figure for fencing in your area?

Mr Duncan—Replacement or insurance cost?

CHAIR—Replacement.

Mr Duncan—Probably in the order of \$2,000 per kilometre including labour.

Mr Nicholl—That would be low-density fencing. They are posts spread well apart.

CHAIR—And fairly flat country, too.

Mr McMillan—In the submission we did make a recommendation early on that the inquiry be extended and undertaken at a state level. That was largely based on the concern that was expressed by our membership. As I previously mentioned, the submissions were called for back in May. In June CALM put out a paper calling for submissions on the management of wilderness areas. We have just about completed our submission now. I do not know whether you have had a chance to look at the document.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr McMillan—But the section on fire management is that much.

CHAIR—You are indicating about three paragraphs in a document of how many pages?

Mr McMillan—The whole policy document, as such, is pretty hastily put together, we would consider. You raised the issue of meeting with CALM before. In my time doing this job—within a couple of years—we certainly have not met on a specific issue. We have met where CALM have been part of a body of senior public servants. The concern I have had, given that the state government has a fairly clearly outlined sustainability strategy which talks about the three pillars of sustainability—being economic, environmental and social, to be treated equally—is that there is an inequitable focus on environmental aspects from the people we have had dealings with to date. That makes us a little hesitant to pursue that road with them.

CHAIR—Yes. I noticed your recommendation that the inquiry be extended. We do not, unfortunately, have the power to extend an inquiry into the state, but we could make recommendations out of our report with respect to what states might or might not do.

Mr McMillan—If we do not ask the question, we do not know the answer.

CHAIR—I am sure that we will be ultimately recommending a number of things that the states should or should not do. Thank you for your evidence. We appreciate it.

[5.10 p.m.]

PEDRO, Mr Anthony Jefferis, Inventor—Head Operator, Front Line Fire Fighting

ROBERTSON, Mr Peter, Convenor, Western Australian Forest Alliance

VERSLUIS, Mr Hendrik Johan, Secretary, South Coast Environment Group

CHAIR—Welcome. I will not reread the formal part as at least two of you have heard it three or four times during the day. We have your submission which has been authorised for publication and forms part of the evidence. Would you like to make some opening remarks before we have questions?

Mr Robertson—Thank you. First of all, there has been a lot of talk today—and no doubt at other times—about this myth that national parks, once they are set aside as national parks, are somehow excluded from fire and become a fire risk to surrounding forest or land. That is another one of many rural myths that float around. In fact, the national parks and nature reserve system in the south-west of WA is burnt repeatedly and regularly, often as a burn buffer, to protect surrounding or adjacent recently logged regrowth forest. It is an absolute myth to suggest that somehow national parks are treated as a great icon where fire shall not go. They are in fact burnt often as a buffer for young regrowth following from logging operations in adjacent state forest.

We have a big problem with fire in the south-west of WA, resulting from overuse and mismanagement of prescribed burning and the mishandling of wildfires by responsible agencies. It is dishonest, in our view, not to focus much more on climate change when discussing fire in Australia and in the south-west of Western Australia. Various governments are obviously in denial about the increasing role that global warming and climate change is having on our entire environment, including fire management issues in relation to the environment.

I know you have received submissions, for example, from Professor David Karoly and Dr James Risbey, highlighting the very significant and growing impact that global warming and climate change—and the drought that has been induced by that in many parts of Australia—are having on fire. It is irresponsible not to take full account of the existing and likely scenarios for the implications of global warming for fire management. CALM itself, more than 10 years ago, put out a report which highlighted the very significant impact that global warming and climate change will have for the south-west forests of Western Australia, including more and hotter fires. Our submission is that to simply respond to that by doing more burning, or calling for more burning, is irresponsible and very dangerous.

Our natural systems in the south-west of Western Australia and, no doubt, elsewhere around Australia are no longer able to cope with more and more disturbance, including prescribed burning. They might once have been resilient to disturbance, but they are now radically changed as a result of clearing, burning, logging, climate change, introduced pests and diseases, foxes and cats, loss of species et cetera. Our environment and ecosystems are now radically different from what they were at the time of European settlement and much less capable of withstanding

continued additional disturbance. We need to take that into account when we are thinking about applying more and more burning to what is left of our natural environment.

There is a continued overstatement of the alleged adaptation of the Australian environment and species to fire and the need for fire and the benefits of fire. At the same time, there is a continued understatement of the extent and degree and types of fire-sensitive values in our environment. In the south-west of WA we have many different aspects of the environment that are very sensitive to fire, especially when—as I said before—you factor in all the other changes that have taken place in the south-west over the last 150 years.

You have relationships involving fungi, animals and plants, long unburnt habitat, organic soils which take thousands of years to accumulate, old trees with hollows that are used by 26 species of hollow-dependent birds and animals in our forest. All of these things are now increasingly sensitive to any form of disturbance, including repeated prescribed burning. That needs to be factored into any discussion about prescribed burning. As a whole, we are changing our environment in a way that makes it more prone to burning. Our environment has natural inhibitions to burning—moisture differentials, structural differentials—that make it unlikely that large fires will burn frequently across the landscape. That is how it was 200 years ago. As a result of all the changes that we have brought about, including frequent prescribed burning, we are making the environment more homogeneously fire prone. We need to factor that in when we are talking about doing more and more prescribed burning.

