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GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 5

Friday 17 September 2010

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, EMERGENCY SERVICES, RURAL AFFAIRS

The Committee met at 2.00 p.m.

MEMBERS

The Hon. I. Cohen (Chair)

The Hon. R. L. Brown
The Hon. R. H. Colless
The Hon. S. Cotsis
The Hon. D. J. Gay

The Hon. M. J. Pavey
The Hon. M. Veitch
The Hon. H. Westwood

PRESENT

The Hon. S. J. R. Whan, *Minister for Primary Industries, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Rural Affairs*

NSW Fire Brigades

Mr G. Mullins, *AFSM, Commissioner*

Ms R. Milkins, *Deputy Commissioner, Corporate Services and Governance*

NSW Rural Fire Service

Mr S. Fitzsimmons, *AFSM, Commissioner*

NSW State Emergency Service

Mr M. Kear, *AFSM, Commissioner*

Emergency Management NSW

Mr S. Tannos, *Director*

Industry and Investment NSW

Dr R. Sheldrake, *Director General*

Mr G. Davey, *Deputy Director General (Primary Industries)*

Mr J. Newcombe, *Director, Education Planning and Private Forestry*

NSW Food Authority

Mr A. Coutts, *Chief Executive Officer*

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 this hearing for budget estimates 2010-11 open to the public. I welcome Minister Whan and accompanying officials. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Primary Industries, Emergency Services and Rural Affairs. Before we commence with questions I will make some comments about procedural matters. In accordance with the Legislative Council guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, only Committee members and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photos. In reporting the proceedings of this Committee media representatives must take responsibility for what they publish or what interpretation they place on anything that is said before the Committee. The guidelines for the broadcast of the proceedings are available on the table by the door. Any messages from attendees in the public gallery should be delivered through the Chamber and support staff or the Committee clerks. I remind the Minister and the officers accompanying him that he is free to pass notes and refer directly to his advisers while at the table. I remind everyone to please turn off their mobile phones.

The Committee has agreed to the following format for the hearing. The portfolios of Primary Industries and Rural Affairs will be examined from 2.00 p.m. until 4.30 p.m. and then be followed by Emergency Services. The House has resolved that answers to questions on notice must be provided within 21 days or as otherwise determined by the Committee. The Committee has not varied the 21-day time frame for answers to questions on notice. Transcripts of this hearing will be available on the website from tomorrow morning.

ALAN COUTTS, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Food Authority,

RICHARD FREDERICK SHELDRAKE, Director General, Industry and Investment NSW, and

GEORGE DAVEY, Deputy Director General, Industry and Investment NSW (Primary Industries), affirmed and examined:

JOHN NEWCOMBE, Director, Education Planning and Private Forestry, Industry and Investment NSW, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: As there is no provision for the Minister to make an opening statement we will proceed with questions.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: My first series of questions relates to fisheries. Are you aware that in 2001, when recreational fishing licences came in, there were 110 fisheries compliance officers. Since then funding has been enhanced courtesy of fishing licences, for which there was meant to be an increase in the number of fisheries officers. Is it correct that the current number of fisheries officers is down to 94 and that until recently that number was 84?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I would have to check the exact figures, and I am happy to do that. Obviously, the Recreational Fishing Trust funds are used for a range of purposes to benefit the fishing community. They include some compliance aspects but also quite a lot of positive capital works for the fishing community and funding for the operation of the Gaden Trout Hatchery. Important things come out of it. I need to seek further advice on the actual numbers. Unless we have that I will take it on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Could I direct that question also to Mr Davey or Dr Sheldrake, because I am sure they would know the numbers.

Dr SHELDRAKE: I have not actually got the number. Probably, to give the most accurate answer, it would be best if we took that on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Do you know if it is more than 110?

Dr SHELDRAKE: I will take it on notice.

