

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 3

Tuesday 14 October 2008

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

EMERGENCY SERVICES

The Committee met at 5.15 p.m.

MEMBERS

The Hon. A. R. Fazio (Chair)

Mr I. Cohen
The Hon. D. J. Gay
The Hon. M. R. Mason-Cox

The Hon. R. A. Smith
The Hon. H. Tsang
The Hon. H. M. Westwood

PRESENT

The Hon. A. B. Kelly, *Minister for Police, Minister for Lands, and Minister for Emergency Services*

State Emergency Service

Mr P. McNamara, *Director General*

NSW Fire Brigades

Mr J. Benson, *Deputy Commissioner*

Mr D. Bailey, *Director, Finance and Administration*

Ms M. McCabe, *Executive Officer to the Commissioner*

NSW Rural Fire Service

Mr S. Fitzsimmons, *Commissioner*

Mr P. Hennessy, *Director of Finance*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

CHAIR: I declare open to the public the hearing of the inquiry into budget estimates 2008-09. I advise of the Committee substitutions for this hearing: We have Mr Ian Cohen for Ms Lee Rhiannon; the Hon. Duncan Gay for the Hon. John Ajaka; the Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox for the Hon. Trevor Khan; and the Hon. Henry Tsang for the Hon. Greg Donnelly. In terms of the witnesses appearing before the Committee, there is a change to the witness schedule that has been previously circulated and instead of Commissioner Greg Mullins from the NSW Fire Brigades we have Mr John Benson, the Deputy Commissioner, NSW Fire Brigades.

I welcome Minister Kelly and accompanying officials to this hearing. This afternoon the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of Emergency Services. I refer witnesses, the audience and members of the media to my earlier statement about procedural matters, such as the broadcast of proceedings. All witnesses from departments, statutory authorities or corporations will be sworn prior to giving evidence.

PHILIP McNAMARA, Director General, State Emergency Service,

JOHN BENSON, Deputy Commissioner, NSW Fire Brigades,

DAVID BAILEY, Director, Finance and Administration, NSW Fire Brigades,

MICHELLE McCABE, Executive Officer to the Commissioner, NSW Fire Brigades,

SHANE FITZSIMMONS, Commissioner, NSW Rural Fire Service, and

PETER HENNESSY, Chief Financial Officer, NSW Rural Fire Service, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: As the Minister is aware, there is no provision for opening statements, so I will ask the Opposition to commence questioning.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Minister and Commissioner, as you would be aware, on 18 January 2003 the ACT was struck by a major bushfire killing four people, with the loss of approximately 500 homes. This was a culmination of three fires, which started approximately two weeks earlier in New South Wales. You would be aware of the McIntyre's Hut fire in that regard. In light of the ACT Court of Appeal decision, which ruled in favour of Mr Wayne West suing the New South Wales Government for the 2003 Canberra bushfires, can you tell me whether the Government will be appealing to the High Court and, if so, what is the estimated cost to the taxpayer of the appeal?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Yes, we are undertaking action to appeal that decision in the High Court. I do not have the particular estimate at hand; I can take that on notice.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Could you give that to us on notice, please?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Can you also clarify exactly how much the New South Wales Government has spent on the proceedings to date? Do you have the figures with you now?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: No, I do not.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: On notice would be fine. Can you also give us an estimate of Mr West's potential damages claim—indeed how much money has been set aside in the event of a finding against the New South Wales Government in this matter?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I am not sure that we can legally do that, can we?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I am not sure on that either actually.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: If we can, we will. It might prejudice the case, that is all.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: If you are able to give us an estimate, that would be appreciated, and in particular a costing in relation to how much is being spent in respect of the whole matter, not just the court proceedings but the other issues that have been dealt with in that context?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: The legal matter, obviously not the cost of the fires?