There is a continued refusal to acknowledge the costs, impacts, drawbacks, limitations, trade-offs and downsides involved in prescribed burning. It is not simply a case that it is a good thing and the more the better. There are many impacts—costs, drawbacks, limitations, trade-offs and downsides—to prescribed burning. They are never discussed by the proponents of prescribed burning.

We are seeing in Western Australia and elsewhere around Australia a continued misuse of Indigenous or alleged Indigenous fire use history to justify more burning. That was touched on in earlier submissions. There is no agreement that the Aboriginal people burnt the entire south-west every three to four years. In fact, there is every reason to believe that they did not do any such thing. To use that as some sort of justification for more burning is irresponsible and not scientific.

We contend that community protection on the one hand and biodiversity conservation on the other must be looked at separately, rather than inflated in this simplistic way, to suggest, as we have seen at the moment, that doing more burning will somehow enhance biodiversity and provide more community protection. Both of those are very contentious claims which are not established fact or borne out by a lot of science. We certainly contend that there is no basis at the moment upon which to base large area burning on the basis of maintaining or enhancing biodiversity. We are not aware of any clear evidence or scientific consensus that will promote biodiversity or maintain it, and in fact there is a lot of evidence that it will do exactly the opposite.

If we are going to introduce burning for biodiversity in the south-west, fine, but let us introduce it as a trial on a very small scale and let us monitor it, because we never do long-term monitoring of what happens with prescribed burning. If that is what we are going to do, let us do

it properly. Let us do it on a small scale and let us monitor the impacts over a long period of time before we blanket apply it across the landscape.

There is very inadequate risk management in the south-west of WA, very inadequate accounting for the full range of values that should be taken into account when looking at fire. Although, as acknowledged before, there is change happening, what we usually get from CALM is just a map saying, 'All these areas haven't been burnt for 10 years', or whatever it is, 'therefore there's a wildfire catastrophe waiting to happen; therefore we need to do more burning,' and so on. It is all based on the most flimsy risk management or risk assessment and, as I indicated before, there is so little monitoring to follow up and audit it, or to demonstrate the benefits or outcomes of any of this burning.

We welcome the fact that there are various reviews under way in Western Australia, including internal reviews at CALM that we have had some involvement in: the imminent EPA review of burning in WA, which we will obviously participate in fully, and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority is doing its own internal reviews, which we have also had some input into, and that is very good, because we have to get a lot smarter very quickly about fire and burning or we are going to end up with an environmental catastrophe and, following on from that, undoubtedly social and economic downsides as well.

In conclusion, our contention is that we need a very new and different approach to fire management in the south-west of WA and no doubt across the whole state. The aim, obviously, should be to minimise the exposure of communities to the threat of fire, which is not the same thing as being able to put out every wildfire that starts. That is much more in line with what people like Klaus Braun were saying earlier: that we need to look at what is going to be impacted by fire that we value, and work back from that.

The second aim, obviously, should be to protect and maintain biodiversity in a multi-threat and drastically modified environment. It is no longer, as I said before, appropriate to pretend that we are somehow living in a pristine pre-European environment that we can walk into and apply all these different techniques to. We are living in an environment now where most of the species are in decline, most of the ecosystems are under threat, and we need to take that into account.

We believe that we need to look more at a zoning system, starting from those values that we define clearly as being the most important and the most at risk from fire, and work out from that. At the moment there is this notion that we just blanket burn remote bushland across tens of thousands of hectares of forest, wetlands and heathlands and somehow that is going to protect the community. That is nonsense. If we have a zoning system, we can work out where the community lives, where the community assets are and what is the best way to protect the community. In some cases that may involve prescribed burning but in many cases it will involve a whole lot of other things in place of, or in addition to, prescribed burning.

Finally, as discussed at various times today, we need a much improved capacity to early detect and suppress fires before they become wildfires, and that is something that we definitely want to see more of in WA.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Robertson. Do Mr Versluis or Mr Pedro want to make any opening remarks before we get to questions?

Mr Pedro—I would like to show my video first.

A video was then shown—

CHAIR—Thank you for showing us that. I understand you are going to leave some information on that for us.

Mr Pedro—Yes.

CHAIR—If you want to expand on that, please do.

Mr Pedro—I should explain why I went to all the trouble to do that. It has consumed at least the last 10 years of my life and, as I have explained, probably \$100,000. I did not do it just for the sake of it. I did it because I had first-hand experience of forest adjacent to my property that you could send kids through. They could run through on a leaf floor like this—open forests that had not been burnt for 60 to 70 years; beautiful open forest with tall trees and a shallow leaf floor.

I experienced these forests as a child and I saw them prescribe-burnt and turned into wattle thickets that you practically had to prise your way into. The prescribed burn germinated all the seed that was just sitting idle, not germinating until the prescribed burn came and germinated it all. Within five or six years, those forests were impenetrable. I then moved from there into a different environment—into a jarrah forest—and saw exactly the same thing happen again. Open jarrah forests that took 15 to 20 years to reach an open state were prescribe-burnt and turned into this impenetrable thicket.

Rather than this defeatist attitude that we have to prescribe burn everything, it seems to me that if it were converted into a social community it is like saying, ‘Let’s wipe out all that section of Perth’s north suburbs in case a disease comes down through there.’ It is such a defeatist, horrible attitude to have. Why not get better at getting there quickly and helping to sort the situation out so that you do not have the problem?