Mr DAVEY: I do not think it is more than 110.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: If, as Mr Davey indicates, it is not more than 110 and, given that extra funding was provided courtesy of the recreational fishing licences, is that an unacceptable level?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I need to look at the commitments made at the time the fishing licence came in, particularly relating to compliance officers. I certainly have not had any complaints from the community about the number of compliance officers. I have had positive feedback on the work they have been doing and the results they have been getting in their compliance work.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I can save you some of that work because I have done that research already. In fact, when the fishing licence was brought in one key expectation or commitment was that the recreational licence would provide for extra officers on the water. Given that you have this extra money from the fishermen of this State, why are there now lower numbers? Evidence given to the Legislative Council committee of which the Hon. Robert Brown, the Hon. Rick Colless and the Hon. Ian Cohen are members indicates that recreational fishers have serious concerns about illegal activities in New South Wales waters with people not being caught?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The feedback I get is that a lot of work is being done in compliance, particularly with bag limits and other aspects of fishing compliance, as well as education, in which a number of officers take a role. I need to check the actual numbers before being able to respond.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You will come back to us with those numbers?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Yes.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I draw your attention to two maps referred to as the Port Stephens Great Lakes Marine Park zoning maps. I ask you to look at insert "F" on each map. I am sure you are aware that fishermen face maximum fines of up to \$11,000 for fishing in a sanctuary zone. I refer you to those two maps. Are you aware that currently within the marine parks two different maps are being distributed to fishermen? Are you aware that these maps contain no dates to show which is the most up to date and with respect to insert "F" regarding Little Beach the maps have different sanctuary zone boundaries? One map shows the boundary goes to the Little Beach jetty and the other shows it going considerably beyond. It seems that in the most recent map, if it can be identified as in fact the most recent map, the sanctuary zone has been extended. Given that fishermen face fines of up to \$11,000 for fishing in a sanctuary zone, how are those fishermen who have the original map supposed to know if they are fishing in a sanctuary zone? From where did the decision come to extend the current sanctuary zone?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Chair, it would be a concern to me if there were two different maps being distributed at the same time and if it is a case of people being confused. I would expect our Fisheries officers to exercise their judgement and, if somebody had made an honest mistake, simply to inform them rather than to fine them. I will hand over to Mr Davey to answer further. I am informed that the Little Beach jetty is the limit of the sanctuary zone and it has not changed, so it would appear that one of these maps is not correct. That is a concern, but we will have a look at the details of them, and ensure that the current map is correct.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, are you aware of any other cases in which this may be the situation, given that you were not aware of this one, given that these maps were given to me by fishermen who obtained those maps from outlets, and given that they tell me currently there are two different maps? Could there be similar anomalies elsewhere in the State?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Chair, the maps and a lot of the administration of the parks is done by the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water. The Marine Parks Authority sits within that department. I have a role in that, but obviously I have not personally seen all the maps. It would concern me if there is inconsistency in maps. I would expect them to be accurate because our marine parks are a very important way of protecting species, particularly for recreational fishers. That is something which is a good outcome for them. It would certainly concern me if there were inconsistencies in other maps.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Are you aware of any fisherman who may have been fined as a result of these faulty maps?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No, I am not aware of that. I would have to take it on notice and find out.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Will you give a guarantee to this Committee that, if that is the case, those fines will be quashed and the money returned, and that any criminal proceedings will be rescinded?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am willing to give a commitment that we will look at each individual case and ensure that there has not been unfair action taken.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, I will go to the commercial section and come back to marine parks. Are you aware that one of the recommendations from the Richard Stevens report of October 2007 was for the Government to allocate from \$20 million to \$22 million in financial assistance for industry structural adjustment to take place? Following that recommendation, how much did your Government actually allocate?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Dr Sheldrake will respond first.

Dr SHELDRAKE: The Stevens report was conducted some time ago, as you indicated. The Government has worked with the industry. Mr Davey, through the Pymont Pact, has worked closely with the industry to bring them onside with the developments. As I understand it, the industry is committing \$1.5 million to assist in the restructure of the industry.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The industry is committing \$1.5 million, but I am assuming that that is from the trust.

Dr SHELDRAKE: That is correct.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That comes from the fees paid by anglers. But how much has the Government contributed?

Dr SHELDRAKE: The Government's contribution is in terms of assisting in the process with on-cost, labour, and the team of people who have been working for the last two to two-and-a-half years to bring this to fruition.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So the answer is nothing—no money has been allocated to this structural reform?

Dr SHELDRAKE: The contribution is in-kind in salaries. I could provide on notice, and take it on notice, the department's contribution, which is very significant in terms of the number of staff who have been working to bring this matter to resolution.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Chair, it should be noted that the Pymont Pact process is something that is being driven by industry. They are setting the direction on this. They see the exit from the industry of some operators as being desirable in that process. They are willing to contribute to that.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, are you aware of any other primary industry structural adjustment that has taken place without any, or with very little, government financial assistance?

Mr STEVE WHAN: In primary industries, obviously I would need to seek advice on whether there has ever been anything, but structural adjustment does occur in industries—in many cases, with government assistance, that is true, particularly in the areas of forests and assistance for farmers who are exiting the industry as well. There are certain areas which do receive assistance. I would have to seek advice, though, on whether there are any other areas where structural adjustment has occurred and where it has not. Of course, the fishing industry has received assistance in past structural adjustments.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Are you aware that the fishing industry was originally promised \$15 million, which was then reduced to a promise of \$4.6 million, and that it is now down to \$1.5 million?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am not personally aware of those figures. I am not sure whether Mr Davey or Dr Sheldrake have anything to add.

Mr DAVEY: No, I am not aware of those figures, either. Just by way of comparison, when the dairy industry deregulated, that adjustment program was largely through industry levy funding.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Certainly my memory questions that, but that is another issue and we will leave it at this stage.

Mr STEVE WHAN: There was a charge on them.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What is the current financial status of the commercial trust? Is it in surplus or deficit?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will refer that to Mr Davey.

Mr DAVEY: I understand it is in surplus.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: What would be the figure that is currently in there?

Mr DAVEY: I would need to take that on notice, I think.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: The budget papers indicate \$1.5 million. Would that be close to your rationale?