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Including the ACT coronial inquest.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Our involvement in that, yes.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Minister, could I have your comment in relation to the amendment to the Coroner's Act, which occurred at about that time, to restrict the degree to which these major fires were investigated?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I certainly cannot recollect any involvement in that, so I think it is a matter for the Attorney General because they were involved in that legislation.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You would have been in Cabinet at the time.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Yes, but anything that is said in Cabinet is in confidence.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: If my recollection serves me correctly, the New South Wales agencies refused to appear before the Nairn inquiry. Is that correct?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Yes, I think we did decline.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: We have a history of non-cooperation in relation to an investigation into this matter and I wonder why the agencies in New South Wales have not taken this matter seriously—

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I do not think you can say that we did not take it seriously, but we will take it on notice so that we can give you a definitive answer as to whether we declined or not.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The SES submissions identify that many SES units occupy substandard premises, some exhibiting occupational health and safety hazards such as the one at Coraki, which itself comes under threat during floods. Has the Government allocated any funds to the maintenance and upgrading of SES units that are currently substandard, and how many unit premises have been identified as substandard or non-occupational health and safety compliant?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I will get you some figures on SES.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When you are getting those figures, can you let us know how much funding has been allocated as well, please?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I am trying to find out exactly what sort of increase there has been. Since 1994-95, since this Government took over, there has been an increase of \$43 million or 411 per cent to the SES.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: It must have been at a pretty low base.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Yes, so you blokes left it in a dismal state.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Thirteen years is a long time, but how many units?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: You left it in a dismal state, so that means their funding was—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The question was how many?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: That means their funding was \$14.6 million when we took over. It is now \$57.6 million. This year alone the SES has an increase of \$6.1 million, or 12 per cent, so the SES has been getting massive increases. I remember only a couple of years ago when I was last Minister for Emergency Services it was \$40 million, and that was a significant increase as well. They have been systematically trying to upgrade a lot of the stations. Under the legislation it is the responsibility of the local councils to provide the SES with adequate headquarters.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, it is a discrete question about how many have been identified and how much funding has been allocated. If you do not have the answer could you take it on notice?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: We do not know the exact amount. We will take it on notice. We have allocated \$2 million this year.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: That is to the upgrade of unit facilities. The amount allocated this year has risen from \$450,000 last year. The significant part of the \$6.1 million, \$1.55 million, went to that. This year we have \$2.2 million to allocate to the improvement of unit headquarters.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How many do you hope to do this year?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: We are still gathering that information at the moment. We will have to take that on notice. At this stage we have a dozen that are up for some form of improvement during the year.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When you take that on notice could you also give us a time frame for addressing all the substandard SES premises?

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Can I go back to the Canberra bushfires? Would you also be able to give us an estimate of the potential cost in relation to damages should Mr West be successful in his court action, given there is the very distinct possibility, if not probability, of a class action by a number of other property owners in the Australian Capital Territory and elsewhere directly as a result of this bushfire?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: If we can, as long as it does not impinge on our ability to defend the case.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: By all means. In relation to the marine coastal patrol, in light of rising costs of fuel and equipment replacement that need to be met by volunteer marine rescue organisations will you support an allocation under future Emergency Services budgets enabling emergency service personnel to focus on the job of saving lives and property rather than selling lamingtons to fund those necessary investments?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Their budget allocation, from memory, is about \$1.3 million and comes from Maritime Services, so that is an issue for the Minister for Ports and Waterways. My understanding is that allocation comes out of fees collected on registration of boats, so it is appropriate for him to answer that question.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Does that cover the issue of providing funds for boat fuel for volunteers for the work they do in saving lives?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: All their allocations come from that \$1.3 million, I think. The Minister for Ports and Waterways—this is in the public arena so I can pass it on to you—announced in August that he had received a report on the State's volunteer marine rescue services undertaken by the former Deputy Speaker, John Price. That report has been placed on Maritime Services' website. Submissions were sought from key stakeholders. The key recommendation of the report was to create a single consolidated organisation, which the three existing volunteer marine rescue groups, the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol and the Volunteer Rescue Association's marine branch, would be invited to join. That is being reviewed by a focus group consisting of members of NSW Maritime, the State Rescue Board and the Secretariat of the New South Wales Police Force before consideration by the relevant Ministers, particularly the Minister for Ports and Waterways and me. All three marine rescue services are encouraged to make their views known along with other interested parties to ensure their views will be taken into account when decisions are made about the future of these three organisations and the valuable services they provide to ensure the safety, wellbeing and education of our boating community in New South Wales. The figure I mentioned before that Maritime currently provides should have been \$1.35 million, not \$1.3 million.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Are you supportive of that consolidation?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Well, we have to wait until we see what the result of—