What I am saying is that if you had this sort of vehicle over in Canberra looking after those forests there, with a high-quality surveillance thing to go with it, you could have got up into those hills on the first day and put the fires out. I have done it. I have been a volunteer firefighter since I was a kid. You turn up to a fire in a truck and start dragging the hoses off into the bush. In the forest industry, you turn up in this amazing equipment and—bang, smash—everything is done, top dollar. It is all precision. Turn to the fire industry and you take this pathetic bloody hose and you drag it off into the bush and it gets jammed on logs and you try and drag it back and it gets jammed on logs. It is absolutely pathetic.

I heard CALM saying that they were world leaders in firefighting. If CALM and Australia in general are world leaders in firefighting, we have a long way to go. Get to these fires quickly and put them out. The main reason that I went to the trouble of coming to see you guys was that there are areas that have survived the prescribed burning regime and are open forests. There are still some open forests down there. Yet we have all this pressure now to get in there and burn it and do it all over again; propagate all this shit. You have to wait 30 or 40 years for it to get back to where it was.

My submission is that the areas that have survived this disgusting regime should be allowed to be monitored carefully, and not monitored by CALM. It is no good CALM monitoring fuel levels. Throughout Australia they have to be monitored by an independent body. Funds have to be made available for, say, science departments of universities or botanic departments of universities to monitor what is happening with these fuel levels.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Pedro. Mr Versluis, do you have anything to say in opening?

Mr Versluis—Yes. To give you a little bit of background, I just moved from the south-west. I moved across to Perth last month, after living for 20 years in the Denmark shire, 55 kilometres from Denmark and 25 kilometres from Walpole. At the back of my property was the Soho forest, which is now a proposed national park, part of the Walpole Wilderness Area. I was a Denmark shire councillor for 11 years and Denmark shire president for two years.

I am currently a member, by ministerial appointment, of the Walpole Wilderness Area Community Advisory Group. I am also the secretary of the South Coast Environment Group, who—as I said in my introduction—were the people that developed the concept of the Walpole Wilderness Area, which was subsequently adopted by a number of political parties and became part of the old-growth forest policy of the Labor Party.

I want to stress that I talk here as layman; as a farmer. I talk here after 20 years, 15 of which I spent as a local bushfire person. From observation and intimate knowledge having worked with the environmental movement in developing something better than what we had, which was the logging of this precious area now identified as the one and only biodiversity hot spot in Australia. It is ironic that during today's evidence you heard someone—I cannot remember who it was exactly, but I think it was Bob Pearce, who certainly has a tendency to massage the truth somewhat—saying that they could not find 8,000 hectares of undisturbed pristine forest. That includes not just pure forest, but an area that may also have swamps and outcrops of granite.

We have a 355,000 hectare so-called national park system called the Walpole Wilderness Area and, after 150 years of careful management by the foresters, we cannot find 8,000 hectares that is not degraded to the point where it does not meet the standards for wilderness. To achieve that, we now have to close a couple of roads. I want to emphasise to this committee, as a member of Walpole Wilderness Area Community Advisory Committee, that we looked at what needed to be done. The statement by Mr Pearce that we were closing roads left, right and centre is absolute nonsense. There are a couple of minor roads that need to be closed, so that two areas which still have a core wilderness of a quality that qualifies them to be called wilderness can be identified.

The chairman of our committee is CALM's director of national parks. We have him as our chairman and a wide representation from the community. We have many problems developing a management plan, because there are a large number of conflicting community demands on the area: for example, CALM wants it for one reason, the Main Roads Department wants to get gravel out, the wildflower pickers want to get the wildflowers, the local guys want to get the firewood et cetera. The management plan is complex.

You heard reference made this morning to the Nuyts wilderness. The management plan of the Nuyts wilderness took 12 years to develop. The draft came out 12 years after the committee was set up to develop it, although there is no question that this is not going to happen now. The time

frame that the minister has set for us to come to a conclusion on a current management plan is probably in the order of three years. It is highly complex, but we are not reinventing the wheel and there is a great deal of help from previous management plans. I am severely worried about the emphasis put by the foresters, in particular, that because we were fortunate enough to find two lots of 8,000 hectares which qualify as core wilderness, surrounded by land tenure of a different description—maybe national park or nature reserve or whatever, but not called a core wilderness—access to the core wilderness is, in fact, reduced to walk in. It is not for the drive-by tourist who wants to sit in a bus. That is not what we have come to see as wilderness.

We have consistently said, as an environmental group and also as a community advisory group, that we are not opposed to prescribed burning, but that we—and I follow Klaus Braun's comment—should have a very carefully studied approach, based on science. I was glad to hear from Alan Walker and from Keiran McNamara, the executive director of CALM, that they now at least have a plan to scientifically study this issue, because in the past they did not and the review in 2001 showed that. We now are studying it to the point where the community can give some input. The myth that we do not want anything burnt is false; the myth that, because a few minor roads are closed to create core wilderness, we are now exposing the entire 350,000 hectares of eight national parks to a holocaust.

I am very surprised at the level of intellectual capacity of the people who gave evidence here today and how often they departed—to the extent they did—from what they know to be the real truth. This is not correct; a number of these statements are totally irrelevant and I challenge them now in front of you and will provide you with the necessary evidence if you require it. I appreciate being given this opportunity as an ordinary citizen, who has had a close association with the south-west area. I live right smack in the middle of the south-west wilderness area, which is the 350,000 hectares that is proposed, the very area that everybody has been talking about here today.