Mr STEVE WHAN: That is the information I am being given now—\$1.5 million.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: During the year, they received \$200,000 in interest. If there is \$1.5 million in the trust, how do you get \$200,000 in interest? Is there another sum of money somewhere that is not showing up to get to that? If you multiply 5 per cent by \$1.5 million—

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Impressive investment!

Mr STEVE WHAN: It seems to be doing quite well.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: It is a great investment. I would like one of them myself.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will need to take that on notice and get you some information on the actual earnings and how it was invested.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, are you familiar with the recently completed report "Socio-economic evaluation of the commercial fishing industry in the Ballina, Clarence and Coffs Harbour regions" and its findings, which indicate the enormous contribution that the commercial fishing industry makes in these regions, including generating more than 930 jobs and pumping \$216 million into the local economy? As the Minister who is responsible for Fisheries, do you share the local fishermen's serious concerns that the proposals to increase the sanctuary zones of the Solitary Islands Marine Park from 12 per cent to 20 per cent and to ban prawn trawling threaten the local economy, tourism in the area, and the livelihood of many prawn fishermen? Minister, have you spoken to your colleague Frank Sartor about these concerns, if in fact you have them? Are you aware that in the Environment estimates hearing this morning, the Director General of the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water [DECCW] confirmed that your Government will be going ahead with the increased sanctuary zone and phasing out of prawn trawling?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Chairman, there are a couple of aspects to that. I am aware of the report referred to. I have not had a briefing on that report yet, or actually read it myself. The impact on commercial fishery in the Coffs Harbour area is something that I want to see evidence on. The assessment from my department is that the impact of increased sanctuary zones on prawn trawling is not as significant as some have said. However, that is the reason why we have had the proposal submitted to public comment. The public comment period closed today, as I understand it. We will be considering all public comments. The report you referred to earlier has not been provided to the department, or to me, yet.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So did the Director General of the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water make that statement a tad early?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am not aware of what the Director General of the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water has said on that.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You will be able to read it in evidence given to this Committee this morning.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am happy to see that. At this stage, I will take your word for that. My position is that public comment has come in and I have not had the opportunity to consider that public comment at this stage.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You released a media statement on 5 July this year calling on the public to buy New South Wales seafood stating:

Buying local seafood helps maintain this important industry and supports regional economies and employment.

Can you tell us how you have supported the Ballina, Clarence and Coffs Harbour fishermen? Have you spoken to them? Have you voiced your opposition to these proposals to Frank Sartor?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will not be discussing in this Committee the discussions I have had with Frank Sartor over this issue. Those discussions are confidential and some of them are in the context of Cabinet discussions. I think we have a viable and long-term sustainable commercial fishing industry in New South Wales and I want to ensure that that is the case for the long term. A number of fisheries have challenges. The impact of any extensions to sanctuary zones needs to be considered carefully, but we need to acknowledge that the sanctuary zones in that marine park are quite a bit lower than some of the others, for example, Batemans Marine Park, where we have seen a fairly positive result from that park, particularly for recreational fishers.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: To follow up on the Coffs Harbour situation, are you aware that there are serious concerns within the industry about the cessation of prawn trawling in the Solitary Islands Marine Park? In fact, Graham Turk, the Chief Executive Officer of Sydney Fish Market, came out strongly saying, "Coffs Harbour king prawns are in such high demand in Sydney that should the \$16 million local seafood industry lose its prawn trawlers Sydney Fish Market would suffer a devastating loss in profits". How do you respond to that?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have heard those views, and I have had views expressed to me by my advisory committees as well. We will certainly take those views on board when we consider the comment. I think that was perhaps a slightly alarmist view being put by Mr Turk, but he is entitled to make that point of view.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You are also putting \$20 million into redevelopment of the Sydney Fish Market. It puts that at risk as well.

Mr STEVE WHAN: It certainly does not put that at risk, and that development is going ahead. Sydney Fish Market is a viable business and will continue to be viable. I point out again that we have been through a public consultation period. The Government has not made a final decision on what is happening with those park boundaries.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Excellent.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It is not so much the boundaries that concern us; it is the phasing out of prawn trawling in that whole park area.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will note your view on that for our consultation process.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Have you met with representatives of the inland commercial fishery?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have met with a number of my advisory committees, which have members representing different parts of the industry. In the past few years there have been restrictions on inland fishing because of drought conditions in the past few years. Do you want to mention a particular person?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Have you heard from a gentleman by the name of Steve Alexander, who is the President of the Inland Commercial Fishermen's Association?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I understand that my ministerial staff and Industry and Investment officials are meeting with him in the next few weeks.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But you have not met with him and you do not intend to?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have not personally met with him, but my staff will meet with him first.

[Time expired.]