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: When do you think a decision will be made?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I am not sure.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Six months, a year?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I do not know. I am not sure.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister you are quite at liberty to answer that question. Do you support it or not?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: No, it is the Minister for Ports, he got the report.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I am the shadow Minister for Ports and I am quite prepared to say I think it is a great idea.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Good on you.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What about you?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: We have to wait until we see the report and the final representations by the individual members. Whilst it does look good on the surface I know the individual organisations have differing views, very different views.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What are the estimated cash savings to the Government's budget of the closing from time to time of the 33 retained fire stations across New South Wales?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I will ask the deputy commissioner to answer that question as there is some confusion about those 33 stations. Those 33 retained fire stations are not proposed to be closed unless on rare occasions they do not have enough members—the deputy commissioner will correct me if I am wrong—to man them. In the past they would obtain a full-time officer—not a retained officer—from somewhere else and pay him overtime to sit in the station all day in case of a fire. Those 33 stations are located close together and are able to be covered by surrounding full-time stations. It is my understanding that this proposal was put forward a couple of years ago by the Fire Brigade Employees Union [FBEU] in support of one of its wage claims. At that time the fire brigades rejected it for occupational health and safety reasons, which I believe have now been overcome. I do not know whether I have missed anything.

Mr BENSON: Fundamentally that is correct. The only difference is that 34 stations have been identified on the schedule. Those 34 retained or part-time fire stations have been identified through an appropriate and structured risk assessment based on a station that was temporarily taken off line. I can state categorically that no stations will be closed. That will give us flexibility to manage our staff in relation to emerging priorities, work-related issues, employers releasing retained staff, and so forth. To answer your question, it is approximately \$2.3 million. That is part of the overall package. As the Minister said, that proposal came from the Fire Brigade Employees Union. At the time it was not supported because we had not done a structured risk assessment to establish what stations came within the footprint of a station that was permanently staffed. That has now been identified and we have gone through that process. It was agreed before the Full Bench in the last award negotiations.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Some people would say \$2.3 million was a small of money potentially to put lives at risk.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: They are not potentially putting any lives at risk. Let me reiterate what has already been said. For some reason retained fire fighters were not available at those stations on a particular day. They might have been away on holidays, they might have been sick, or they might have been out of the area. On occasions they might not have had a minimum of four fire fighters to take out the engines. Even in non-fire

seasons they would employ someone from a neighbouring station and pay that person overtime to man a station that was not normally manned by a full-time fire fighter. The union put forward that proposal as part of its productivity savings to obtain a pay rise.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Was it initially the idea of the union?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Initially it was the union's idea.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Is it still its idea?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Yes, it is. One weekend when they were having negotiations about back pay the issue was raised again, but initially it was their idea.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: If this is such a great idea will you give us a guarantee that no lives will be lost because of these changes?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I was about to say what the commissioner said. In periods of extreme fire danger this policy will not be enacted. It will be enacted only in periods when there is no extreme fire danger.

Mr BENSON: There are a number of pre-emptive management processes before any decision is made to take a station temporarily off line. Those include when there is a total fire ban or an incident bordering on or within an area. The last component of that is the overall risk assessment to be carried out by the area commander in charge of that local area. I give as an example somewhere like Mortdale in Sydney. It is covered by five permanently staffed fire stations that respond and arrive at an incident within Mortdale's fire district before they even get to the station.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Because they are retained fire fighters.

CHAIR: We will now go to crossbench members for questions.

The Hon. ROY SMITH: Minister, I noticed in a recent article that Len Foster, Chairman of the National Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre bemoaned the fact that there was an ongoing shrinkage of bush fire volunteers. He also bemoaned the fact that there was no national plan to deal with intense bush fires. Is there a problem with retaining or recruiting volunteers in New South Wales? If there is, what is being done about it? He said he thought that, in the longer term, we would end up having to supplement them with full-time employees or employees from other government departments. If there is no national plan what are we doing to make sure we get one up and going?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: There is a national plan. In New South Wales we have 70,000 volunteers in the Rural Fire Service. I have not checked the figures since my return to the Emergency Services portfolio, but in the past that number was increasing. I do not think we will ever reach the situation that has been reached in China where 50,000 fully paid Army employees carry both a leaf blower and a rifle when they are fighting fires. However, our fire fighting resources are nationally coordinated. It is no exaggeration to state that over the past 14 years we have seen remarkable improvements in bush fire fighting resources in New South Wales. In that period record funding of more than \$1.6 billion has been allocated to the Rural Fire Fighting Fund, and this year alone it is \$201 million.