I emphasise again that there are horses for courses. The fire regime and the fire management in the tingle forest is different from that in the kauri forest—that has been acknowledged by a couple of people—and it is different in the jarrah forest. So we have to be very careful that we have science signs based differentials between the approach we take when prescribed burning is used as one of many management tools in these areas which are distinctly geologically and environmentally different. I will leave it at that.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Versluis.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Mr Robertson, I was just going over the written submission and there is a statement made under the heading 'Facts about pre-emptive burning'. The first dot point says:

frequent burning does have harmful ecological impacts;

and then

doing less pre-emptive burning but targeting it more ...

Am I to take it, from that, that your organisation believes prescription burning does have harmful effects but can be useful in some circumstances?

Mr Robertson—We are prepared to give it the benefit of the doubt, yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Also, the statement that there should be less pre-emptive burning but targeting it more—have you had a look at the maps and the pattern of current mosaic burning by CALM?

Mr Robertson—I am familiar with the maps they published showing recent burns, yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—The map shows intensity of fires.

Mr Robertson—Are you talking about the satellite images?

Ms PANOPOULOS—No, I am talking about maps that identify areas and label the year in which they were burnt and often the intensity of the fire.

Mr Robertson—I know there are maps showing what has been burnt recently. I know there are satellite images which show the intensity of the burns. I am not so familiar with maps showing both, but I will take your word that they exist.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do the maps you have seen include the historical information of which areas have been burnt and during which years?

Mr Robertson—In a very limited fashion. There is a very severe paucity of information about the long-term fire history of the entire south-west.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I ask those questions because, as I said, you made the statement that there should be burning, but it should be more targeted. I would suggest that your organisation—

Mr Robertson—There should be hazard reduction and that should be more targeted. The hazard reduction may be burning, or it may be some other mechanism.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I would suggest that perhaps you get access to some of those maps showing a very targeted approach to burning. You seem to have made that statement—

Mr Robertson—I am familiar with the maps you are talking about showing where the burns are. That is no secret.

Ms PANOPOULOS—No. If you are talking about targeting, Mr Robertson, I am quite concerned about targeting as well. What I am suggesting is that perhaps this already occurs and if you had a look at CALM's maps they might be able to assist.

Mr Robertson—We are talking about different forms of targeting. Sure, they go out and target areas to burn, but I am talking about targeting and burning or hazard reduction for where it is actually needed and useful.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Okay.

Mr Robertson—Not just ‘This block today, that block tomorrow and that block over there the day after.’ That is not what I call targeting.

CHAIR—Effectively what you are saying is that in your view that is how CALM do their planning; they do not take into account what the species are in a particular area, the various wetness and all those other things. You are effectively saying that they do not do any planning other than, ‘We’ll just go and burn particular areas.’

Mr Robertson—No, I did not say that they do not do any. I am saying that they are starting now to try to adopt a slightly more sophisticated and scientifically credible approach to prescribed burning, but there is a long way to go. Too many of the burns that are conducted at the moment are still very much in the old style of repeated ignitions until everything is virtually blanket burnt over a large area, with no monitoring to determine whether that has actually had a very serious impact on the environment and species and with very little justification, as far as we are concerned, as to whether that is of any significant benefit to the actual assets of the community that are supposedly being protected by that burning.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Are you aware of the arguments that the use of prescribed burning in the south-west has actually helped divert fires and helped diminish or reduce the spread of fires? Are you aware of that argument?

Mr Robertson—I am aware of that argument, yes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Do you accept it?

Mr Robertson—I accept it in some cases. Prescribed burning has undoubtedly helped to control some fires, but as we heard—and you would have certainly seen in your submissions, for example, from the bureau of meteorology, the CSIRO and others—there are very significant limitations on the effectiveness of prescribed burning. As we have seen in wildfires recently, areas that have been prescribed burnt or burnt by wildfires as recently as a few months, let alone a year or two previously, have carried wildfires on severe days.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I have a particular interest in the arguments for prescribed burning because—

Mr Robertson—Me, too.

Ms PANOPOULOS—I had 900,000 hectares of my electorate burn and there had been very little prescribed burning. That brings me to my next question about biodiversity. I am not a scientist and I need some assistance with my eyesight but, from what I have observed, with the naked eye in my neck of the woods, the wildfires really singed thousands of hectares. It was not just a normal fire going through; they were feral fires.

Mr Robertson—Feral fires?

Ms PANOPOULOS—Yes. That is a term as used by certain scientists. The impact of those fires on that biodiversity most people would suggest is far greater and more permanent than the impact of pre-emptive burns on the—

Mr Robertson—It is very well to suggest it, but where are the studies that show it? Where is the long-term monitoring of any of the burning we do, whether it is wildfires or prescribed burns? It just does not exist. Where it does exist, where there has been some monitoring, in many cases the scientific reports indicate that the prescribed burning can be just as destructive as wildfires.

Ms PANOPOULOS—If you have any of those particular scientific reports available—I have not seen any of them which have used research—

Mr Robertson—I have a very large lever arch file—

Ms PANOPOULOS—If you could at some later stage make them available to the committee.

Mr Robertson—Sure.

Mr Pedro—You seem to be suggesting that if you prescribe burn, you alleviate wildfire. You were suggesting that if you prescribe burn the forest will look acceptable and, if you have wildfires, it is devastated. I agree that your fires were devastating. But this summer that has just gone past—and I included this in my part of my submission—prescribed burnt country of some 50,000 hectares was burnt by wildfires and looked exactly like your forest did. Even though they were a prescribed burn, they still carried wildfires and they still ended up looking like your forests did. So a prescribed burn does not mean—

Ms PANOPOULOS—I doubt whether they would look pretty much like the fires down at Nyungar.