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I will continue on the fisheries theme. In 2007 at a budget estimates committee your predecessor, in response to a question from me, provided some data and information on the number of fee payments or licences for recreational fisheries and the total number of licence holders for commercial fisheries. That information was provided for 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07. You may have to take this on notice but can you provide me with the data for 2007-08 and 2008-09 on both the recreational and commercial fishing licence holders or fee payments or however you would like to call it?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am certainly happy to provide you with the details on notice. I can tell you that in 2009-10 we had 540,000 recreational fishing licences, raising more than \$13 million in fees. I can get the rest on notice for you.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Can you advise, in the 2010-11 budget papers, what is the department's estimate for income or the number of recreational licences for this budget period?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take that on notice. I understand that it varies year to year, obviously, but it is about \$13 million. I will take on notice exactly what we have put in our budget.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: In terms of the Solitary Islands and Jervis Bay marine parks zoning reviews that are currently underway, you said that the public consultation period finishes today. Can you describe to the Committee the process by which you comment, view, whatever you and your department do on the submissions that go to the Marine Parks Authority and your relationship with the Minister for Climate Change and the Environment on that?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Obviously, there has been a process which involved a significant amount of discussion between my department and the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water in getting to the zoning plans which were put out for comment. Once the comments have come in my department will be looking at those comments and providing me with advice on what it believes should happen, particularly on the issues of prawn trawling and recreational fishing. I have a good relationship with the Minister for Climate Change and the Environment, and we discuss things personally as well. At this stage I will be waiting for advice from my department before we start discussions on them.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: What is your formal role as Minister in approving or otherwise whatever recommendations are made? Do you consult? Do you veto? What is the relationship, if I can ask that question?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I need to seek some advice on the formal process of coming back to Cabinet. I can take that on notice and let you know.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I want to know formally how you interact with Mr Sartor.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Certainly. I will take that on notice.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: My question relates to the livestock health and pest authorities. In the past 18 months there have been big changes in that body with mergers, amalgamations and staff changes. There was a lot of controversy at the time the bill went through. In fact, pictures of the members of the Shooters Party ended up on the front page of the *Land*.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You were silly enough to support them.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I am asking the question now. Eighteen months down the track, can you give the Committee any detail on whether you view those amalgamations as successful? If so, by what measures do you make an assessment?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We believe that the amalgamations have been successful in a number of aspects. I guess most important is improving the viability of livestock health and pest authorities at the local level. We have been able to save a significant amount of administrative costs in the amalgamations that have been undertaken, and we have improved the effectiveness of the central administration over a number of aspects of

the operations. We have finalised the staffing structure. I guess one of the most practical ways that we have had success is that we have now filled the veterinarian positions around the State, which we struggled to do previously. That is an important aspect of it. At a fairly early stage it seems to be working quite well.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: One of the key elements in my party's support for the Government's bill was that it would deliver to the ratepayers either an average lessening of the rates they might be liable to pay—I understand that has not been even across the State—and at the same an improved level of service. What measures have you put in place to check whether there has been an improvement in the level of service at the farm gate?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The livestock health and pest authorities State board has requested a business case for review, which will commence early next year, to assess the efficiency gains from the amalgamations. We will essentially look at whether we have achieved improvements on governance and service delivery rather than dollars amounts particularly. We will certainly undertake that next year and try to quantify exactly how it has gone.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Do you believe it has been successful but the jury is still out?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Yes, I think it is fairly early days. I guess we can make a judgement based on the fact that rates this year stayed fairly stable. That was in part due to legislation passed in this Parliament that ensured that increases in rates were not as variable as they were in the previous year, and that has certainly been appreciated by rural communities. Yes, the jury would still be out overall. The initial impression is that there have been strong improvements in some of the areas I mentioned before with recruiting and with the management at local board level.

CHAIR: I refer to the expansion of the sanctuary zone and commercial prawn fishery. That is not closing the entire industry, is it?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No.

CHAIR: Will you provide the Committee with some detail on that?

Mr STEVE WHAN: There are different estimates of the impact. The estimate from my department is as that the impact on our State prawn catch from the proposed changes is in the order of a 5 per cent reduction.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: That is statewide, but what about locally?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Statewide. I have asked questions and I want to know the impact of any changes on the Coffs Harbour Cooperative. There are certainly differences of opinion on that impact, and that is something that we will be looking at.

CHAIR: But it will not take away the entire fishery in that area?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No, certainly not.

CHAIR: I have asked former fisheries Ministers about the shark meshing program that the Government consistently undertakes. Will you provide an indication of the cost of the New South Wales shark meshing program in the last financial year? What is the projected cost of that project for 2010-11?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We have made a number of improvements to the program this year, including the number of hours between checks required on the nets. Every 72 hours they are being checked. It is a very cost-effective program when one considers that it has been running since 1937. In that period on our meshed beaches there has been only one loss of life from a shark attack and that is a very good outcome.

CHAIR: How much loss of life from all beaches?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I do not have that figure.

CHAIR: I think you will find it is relatively small.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I acknowledge that even though shark attacks make a lot of headlines when they happen they are not frequent events on Australian coasts—and the sharks are in their natural environment of course. The shark nets in the netting program are not designed to completely enclose a beach but are designed to upset sharks' migration habits and stop them from setting up territories on those beaches. That is their aim and the cost of meshing for sharks in the 2010-11 budget is \$900,000.