When I was Minister only a few years ago it was about \$140 million, so in those few years the allocation has increased dramatically. This year \$31.1 million has been allocated for bush fire tankers; \$15 million for new and upgraded fire stations and fire control centres, and the installation of rainwater tankers; and \$14 million for maintenance grants to local councils. I am aware of the remarks made by the former head of the Victorian Country Fire Authority about the long-term prognosis for bush fire fighting in Australia. A Climate Institute report, released last September by the CSIRO's Bureau of Meteorology and Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre confirmed long-held Rural Fire Service concerns that climate changes in south-eastern Australia threatened hotter, drier fire seasons. The predicted result is more frequent and intense fires over a longer season.

In the face of the growing threat, the 70,000 volunteers in the Rural Fire Service stand at the ready to defend life, property and the environment. Long-term strategic planning by the Rural Fire Service is addressing the issue of the ageing fire-fighting force. However, in recent years it has been great to see that the recruitment

campaign, including a cadets' program, has significantly increased the number of fire fighters. The State Emergency Service also commenced a school cadet program. The Rural Fire Service aims to ensure that our response plans are coordinated with other fire services, in particular, on the border regions of Victoria and Queensland. It might be true to say that Australia has no national coordinating authority for bush fire planning, but that does not mean that natural resources are not coordinated.

Respective State and Territory emergency services collaborate and cooperate extensively on planning and research. Recently a national aerial fire fighting strategy was implemented. I do not know the figures offhand, but I will get the commissioner to talk later about that strategy. An interstate memorandum of understanding and programs at the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre reflect the mutual commitment to cross-border responses and sharing of resources. Committee members would also be aware of the contribution of the Rural Fire Service to recent campaigns in Victoria and South Australia as well as overseas. The skills, experience and expertise of our volunteer fire fighters are recognised internationally.

We are proud to support the Rural Fire Service by providing the training, funding and resources needed for our volunteers to protect our community. The commissioner might be able to update the Committee on the national aerial fire fighting strategy and advise members what funding is available this coming year. Both the Federal Government and individual States contribute to that funding. That coordinated strategy provides aerial support through what are colloquially known as Elvis helicopters. In the past fixed-wing planes or Elvis helicopters were strategically located in New South Wales and in Canberra to assist fire-fighting activities in country New South Wales or, alternatively, in Victoria or South Australia. The commissioner might be able to advise Committee members what is proposed this year under the national aerial fire fighting strategy.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: We are receiving of the order of \$3 million from the national program to augment contracts in New South Wales. We will see a variety of aircraft comprising fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft with specialist capabilities. Over the coming months those aircraft will be strategically located across New South Wales. They are such that they are unable to be moved around in association with the prevailing threat. As the Minister indicated, indeed, the national approach is that they are part of a national fleet that can be shared across jurisdictional boundaries.

If I may, Minister, just echoing some of the comments around volunteers, their availability and numbers, it is a fact that our numbers have remained reasonably stable around the 70,000 mark now for some time. But we are very mindful as we look ahead, particularly in areas of ageing population, volunteer availability, challenges for time, family and social commitments, works, et cetera, that there is a plethora of arrangements that are coming to bear to augment the volunteer availability. What I mean by that, just by way of example, would be things like early intervention of aircraft when we have fires. In recent seasons we saw fires in western New South Wales where aircraft is part of the initial deployment. That buys time for crews to get on the scene and have a relatively smaller problem to deal with, hopefully, under the right conditions. It is about detection and reconnaissance from the outset; it is about engagement and technology.