Mr Pedro—They did.

Ms PANOPOULOS—But, to get on to something else, you have put in your written report and you said this outdated approach is gradually being replaced by a new understanding of the values and sensitivities of natural systems. What manifestation or practical example have you seen of this new understanding of the values and sensitivities of natural systems?

Mr Robertson—I suppose we are taking, to some extent, on trust what we have been told by CALM.

Ms PANOPOULOS—What is that?

Mr Robertson—They are attempting to modify the way they go about their burning operations.

Ms PANOPOULOS—In what way?

Mr Robertson—To make them more like a mosaic. There are unresolved issues between us and CALM about the size of these mosaics and their extensiveness across the landscape—very significant problems.

That is the nub of it—this promotion of the idea that, instead of doing blanket burns over large areas, there be more of a mosaic style of burning which supposedly will protect or maintain the biodiversity. There are a lot of question marks over that, and whether it is actually being applied as it is being talked about et cetera, but that is obviously the direction in which we want to see things move. I am concerned. The burns that you do to maintain biodiversity might well turn out to be so small and non-extensive across the landscape that they have very little fuel reduction benefit. On the other hand, the burns that you do for fuel reduction need to be so big and so frequent that they have catastrophic effects on biodiversity. That is why I said in my spoken comments earlier that I think that there is a fundamental difference between burning for biodiversity, whatever that might be, and burning to supposedly protect the community. There are some very fundamental contradictions and problems there.

Mr McARTHUR—You make the comment that prescribed burns are not a good thing. I wonder why, out of the 450 submissions, overwhelmingly the submissions coming from Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia are advocating a prescribed burn regime.

Mr Robertson—I do not know. Maybe there was more effort put into getting submissions for more prescribed burning.

CHAIR—By whom?

Mr Robertson—I do not know.

CHAIR—What are you suggesting?

Mr Robertson—I am not suggesting anything. I am just saying that might be what happened. As discussed earlier by Dr Schultz, I do not think it necessarily comes down to a question of numbers. It is also a question of what underlies those various calls.

Mr McARTHUR—I just make an observation that we have had 450 submissions from individuals and people who have spent a long time in these industries—

Mr Robertson—As have these gentlemen here.

Mr McARTHUR—who overwhelmingly support the concept of fuel reduction burning, along with Dr Peter Attiwill, who gave evidence in Ballarat, who has spent a lifetime looking at the impact of fire.

Mr Robertson—I am familiar with Dr Attiwill's work.

Mr McARTHUR—I am interested in how you can refute that overwhelming evidence that has come before the committee.

Mr Robertson—I do not think it is overwhelming. There might be numerically a number of submissions calling for such and such a thing. It does not make it overwhelming.

Mr McARTHUR—We have not heard from many on the other side of the argument.

Mr Robertson—You just accused us of being the other side of the argument.

Mr McARTHUR—You are one, I agree, but I am just saying—

Mr Robertson—We aren't the only one.

Mr McARTHUR—I am just saying we can only go on the evidence we get.

Mr Robertson—It is no secret that the community feels a great deal of disquiet about prescribed burning, and there are more than a couple of dozen people out there in the community.

Mr McARTHUR—They had the option to put in some submissions.

Mr Robertson—That is why organisations like the Conservation Council and the WA Forest Alliance are here. We represent a large segment of the community.

Mr McARTHUR—Thank you. I just make the observation again that they are overwhelmingly in favour and that, on their evidence, prescribed burning is very helpful in reducing the impact of wildfire.

Mr Robertson—Great.

Mr McARTHUR—The second comment I make is that we have had witnesses here today suggesting that, prior to the introduction of fuel reduction burning, wildfires were out of control in Western Australia; since the introduction of prescribed burning, they fundamentally have every chance of being controlled.

Mr Robertson—As a number of people have already said to you today, there was widespread prescribed burning in the forests around Dwellingup prior to 1961 and it did not save Dwellingup. It is on the record. The royal commission stated categorically that there was extensive prescribed burning in the forests around Dwellingup prior to the famous or infamous Dwellingup wildfires, and it did not save Dwellingup.

Mr McARTHUR—I do not think the advocates of prescribed burning have ever said that in wildfire circumstances, when wildfires are out of control, anyone can stop the wildfire. Nobody has advocated that—as I have heard them, anyway, over the time. Can I go to your other comment here under ‘The pre-emptive burn “target”’:

Not only is this target ecologically, financially and operationally unsustainable; the attempt to reach it involves considerable risk and damage ...

How do you support those assertions?

Mr Robertson—To the extent that there is a push to meet those targets, as CALM indicated in their earlier submissions, that may put pressure on prescribed burning agencies to burn under unsafe conditions, which then results in escapes and wildfires, which in turn cause catastrophes.

Mr McARTHUR—But they have given evidence that they have had, I think, five escapes out of 200 burns—something like that.

Mr Robertson—I do not think that is quite correct. Six wildfires resulted from escapes from departmental prescribed burns in the south-west.

Mr McARTHUR—Out of how many prescribed burns? Two hundred?

Mr Robertson—There were 86 separate jobs, six wildfires, and the burns arising from those wildfires amounted to 18,000 hectares that were burnt in escapes from CALM wildfires.