CHAIR: How does that compare with the last budget?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take that question on notice.

CHAIR: The nets are some 50 metres long and they do not mesh an entire beach?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No.

CHAIR: Does it concern you that some 35 per cent plus sharks caught in the nets are actually coming from the inside and heading out?

Mr STEVE WHAN: In this program we try to ensure as much as possible that marine life is not threatened. There have been target and non-target species caught in nets during 2009-10—I can give you an indication of what types if you are interested.

CHAIR: I am interested in how many threatened or endangered species are caught in the nets, be they shark and other species. If you had that information it would be helpful.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have not had them broken down. I can say that of non-target species caught in the nets in 2009-10 there were smooth hammerheads, hammerheads, thresher sharks, angel sharks, grey nurse sharks, Port Jackson, rays, bottle nose dolphins, common dolphins, dugongs, seals and turtles. We had 120 animals reported entangled in nets from 1 September 2009 to 30 April 2010, of which 44 were released alive.

CHAIR: That makes it a fairly expensive operation on other levels—not economic, but in terms of environmental impact. Do you agree?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We hope to avoid any deaths of sea life in nets but, again, this program is a balance. The nets have been very successful in protecting swimmers at beaches and in that sense they have been very effective.

CHAIR: Do you have proof of that?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The figures certainly prove it. We are doing a lot of scientific work on sharks that is designed to try to enhance the way that we protect. We are doing scientific work in Sydney Harbour tagging sharks so that we can get a better idea of their habits and try to introduce more effective preventative mechanisms or educational mechanisms for people. I highlight that the nets are not meant to be a physical barrier but are meant to disrupt territorial behaviour. They are designed to try to stop sharks from establishing territory on those popular beaches.

CHAIR: If one shark is removed another shark will come into that territory. I put it to you that it is an old system going back to the 1930s, that the shark population has been radically reduced by a number of means and that, by and large, it is fairly ineffectual, given that some 90 per cent of the coastline is unmeshed and we do not see a breakout of shark fatalities in those areas.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We are certainly willing to look at other methods we can use as well or, in the long term, if there are more effective methods we will be happy to look at them. The evidence that we have so far is that this is the most effective way to protect beaches. The evidence on attacks seems to suggest that the nets do work. We obviously do our best, and our contractors do their best, to minimise aquatic species being killed in the nets. The nets are not the same as those used in the 1930s. They are now equipped with acoustic warning devices to try to keep mammals such as dolphins and whales away. We remove them; they are not there permanently. So they are only there at certain times of the year. We remove them during the main whale migration season.

CHAIR: When does the net season start?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The nets went in a couple of weeks ago for the start of this season, and that is the period when the sharks are starting to establish territory.

CHAIR: That is also a period when the whale migration is still occurring.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Full swing.

CHAIR: It is actually the middle of the whale migration.

Mr STEVE WHAN: All these things are a balance. We have, of course, a demand from the public as well that we do what we can to protect the beaches.

CHAIR: Perhaps we can discuss this at another time but the beach has such a low level of usage at this time of the year that we are really not protecting a great number of people. Even if you agree with shark meshing, it could start much later in the year and be effective if that is the way you want to go. Have you given that some consideration?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am certainly happy to speak to you further about that and seek advice on it. The advice I was given about the starting time was that it matched the time that sharks were establishing their territories. I am happy to discuss that with you further.

CHAIR: How many full-time equivalent fisheries officers are currently employed by the department?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Davey, do you have that, or do you want to take it on notice?

CHAIR: It was already asked.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Yes, a similar question was asked. We will take it on notice.

CHAIR: Could you tell me how many shares in share management fisheries have been forfeited under section 75 of the Fisheries Management Act in the last three years?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We will take that on notice.

CHAIR: You might be aware that section 75 allows for the forfeiture of shares in a share management fishery where a shareholder commits a certain offence. Last year Minister Kelly made a commitment during the passage of the Fisheries Management Amendment Bill 2009 that amendments would be made that would allow the Minister to assign forfeited shares to Aboriginal fishers engaged in cultural and subsistence fishing. Has that commitment by the Minister at the time come about? Do you have any intention to amend section 75 of the Fisheries Management Act or similar provisions in relation to the surrender of shares in share management fisheries to remove the requirement that the Minister sell forfeited shares at public tender?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will seek advice on that and the commitment made by Minister Kelly. We have not yet had any in that category. Does that mean none forfeited at this stage?

Mr DAVEY: Yes.

CHAIR: So there is no forfeiture at all at this point in time?

Mr STEVE WHAN: At this stage, yes.

CHAIR: Has the department previously considered any amendments to section 75 of the Act, and what was the nature of the proposed amendments?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take that on notice as well.

CHAIR: On page 7-19 of Budget Paper No. 3, Volume 1, it is reported that reductions in net greenhouse gas emissions from primary industries has remained at 3 per cent since 2007. What contribution in

terms of funding emissions reduction activities has Industry and Investment NSW made for the achievement of this emissions reduction level?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Do you mean from their own operations or from their research and industry?