With the significant investment we have seen, it was only a couple of months ago that we marked delivery of the three-thousandth tanker to the brigades across New South Wales. With that significant investment in the fleet matched with significant investments in training, radio communications systems, interoperability, and personal protective equipment [PPE], we are much more mobile and integrated. Basically now with the modern technology with the fleet, communications and interoperability they have the ability to traverse New South Wales fairly quickly and expeditiously. Historically, if we take, for example, 1994, which is notable to many, where we saw a lot of Sydney or coastal areas move into the bush to assist their colleagues, with the modernisation of fleets of these days, intercouncil response from neighbouring councils and across the northern, western or southern geography, there is much capability inherent across the length and breadth of New South Wales.

As the Minister mentioned, we are doing a range of strategies in relation to augmenting the membership, picking up on cadets and gender balances and the like. The other thing I would also say is that if you look at the interoperability and compare 1994, when I think we relied on something like 1,900 interstate firefighters, with the bigger seasons of, say, 2001-02 and maybe 2002-03 there were more than 5,000 firefighters who came from interstate to assist us. Similarly, we have provided a statistical level of support when our seasons have been such that we can. We have seen that support go to Victoria and South Australia last season. I think for a couple of years now we have also had volunteers go to assist our colleagues in the United States. Again, their ability to interact relatively seamlessly is recognition of how far they have come.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: If I can make two final comments on that. We do not thank our volunteers enough for—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, this is very interesting, but it is taking a lot of time.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I was about to thank the volunteers for the work they do these days, not just fighting fires on their own farms or in their own backyards. The point raised by the commissioner is that these days if there is a fire in a neighbouring council area these volunteers, who have other businesses, spend a lot of time visiting those and putting out those fires. So, they do a lot more of that sort of work.

Mr IAN COHEN: Minister, would you inform the Committee how your organisation will manage the transfer of the 14 rescue units from the New South Wales Ambulance Service to New South Wales Fire Brigades? Of the 88 paramedics affected by the transfer of responsibility, how many have taken up offers to retrain with New South Wales Fire Brigades?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I will make a couple of comments and perhaps the commissioner might make some additional comments. The Department of Premier and Cabinet's performance review earlier this year released a performance review of the Ambulance Service in New South Wales. Among the reports and many recommendations was the transfer of the New South Wales Ambulance Service rescue function to New South Wales Fire Brigades. Following a period of consultation and consideration the then Minister for Health determined that the Ambulance Service would withdraw from the provision of rescue services in eight locations in the areas of Bankstown, Camden, Caringbah, St Ives, Parramatta, Gosford, Newcastle and Wollongong. The remaining six ambulance rescue units in the original locations were not affected.

The Ambulance Service of New South Wales formally advised the State Rescue Board of the Minister for Health's decision on Tuesday 2 September. The units were to be withdrawn from service in the eight locations effective from 8.00 a.m. on Thursday 4 September. This required the State Rescue Board then to convene a meeting to resolve how to fill the gap in those rescue services created by that withdrawal. On 2 September the board convened an extraordinary meeting and considered a proposal to ensure the continuity of rescue service provision in the eight locations. The board did determine to recommend to the Minister for Emergency Services the following changes in accreditation, all to be effective from 8.00 a.m. on Thursday 4 September. The following secondary general land rescue units were upgraded to primary units: Cooks Hill Fire Brigade, Engadine Fire Brigade, Gosford Fire Brigade and Wollongong Fire Brigade.

In addition, the following units were accredited as primary general land rescue units: Rosemeadow Fire Brigade, Sutherland Fire Brigade, Bankstown Fire Brigade, Gordon Fire Brigade and Wentworthville Fire Brigade. The accreditations of Bankstown, Camden, Caringbah, St Ives, Parramatta, Point Clare, Hamilton and Wollongong ambulance rescue units were then revoked. The then Minister for Emergency Services approved the board's recommendations and the changes came into effect on Thursday 4 September and have operated satisfactorily since that time. Your question I believe concerned the operational side of the issues as well. The deputy commissioner might want to add to what I have said.

Mr BENSON: Mr Cohen, what has taken place is that there have been discussions between Health and Fire Brigades about transitional arrangements for ambulance rescue personnel to transfer over to Fire Brigades. Currently, that is in its infancy in that we have provided a scope of the recruitment process. Obviously, competencies would already have been attained by the rescue operators for the Ambulance Service. It is too early to say about exact numbers, but we have a feeling at this stage for approximately 20.