CHAIR—Can I help you on this. Mr Braun said that 95 to 98 per cent of prescribed burns were okay; it was only two to five per cent that escaped. That was his evidence.

Mr Robertson—I am not sure. You yourself raised some doubt as to the interpretation of that statement. I think we should have him back in here to clarify what he was meaning by that statement or what your interpretation of his statement is. I think you might be misinterpreting what he was saying.

CHAIR—I am not interpreting anything; I am reading what he actually says. I will quote and help Mr McArthur:

Existing bushfire management practices and systems appear to be adequate for some 95-98% of the fires—there is nothing to interpret there—with losses kept to a minimum.

Once again, nothing to interpret.

However, existing systems and practices fail to prevent significant losses in 2-5% of the bushfires.

I do not think there is an interpretation. I am trying to make the point that those figures seem to match the figures provided by CALM of the number of escapes from prescribed burns. They seem to be the same figures, that is all. I just saw that as an independent assessment.

Mr Robertson—There are all sorts of prescribed burns that may be contrary to the prescription. It is not only whether they escape and do further damage. As Tony said before, we have had huge escapes from prescribed burns in the Walpole area recently. It is also when they burn hotter than they were intended to and when they burn areas within the burn that they were not intended to burn. There are all sorts of consequences from prescribed burns that can be very damaging.

Mr McARTHUR—I finish with a comment. Nobody has claimed that prescribed burns are an exact science. Nobody has claimed that. I just draw your attention to the horrific outcomes in north-east Victoria and Canberra and the Kosciusko National Park, where wildfire basically

wiped out those areas—in the case of north-east Victoria under benign conditions except for two days. I draw the comparison.

Mr Robertson—It is by no means agreed that prescribed burn would have necessarily made much difference to those outcomes.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Almost every single one of the hundreds of land-holders and farmers in the north-east whose property adjoins crown land has said, ‘We wouldn’t have suffered as much had there been prescribed burning as existed in the past.’ These people do not necessarily thrive on and want to see a pre-emptive fire on their back doorstep, or put up with the smoke, but in their opinion and with their experience of living in that area, that is what was needed. What would you say to those people?

Mr Robertson—The goal, surely, is not necessarily to prevent wildfires. The goal is to make sure that the community is not harmed by wildfires. Those are two different things. You can protect the community in a whole lot of different ways, without necessarily involving prescribed burning.

Ms PANOPOULOS—With these farms that are surrounded by crown land, would a better way to protect them be to move them out of that area, if the argument is that the only way you can really seriously reduce the possible damage to that property is to prescribe burn?

Mr Robertson—Presumably, when they go and live in that environment they understand that they are putting themselves at risk. If they then say, ‘Well, I’ve put myself in a position of risk. I want you, therefore, to go out and burn the biodiversity out of all the surrounding forest,’ is that a fair thing for the community, do you think?

Ms PANOPOULOS—You would recommend that they move out of that area?

Mr Robertson—I am not saying that. I am just saying they have put themselves in a position of risk.

CHAIR—I think Ms Panopoulos is talking about areas in which people have been for generations and it is only in recent times that they have copped the particular impacts that we are talking about.

Mr Robertson—As I said before, the climate change evidence is clear. We are going to get more and more severe fires and what is the government doing about that?

CHAIR—I might come back to that in a minute with some questions as well. Mr Pedro, you wanted to say something on that.

Mr Pedro—In the Denmark region, we had a specific example of that very situation, where a prescribed burn relit two weeks later under similar sorts of conditions you had in the east, turned into a wildfire. It then reburnt three-month-old prescribed burnt country. It ran into a patch of prescribed burn that was only three months old, reburnt that three-month-old prescribed burn, then pursued into agricultural lands and burnt out about 10,000 hectares of agricultural land. So the argument that has been presented by the member of parliament, that if there had been

prescribed burning done adjacent to those properties they would not have been burnt, is absolute nonsense, and it needs to be seen as such. It is absolute nonsense.

Ms PANOPOULOS—That is not what we said.

CHAIR—Yes, I think you are being a bit selective with the comments that were made but we will use the actual evidence that has been given to determine those things.

Mr ORGAN—I must say I do support the general thrust of what has been said here, in that we must protect property and we must make sure that we do focus in on specific areas and protect those properties, and that we have to be more intelligent in dealing with fires. Could you comment on the claim that frequent fire can give rise to vegetations which are more fire prone, more flammable than the natural vegetation, and that it is therefore more likely to burn, and in fact increases the threat to the community.

Mr Robertson—There have been scientific papers published along those lines. It is indisputable I think that burning has encouraged the growth of invasive weed species all around—for example, the fringes of metropolitan areas, on the urban bush interface, are now becoming infested with weeds. Every time you burn, you simply encourage more flammable weeds and also of course the native, more fire prone species. One of our concerns is that we are getting into this sort of spiralling situation, where the more burning we do, the more we are encouraging fire prone species and a generally more fire prone environment. So far from solving some problems, we are actually making it worse, but there is this impetus to go on doing it, anyway, because it might have worked in the past once, or someone thought it was a good idea a hundred years ago, or something like that.

Ms PANOPOULOS—If you have available any of that scientific research to support that proposition—

Mr Robertson—Absolutely, I have files full of it.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Could you make it available to the committee at some later stage?