CHAIR: Either their research or directives of their operation—I am open to any interpretation.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will pass to Dr Sheldrake, who will speak about the department's own operations. Generally the department's researchers have been working on a number of projects on greenhouse emissions in agriculture and are very closely involved in some of the work, which was intended to be towards the Federal Government's emissions trading scheme on the involvement of agriculture. For instance, we have projects in some of our research facilities on emissions from cattle, whether genetic factors are involved in that, and how to reduce it, but I will pass to Dr Sheldrake to give more specifics.

Dr SHELDRAKE: In terms of agricultural research and the impact on carbon emissions, the New South Wales Department of Industry and Investment is seriously a world leader in a number of areas. The Minister has mentioned methane emissions from ruminants. We have been working in that area for nearly 20 years, so we are way ahead of the current interest in that area. Other areas include soil carbon storage. Again, our scientists have been working in that area for a long time.

In terms of working with an alternative to the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, which looked as though it was getting into trouble last year, our scientists and economists have been working on an alternative model using carbon offsets. That is effectively on-farm mechanisms, either forestry or carbon sequestering through plants, and changed farming practices like low-till and no-till farming. So the department has had a very high profile in recognising that agriculture has a massive role to play in reducing carbon emissions. We have been working so that the benefits flow through to the farming community as well as to the community more broadly.

CHAIR: Thank you. We will now go to the Opposition for questions.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Minister, in answer to a question from the Hon. Robert Brown on the changes to the livestock health and pest authorities [LHPA] system going from 47 to 14, you said that they have saved a significant amount in administration costs with the amalgamations in the LHPA. I think I have reasonably paraphrased your words. I have before me a letter from the Riverina Livestock Health and Pest Authority, which indicates:

I refer to our meeting at Leeton in December and our discussion regarding the increased payroll tax charged by the Office of State Revenue to the LHPAs compared to the RLPBs as a result of the combining of 47 payrolls into 14.

State Council have provided the following figures for the state:

2008	\$118,195.83
2009	\$775,960.57

That is a total increase in 12 months of \$657,764.74 in payroll tax. It goes on to say:

This increase obviously has put upward pressure on the rate levels needed to be charged to our land holders.

How does that sit with your comments earlier that these changes have saved a significant amount in administration costs?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Clearly savings in administration costs are going to come through combining and having less administrative staff. That is the reason why we are doing a study next year to work out and quantify exactly how that has gone, as well as the effectiveness of the delivery. Payroll tax issues and how they apply are a matter for Treasury and I do not have a say in that process.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: They are a matter for the ratepayers of the rural lands protection boards, and it flies completely in the face of your assertion that your reform has been good and cut administrative costs. A \$657,764 increase because you have combined these payrolls from 47 to 14 is hardly a saving of administrative costs.

Mr STEVE WHAN: That is one part of the equation and obviously you need to quantify the savings that you actually achieve through having fewer individual administrations for a whole range of boards. So that is why we will be looking to quantify that next year.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You will recall that your Government proposed to send agricultural research stations to the chopping block in your 2008 mini-budget before then reacting to fierce community and Opposition concerns and deciding to keep some open. Your Government also announced on 7 July 2009 that the Gaden trout hatchery would be saved and you would use the fishermen's money to buy it back from the Government. You also said that Gosford Institute at Narara would be relocated to Ourimbah within the University of Newcastle. Regarding Narara, can you confirm this and provide an update, and can you also confirm that the facilities at Berry, Condobolin, Glen Innes and Temora have remained, and will remain, in place and operate as they have in the past?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I can confirm, firstly, that the new facility at Ourimbah is well underway. I visited it a couple of weeks ago and spoke to the site supervisor there. There had obviously been a little bit of disruption due to welcome rain. That means that the completion date for that facility now looks like being February. That is going to be a very valuable facility. Gaden hatchery, as you correctly mentioned, is open and is functioning as a result of some good work by the community and some people in this room. So there is some very good work happening there. I might hand over the other more specific queries to Dr Sheldrake for comment.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I am happy for them to be taken on notice, if you like.

Dr SHELDRAKE: I have the answers, but I can take it on notice if that is easier.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: One station under threat in the past was Trangie research station. Pressure once again from the Opposition and the local community was answered with an undertaking from the Government that this was not the case and it would not be sold. There are now renewed concerns as to the station's future. What is the latest situation with Trangie?

Mr STEVE WHAN: From my point of view Trangie has a very positive future and it is doing some important work. Dr Sheldrake may want to add to that.

Dr SHELDRAKE: There is no change in the situation at Trangie and that is the same with Berry, Condobolin and Glen Innes stations.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Given the uncertainty at Alstonville, can you provide an update on the Government's plans and the collocation with Southern Cross University?

Mr STEVE WHAN: There have been quite a lot of detailed discussions with people at Alstonville.