Mr IAN COHEN: Out of the 88?

Mr BENSON: Out of the 88, and it is still ongoing. So, it would be inappropriate for me to cite an exact number, but certainly there has been some interest and we have developed that transitional process.

Mr IAN COHEN: Potentially this could leave quite a hole in your expertise model if only 20 or so of the 88 transfer, would you not agree?

Mr BENSON: No. In fact, currently we are training accredited rescue operators at our Ingleburn facility on an ongoing basis. We certainly have the capacity. In fact, the only difference would be that at this stage we probably would have to look in our recruitment process into the permanent brigade at a reduction of our overall strategy for 2008-09, which is 160, being reduced probably by 20, if that would be the case.

Mr IAN COHEN: Could you inform the Committee how many bushfires occurred last year? How many resulted from hazard reduction burning over that period of time?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I am sorry, I do not quite understand the question.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Are you referring to hazard reduction burns that got out of control?

Mr IAN COHEN: That is correct, yes.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: We will take that on notice.

Mr IAN COHEN: Has there been any development in northern New South Wales of prescriptions for rainforest in hazard reduction strategies being different to dry forests in other parts of the State?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: All prescribed burning is the subject of prescriptions, utilising the expertise at the local bushfire management committee level. I do not have a specific answer to that. I will have to take it on notice.

Mr IAN COHEN: Take that on notice, and also the requirement of thinning out some forests and the effectiveness of that as prevention. Thinning out rainforest can create greater fire hazards. I am wondering whether your organisation is mindful of the fact that developers in many areas, particularly in coastal and wet areas, use the clearing and fire prescription methods to increase development potential rather than using them for effective fire mitigation.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I would have to understand what the question is.

Mr IAN COHEN: They clear land to maximise development under the guise of fire mitigation. That is happening significantly on the North Coast. You have heard of that?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I am not aware of that.

Mr IAN COHEN: Perhaps you can investigate that, take it on notice, and get back to us. It is a major issue on the North Coast.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Is it? Okay. Is that Planning?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: It sounds like Planning, but we will check.

Mr IAN COHEN: If you have planning and you have fire officers coming in to make assessments, the rural fire assessments override all the other planning activities.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Do you have some specific examples we could look at?

Mr IAN COHEN: Yes, I could certainly give them to you.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: Could you provide us with specific examples so that we can check it out? I assume what you are saying is that the Rural Fire Service should make sure that it has adequately stated what the clearing of an area should be for fire mitigation purposes. Is that what you are getting at?

Mr IAN COHEN: Yes. In terms of hazardous materials incidents, it is noted that the New South Wales Fire Brigades responded to some 12,700 hazardous materials incidents in 2007-08. Would it be possible to provide information to the Committee, or take the question on notice and inform the Committee, on the types of hazardous materials to which the New South Wales Fire Brigades have responded, the location of incidents, and the data on any hazardous material that each emergency unit responded to?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: We would certainly be able to get the types, but the locations might amount to 12,000 different locations. You would not want them like that, would you?

Mr IAN COHEN: No.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: You would want groupings or something.

Mr IAN COHEN: Groupings would be fine, thank you.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: You might say that 500 might be of a certain type of material and they were in the Central West.

Mr BENSON: You are referring to like incidents?

Mr IAN COHEN: Yes, thank you. In terms of high and medium nuclear waste, what training and what support have New South Wales Fire Brigades brought in on the movement of nuclear materials? I am thinking of the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation [ANSTO] and ports, as well as intermediate and lower grade nuclear waste transportation. Does your fire service have an active role? What would the training be in that situation?

Mr BENSON: We have operational procedures. We are given sufficient notification about the transportation of dangerous chemicals, whether it is from ANSTO or any like facility to Port Botany and so forth. We have operational processes in place that identify the scope, timing, traffic management areas and a whole wide range of issues. I am certainly happy to take that on notice and provide a more comprehensive scoping of that question.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: I return one more time to the issue of the Canberra bushfires. Commissioner, have you read the Mann report and the Australian Capital Territory Coroner's report?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I am familiar with both reports. Yes, I have read them.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Have you implemented recommendations from those reports as they apply to New South Wales?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: More specifically?