CHAIR—You would have heard the evidence from CALM when they were asked the question: was there any scientific evidence to support claims that species have been lost due to forestry activities and burning, and they said there was none. I think my colleague the deputy chair was probably referring to statements by Patrick Moore, the founder of Greenpeace, who said there is no scientific evidence.

Mr Robertson—The founder or co-founder?

CHAIR—Co-founder of Greenpeace. I think that is what he was referring to. Dr Schultz made a comment that species had been lost but did not actually name any, and I think he made comment as well that species had been lost. What is your scientific evidence to support the claim that species have been lost through interference in these forests?

Mr Robertson—Let me put it back to you.

CHAIR—No, we were asking the question.

Mr Robertson—There is the federal government, with a fairly large budget. Why doesn't the federal government, as part of this inquiry process, fund someone, perhaps at the parliamentary library, to go through all of the scientific research and find out for yourselves just how much research there is showing that fire, including repeated prescribed burning, has had a serious impact on a whole range of species across the entire Australian continent. I can quote you scientific reports for the rest of the day if you want. I will read out long excerpts from published peer review scientific reports, referring to the role that prescribed burning and fire generally has played in the decline of species. There is a whole series of comments on our submission from scientists in peer review published scientific reports saying that prescribed burning in particular and fire in general has had a serious, deleterious impact on a whole range of species, including leading to the extinction of some species.

CHAIR—That is what I am getting at.

Mr Robertson—You have the resources. Why don't you go out there and do an entire survey of scientific literature and find all of the references that are there in multitudes, to show the serious impacts?

Ms PANOPOULOS—There are also contrary scientific opinions.

Mr Robertson—Of course. That is fine, but if you are talking about weight of evidence, there will be far more scientific reports—

CHAIR—Wait a minute now.

Mr Robertson—There are far more scientific publications that will show serious impacts from repeated burning—

CHAIR—One at a time.

Mr Robertson—than the contrary.

CHAIR—That is not the question I asked, and this is the problem we have with this.

Mr Robertson—What was the question you asked?

CHAIR—The question was the loss of species.

Mr Robertson—I quote:

Historically, many plant species have become locally extinct due to too-frequent fires. Typically, these species have fire-sensitive adults and rely on seed for their re-establishment after fire ... Fire-sensitive species may become rare and become confined to "fire shadows" in the landscape ... Examples of fire-induced local extinctions of native plants in Australia span the continent ... Leigh and Briggs (1992) list 19 species as being threatened with extinction at state or federal level due to the inappropriateness of current fire regimes."

The reference is Gill A.M. and Bradstock R., Extinction of biota by fires, in *Conserving biodiversity: threats and solutions*, Surrey Beatty & Sons, 1995. There is one example. I can give you a dozen of those.

CHAIR—That did not answer the question, either, because the question was lost species and, once again, you talked about impact on species, not loss of species. Nothing that you read there talked about an actual lost species.

Mr Robertson—As I read:

Historically, many plant species have become locally extinct due to too-frequent fires.

CHAIR—But there is no reference to—

Mr Robertson—Further:

Detrimental fire regimes—

CHAIR—We can argue all day on those.

Mr Robertson—No, hang on.

Detrimental fire regimes contributed to the extinction of two of the three bird species, and three of the four sub-species [including two WA sub-species ...] which have disappeared from Australia since European colonisation.

The reference for that is Woinarski, J.C.Z, *Fire and Australian Birds: A Review*, in *Australia's Biodiversity—Responses to Fire*, published by Environment Australia, Technical Paper No. 1, 1999. Two of the three bird species that have become extinct in Australia they put down to detrimental fire regimes.

CHAIR—To fire.

Mr Robertson—That is just a further example. I could come up with many more. Once again, I challenge you to get the parliamentary library and parliamentary research services—

Mr McARTHUR—But we are asking you.

Mr Robertson—It is all there.

Mr McARTHUR—Can I just say, Chairman, that we asked Peter Attiwill, who has spent a lifetime in research, for his view on the aspects of biodiversity. He said that 70 per cent of the people thought that fire was a good thing for biodiversity and the advantage of the Australian bushland. That was the view of somebody who had spent a lifetime in the area. He is a very respected researcher and professor in the botany school in Melbourne. There is a range of views on this. He put this in evidence before the committee. We can only take his word. We are not experts on it.

Mr Robertson—Yes, I know. I have just quoted you two papers which clearly have a different view.

CHAIR—Yes, and we will look at the—

Mr Robertson—And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

CHAIR—And we will look at the different—

Mr Robertson—And for every Attiwill, there will be 10 scientific publications which go the other way.

CHAIR—That is your view.

Mr Robertson—Yes, it is. I just want something that is based on someone who has actually looked at the literature over a long period of time.

CHAIR—Yes. Good.

Mr Robertson—It is not an uninformed comment.

CHAIR—No, and there is a lot of other claimable not uninformed views as well.

Mr Robertson—But how much of that has been peer reviewed and published in scientific journals?

CHAIR—Eminent scientists and so on—I can list the whole lot, but I am not here for cross-examination, Mr Robertson. You have been given the privilege to put your view and we are hearing your view. Can I just ask a couple of other—

Mr Robertson—You are privileged to hear our views as representatives of the community of Western Australia.

CHAIR—Could I just ask another question. You talked about the cost of prescribed burning, the cost to CALM in doing prescribed burning.

Mr Robertson—Yes.

CHAIR—Has your organisation done any analysis of the cost to the taxpayer of dealing with wildfires?