Mr DAVEY: There have been detailed discussions about Alstonville and we have been working with local industries in that area to look at how we can rationalise operations undertaken at Alstonville. We have moved some operations to Wollongbar and we are looking at how we can develop the relationship with Southern Cross University. Those discussions are taking place now.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I appreciate the briefing I had last week about locusts. It was very helpful. There are still some outstanding questions, more to do with the past than the present. How much money is still owed by farmers from past outbreaks and what years do those outbreaks relate to? Is it 2002 to 2008?

Mr STEVE WHAN: There is a debt that related to 2003-04, from memory, but I will confirm that. The debt was in the vicinity of \$12 million and during two years of drought the levies were postponed but the debt was not waived. The existence of that debt was one of the key reasons I went to Cabinet asking for \$18.5 million for this campaign because I felt that the current level of contributions for the pest insect levy were as much as landowners should be asked to pay. The current debt is \$12.7 million.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Have you considered making that loan into a grant?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We achieved an \$18.5 million grant towards this campaign with the capacity to return to Cabinet should that be required. The plan I put up was that if we continue with the current contribution

level for the pest insect levy we would be able to overcome that debt and have some in reserve for future years, for normal years—the average year of locust campaign.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: If there is money left over from that \$18.5 million have you considered putting it towards reducing that debt?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We have the \$18.5 million. I suspect there will not be money left over but my understanding is that if there is money left over it is retained.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: How much money is collected each year in the locust levy?

Mr STEVE WHAN: My understanding is it is just under \$6 million.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Where will that money be going this year?

Mr STEVE WHAN: It will be going towards that debt. I will leave the technical side of it to Dr Sheldrake.

Dr SHELDRAKE: There is a fund called the plague locust insect levy fund and the \$6 million that will be collected through the levy process will go into that fund. As the Minister has indicated, that is currently \$12.7 million in debt, so the \$6 million would go to pay off part of that debt.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So, there is no money coming out of the levy into locust control this year?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No, because we are fully funded with the \$18.5 million for our estimate at this stage. Obviously it is an estimate of how much the campaign will cost, but that is the best we have at the moment.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Are you aware that Premier John Brumby has committed \$44 million in Victoria, which is more than double what has been committed in New South Wales? Given that Victoria is a smaller State than New South Wales, how does the \$18.5 million relate to the \$44 million committed in Victoria?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am aware of Victoria's spending. There are a couple of factors in that. Firstly, Victoria has not had an on-the-ground mechanism such as the Livestock Health and Pest Authorities [LHPAs] so we are not counting in the \$18.5 million a lot of the staff and administration of the scheme, whereas Victoria is spending a considerable proportion of its commitment on administering its scheme and employing staff to coordinate operations. They are also starting from scratch. They do not have a distribution mechanism for chemicals and are having to put that in place. In New South Wales's case we use the LHPA network and farmers can get the chemical for free. In Victoria farmers are buying the chemical commercially and then seeking rebates. That is inevitably going to cost more. The difference really is the level of preparation that already exists in the State. While there is more upfront outlay in the \$44 million headline figure, New South Wales's actual contribution is far more than the \$18.5 million cash that we are flagging.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I want to raise the issues of myrtle rust and Hendra virus. Are you aware of the outbreak of myrtle rust in New South Wales? Can you identify the month that this occurred? Has your office been contacted by members of the public or the nursery industry in relation to this issue? What was the nature of these calls and under which category has myrtle rust been declared?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am aware of it. I have been getting briefings every couple of weeks about progress on a number of properties that have been put in isolation. We first detected myrtle rust in April 2010 at a cut flower growing facility on the Central Coast. We have now confirmed myrtle rust on 32 sites in New South Wales, mostly concentrated around the Gosford-Wyong area and the Sydney basin, with some trace forward along the mid North Coast and south to Nowra. They are all areas that we have been able to trace directly from the facility. I am not aware of any contact that my office has had from individual businesses but my department has been on the ground in contact with all those businesses and working very closely with them. I have had frequent reports on that contact. It is obviously a concern. So far we have not found myrtle rust in any eucalyptus but it would be a serious concern particularly to the plantation forest industry if it got in.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I am told it is category 1, which is the same category as equine influenza. Has the department put the same sort of effort into myrtle rust as it did into EI?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will ask Dr Sheldrake to make that comparison.

Dr SHELDRAKE: I think the reference to category 1 relates to the funding arrangement but I will take that on notice. The issue in aligning it with equine influenza or another disease is that the control strategy you put in place and the management practices around that strategy are important. In this case the department, the Commonwealth Government and the other jurisdictions have effectively signed off on a national way to deal with this outbreak, as we did with equine influenza.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: I have further questions relating to this matter but I will put them on notice. How seriously do you take the Hendra virus? Are you aware that two veterinarians have already died from that virus? What is the Government doing currently and what steps have been put in place to combat that virus? How much money has been spent on research into the virus? What research has been done in relation to bats as viral vectors?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take on notice that element of the member's question that relates to the amount of money that has been spent. Obviously I am aware of the deaths of two veterinarians, which is tragic. I am aware also that our department and our biosecurity people take this disease seriously. We have been looking at strategies, in particular, in northern New South Wales. Primarily, it is a disease in tropical areas and a lot of work is taking place in Queensland. We do exclusions in New South Wales and we have in place personal protection clothing and protocols. We might have some more detail in relation to that issue.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Are you looking also at horse vaccinations?