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: In particular how the Australian Capital Territory-New South Wales firefighting services cooperate.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: What report was that? The Mann report? That was a political witch-hunt, was it not?

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: No. It is a very good report on some of the problems associated with the bushfires.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I thought it was a witch-hunt.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Minister, I will provide you with a copy later. In regard to these reports, there were a number of recommendations, some of which dealt with some of the problems in terms of communication between the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales services. I am just wondering whether in particular there are clear rules of engagement in relation to how the services cooperate to deal with a fire that might be started in the Australia Capital Territory or in New South Wales.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Quite simply, there is a memorandum of understanding between New South Wales and the Australia Capital Territory authorities that just recently was reviewed as part of a routine periodic review. It is just having some minor appendices refinement as we speak. That is the subject of re-signing. The answer is, yes, there is, but I do not have the details to go into that now.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Will you provide details of the memorandum of understanding when it is finalised?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Good. In relation to the upcoming bushfire season, could you tell us how much the Government has spent on fire preparedness for the upcoming bushfire season?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: As opposed to the budget? The budget is \$201 million.

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: What of that have you spent in relation to preparedness for the bushfire season, particularly in relation to planned burns and hazard reductions?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: It is all being prepared, is it not?

The Hon. MATTHEW MASON-COX: Planned burns and hazard reductions in particular?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: We usually keep those statistics, not in costs but in area or acreages.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: The principal thing is not so much about the cost but actually about the achievements of the regime of activities that are identified across the State as necessary to be done. But I think the Minister will have some figures relating to some significant enhancements in funding to assist the delivery of hazard reductions and mitigation programs.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: The Rural Fire Service budget now includes some \$9 million in funding specifically allocated for additional hazard reduction works. This funding was introduced last year and I emphasise that it is recurrent, not just a one-off infusion. It is an ongoing commitment to enhanced bushfire mitigation, so it amounts to \$9 million for additional hazard reduction works. The Government's significant reforms in hazard reduction in recent years have seen a priority placed on carefully targeted burns that provide greater community benefit by protecting their homes, families and the environment. They are aimed at asset protection. There has also been a greater focus on a range of other measures that include protecting the community against bushfire hazard complaints, community education and development control standards in bushfire prone areas.

My understanding is that we have had a reasonably good season in relation to hazard reduction. That is not just burns but would include chemical-type hazard reduction as well. Normally you plan these seasons to have hazard reduction, regardless of the type and whether it is ploughing, slashing or hazard reduction burns, but you over plan because it is very difficult to be able to achieve that. This year we have had a significantly better year.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Notwithstanding some of the weather implications of this year—as you know we have had some fairly good moisture in the last 12 month—we are somewhere in the order of 60 per cent in terms of the completion rate on target, which compares favourably to some of our recent years which typically were around the 40 to mid-40 per cent mark. In terms of the identified programs statewide, they are in the order of 60 per cent.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Are there any glaring gaps in the program? You have mentioned 60 per cent, so there are 40 per cent that are not quite there. Are there any areas that are worrying you?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: No, there are not. If you were to look at the State generally, wherever there is population and an interface with the bush, there is always and ever-present challenge in terms of bushfire. If you look at the landscape in terms of moisture, or lack thereof more particularly, you would have to say that the south-western and southern regions of the State have been the most moisture deficient. The only benefit in a bushfire sense in that regard is that there is little growth commensurate with prevailing drought conditions.

The reality is that last year we were dominated by La Niña, which meant we had some pretty good statewide rainfall patterns. This year it is a fairly neutral outlook in terms of the season, but we are expecting some above average temperatures, if anything, looking ahead to the season. But with the underlying drought conditions and only 10 per cent of the State being identified as acceptable and 71 per cent being drought declared, which I think is the latest statistic in terms of areas, you have up to 90 per cent that is either drought declared or drought affected. With that underlying dry condition and if the weather ingredients come together, including hot dry windy weather this season, we can expect to see fire in those areas where it dries out.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: On top of that, there is a new reporting system which will show up in this year's annual report and will be published soon. It takes into account various hazard reduction and development