Mr Robertson—The cost to the taxpayer of dealing with wildfires? Yes, we have asked some questions in parliament and according to the parliament it cost CALM \$648,000 to fight wildfires resulting from escapes from, CALM prescribed burns. It cost them \$2.3 million to conduct prescribed burning operations in the south-west. Silvicultural burns cost them \$922,000; fighting wildfires from lightning cost \$2.8 million; Wildfires from arson cost \$964,000; and wildfires from accidents cost \$446,000.

CHAIR—The figures are all there. There are significant costs involved in all sorts of firefighting.

Mr Robertson—There are significant costs everywhere.

CHAIR—Not just doing prescribed burns.

Mr Robertson—Of course not.

Mr Pedro—I have an interest in this subject, actually. It might sound like some sort of conspiracy, but my experience is that it is sometimes in CALM's interest to allow lightning fires—and I have given you a specific example of this in my submission—that would be easy to put out, to transform into wildfires because the funding—and this is something I think the committee should look at—then ceases to be the responsibility of the local CALM office. I am talking, for instance, about Walpole. Walpole looks after a large area down there. Once a wildfire is declared—and wildfire is declared when the fire is still relatively small; in my understanding it only needs to be around 50 hectares—the financial responsibility of that fire then moves to another department. It moves to state government funding. The local CALM office is then no longer responsible. What that seems to result in are fires which you would presume would be easy to put out, are not put out; they are turned into wildfires and are funded outside of the CALM office.

Ms PANOPOULOS—Is that opinion based on any direct experience you have had?

Mr Pedro—It is. I have given you a specific example.

CHAIR—Excellent. That is evidence that the committee has been given not only in Western Australia, but in other states and shifting not only from the local fire service—or whoever it is that has responsibility—to the state, but also from the state to the Commonwealth.

Mr Pedro—Yes, exactly.

CHAIR—The cost. It is something we have already taken substantial evidence on and the committee has a great interest in. We thank you for the additional example.

Mr Pedro—I have one other aspect to do with Aboriginal fire regimes in Australia that I would like to speak to, if I could.

CHAIR—Be very brief, please; we are well over time. If you could finish off with that.

Mr Pedro—It always seemed to me an extraordinary ask: this popular belief that the Aborigines held Australia's fuel levels down. The agricultural land was predominantly forested and here you have one or two million Aborigines supposedly holding all of Australia's fuel levels to low levels. It seemed to me such a ridiculous, stupid thing to suggest. But it is the popular belief of people who promote prescribed burning, because they say they are following Aboriginal fire management.

Whenever I had an opportunity of meeting old, Aboriginal elders in the Albany region—because Albany has quite a substantial Aboriginal base—I tried to discover what they thought about this. I went to a CALM seminar about burning in the Stirling Range National Park. There was an Aboriginal elder there and we sat through a day of hearing how CALM were following Aboriginal practice and doing exactly what the Aboriginals did. This elder just sat at the table and said nothing practically the whole day. At the end of the day he left and I caught up to him before he got into his car and I said, ‘What did you think about all that? Is that how you see things?’ Am I clear? CALM were putting forward that they were copying what Aboriginals did. He looked at me and initially did not want to give me the time of day and I said, ‘No, come on, surely if that is not it, surely you can tell me.’ Eventually he said, ‘Look, those’—and I do not need to be too specific about what he said—‘they are so’—

Mr ORGAN—Yes, you do, actually.

Mr Pedro—Do I?

Mr ORGAN—Yes.

Mr Pedro—He said to me, ‘Those bastards are so far from the truth that I didn’t even bother to comment.’ I said to him, ‘Why on earth would you say that? Why wouldn’t you stand up and contradict what they were saying?’ He had tears rolling down his cheeks and said, ‘If you knew the trouble that I have with my community with children and the social issues I have to deal with, it just consumes me totally and I just cannot be bothered trying to convince those guys any different.’ But he said, ‘If you’re interested, I’ll tell you.’ He said, ‘When the cold fronts come, when you see the black horizon and the winds are blowing, then that is when we light our fires. We light fires and they roar off with the strong winds behind them in a long arrow and then the rain would come and whoosh and put them out.’ Then we would have a green patch of shoots so that when we came there next time to hunt, that is where our game was. If the fire had done what CALM do and spread over the horizon, then all the game is spread over a huge area and what have we done?’

In fact he pointed to the backs of his legs and said, ‘If we did that, we would get speared in the backs of our legs.’ That is how serious he was about it. I said, ‘Come on, sometimes those black fronts that you think are cold fronts, the rain would not come and you would end up with this bloody holocaust.’ He said, ‘Don’t you judge me by the way you bastards burn now.’ He jumped in his car and roared off. That will give you some idea.

CHAIR—Thank you for that one example.

Mr Pedro—It is true. I do not like this business of your committee person pretending that I am some sort of an idiot. I am not an idiot.

CHAIR—That is not the case. It is one example.

Mr Pedro—I am giving an absolute example of what happened.

Ms PANOPOULOS—And we appreciate that.

Mr Pedro—Then why should you shake your head as if to say I am some sort of an idiot?

CHAIR—Everybody has different views and everybody has other experiences.

Mr Pedro—But surely I should—

CHAIR—And we listened and we hear your example.

Mr Pedro—Thank you for doing that.

CHAIR—Certainly it is on the record. Thank you for your evidence this afternoon and your submissions.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 6.15 p.m.