control standards, et cetera. These figures are not final yet, but they will show that more than 185,000 properties worth \$90 billion have been protected through various bushfire protection works.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Where do we get that information?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: That will be produced for the annual report.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: That will be part of the annual report data.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: When will that come out?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: My figures say in the near future.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: In the next couple of months.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: These are not the final figures but they will be close to them—185,000 properties.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: It is in that order, and if I may pick up on the Minister's point—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: If you could be concise.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I will be concise. Of that total works program, which is the amalgam of treatments that the Minister reflected on, I think we are going close to 80 per cent of target of the collection of things, not just hazard reduction on its own but hazard reduction plus those other critical things like community education and development, trail works and those sorts of things.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Some \$6 million has been allocated to the Emergency Services Cadet Program in 2008-09, which you mentioned it earlier. How many students have been recruited into the program, and how is it working? What is the retention rate?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: The Rural Fire Service or the State Emergency Service?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Both.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: The State Emergency Service is only just starting.

Mr McNAMARA: This year we had a pilot program where we successfully trained 60 school students from three schools. We will not know how many of them progress to the State Emergency Service because we have to wait for them to turn 16.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: The Rural Fire Service?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I would not have the exact figures but off the top of my head I think our thing has grown exponentially in recent years. I think we started with five school programs; we are up in the 20s or 30s in terms of school programs, taking it across New South Wales. There are also brigade and district based cadet programs. We take in those cadets in the 12 to 16 category. Registered interest and the transfer into full membership post 16 years of age is on the agenda of most of our cadets.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Can you get us the figures on the actual retention rate and how many schools and cadets are envisaged to be covered by the budget allocation?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: As you will understand, one big problem in country New South Wales with training people at schools in various locations—

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: They go to big cities.

The Hon. TONY KELLY: That is right. Because they do not have jobs there, they go into cities. However, some of them return at a later stage and join the Rural Fire Service.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I was in Mudgee only a fortnight ago to commend a school of graduates who had just come through the program. About 70 per cent of the graduates had plans to join their local brigade when they turned 16. That will at least take them through their senior years at school if they do something locally in town, but moving into the city is another challenge for all of us.

Mr IAN COHEN: What strategies has the office of emergency services developed in response to the national strategy for emergency management in remote indigenous communities as outlined in the "Keeping our Mob Safe" paper?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: I will have to take that on notice.

Mr IAN COHEN: Last year at the budget estimates former Minister Rees was asked what resources were needed to protect assets as we move into what is now likely to be a period of increased severity of fires, specific work done on how large those resources will be and how they will be allocated. The then Minister responded that it was too early to tell and quantify but that he "expected estimates in this session next year". Will the Minister provide the long-range Rural Fire Service budgetary needs estimates that the Hon. Nathan Rees said would be available?

The Hon. TONY KELLY: As I said earlier, research from bodies including the United Nations, the CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Bushfire Cooperative Centre research, among others, points to future climatic extremes as a result of climate change and associated global warming. These predicted severe weather patterns significantly heighten the risks of both drought and floods, of large bushfires fanned by strong winds and of more frequent storms, including hail storms. That is one reason the Government continues to fund the emergency services at greater than the consumer price index. If these research projections prove accurate, the impacts for our emergency services are likely to include an increase in demand for all services, not just including the State Emergency Service, because of storms and floods; more protracted demands on the Rural Fire Service and the New South Wales Fire Brigades to engage in large, multiagency bushfire operations, particularly along the urban bushland interface; and a need to adapt firefighting and emergency activities in general, such as HAZMAT operations to a context of protracted water shortages. Obviously, that is another problem because we fight these fires mainly with water.

A climate change working group has been established to provide policy advice to the State Emergency Management Committee. This working group, chaired by the Department of Environment and Climate Change, includes representatives from each of the emergency services organisations and is specifically looking at the impact of climate change on the various hazard reduction management agencies. It also provides the committee with a direct link to the State climate change working group. The Fire Brigades has established a climate change steering committee to investigate and advise on a range of policy issues, including vehicle design and acquisition, fire station design, equipment and training capabilities, water use, interagency operations and identification of New South Wales Fire Brigades carbon footprint and carbon accounting. They are also researching the potential of new firefighting water delivery systems that use significantly less water. That probably covers the issue.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.