Mr STEVE WHAN: For Hendra?

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Yes.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will ask Dr Sheldrake to answer that question. We might have to take that question on notice.

Dr SHELDRAKE: I will take that question on notice.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: Before we ask questions about inland fishing, can you confirm whether recently you called for voluntary redundancies within the department? What was the figure? Am I correct in the information that I have of 185 redundancies in the latest round? If so, why were those redundancies needed?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Last year these voluntary redundancies were advertised and were focused on achieving budget savings without compromising service delivery. We quarantined front-line services. The number of voluntary redundancies accepted was 83 across the department—17 in the Primary Industries section of the department. At various stages along the way I have seen the list and I have been assured that we are not accepting voluntary redundancies from front-line positions.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: You indicated that these redundancies were to cover a budget problem. Am I correct in stating that there was a budget black hole of \$11 million? If you have not fulfilled all the redundancies that you had hoped to achieve, does that mean you have an ongoing budget problem?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Our target was never 180, or the figure that you mentioned before; our target was always around the level that we received. Dr Sheldrake might want to comment on the actual budget impact.

Dr SHELDRAKE: One of the initiatives taken by the Government a year ago was to create the larger agencies, in part, to achieve efficiencies across the organisation. Much of what we have done with the larger department is to try to achieve efficiencies behind the scenes, in the backroom, so there is no impact on front-line services. We are in the process of trying to reduce our cost of business. That has been possible because of the linking and merging of a number of smaller agencies to create Industry and Investment NSW.

The Hon. DUNCAN GAY: So I cannot track where from where they are going.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I ask a follow-up question about inland fishing. What is the current situation with respect to commercial access for carp and yabbies in inland waters?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Let me give you some background to this issue. Because of the drought there have been financial pressures on the inland commercial fishing industry. The inland restricted fishery was formed after commercial fishing for native freshwater fin fish ceased in 2001. The fishery is now restricted to harvesting carp and yabbies, by permit. Twenty-six commercial fishers elected to remain in the fishery targeting those species. Under our policy, we open lakes only to commercial fishing for native fish species when there is a real risk of the fish perishing because of low water levels. We receive advice on those water levels from State Water. Consistent with the Government's commitment to assisting inland lake fishers where possible, Industry and Investment NSW currently is reviewing options with respect to the ongoing management of the fishery.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: While we are talking about fish, when the recreational fishing havens were put in place some biodiversity baseline studies were carried out in 2002 on Tuross Lake and Lake Macquarie. In 2005—that is, three years later—the department conducted some research and those research papers are available. Does the department have any plans to repeat that data collection and research in those two areas, as those are the two areas on which you concentrated before?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will refer your question to Dr Sheldrake. I am not aware of any.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: You could take that question on notice.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We will take that question on notice.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Apart from the money from recreational fishing trusts that is used for research projects—some of which are run by or within the department, and some of which are managed by the department or by using departmental scientists—what is the department's research budget for all research?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have a breakdown somewhere.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Again, if you want to take that question on notice, that is fine.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We will take that question on notice. Obviously we have a number of fishery research facilities. Port Stephens and Cronulla are doing research and I know that some impressive and world-leading research has been done on southern bluefin tuna at the Port Stephens facility. We will take that question on notice.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: During the current public inquiry into recreational fishing some of the witnesses presented a table that purported to show a comparison between the commercial fishing take and the recreational fishing take. It turns out that the table that was presented was a cobbled together table taken from parts of a major fishery's research effort into the recreational fishing take. However, the one thing that is evident is that the range of estimates on the recreational fishing side were huge, which indicates that the research was based on a small sampling with maybe huge extrapolations. Does the department have an allocation in its current budget, or does it have any plans to do any overall State saltwater estimates or data gathering on the recreational fishing take? Would that be done within the general fisheries research budget, or would you be expecting the trusts to fund that sort of research?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I can understand the need for more information on take and also on the economic benefits of recreational fishing. As the member representing the Snowy Mountains, I talk a lot about that issue. We are expecting a study on certain aspects of that to commence either this year or in 2011. I will take your question on notice and supply you with more details on that and also on the source of the funding. I believe it to be jointly funded by us and the trusts.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Another issue that raised its head in the recreational fishing public hearings was the structure of the bodies that look after recreational fishing. I seem to recall that in the previous budget year, and it might even have been the budget year before that, the Minister for Fisheries allocated about \$130,000 to recreational fishing trusts—my memory might be wrong so I will take the Minister's advice on this matter—to appoint consultants to put together a business plan, or to look at how the recreational fishing trusts and the advisory body were functioning. Is that the case? Was that money put aside and, if so, has that progressed at all?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take that question on notice.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: As part of the Rural Affairs portfolio, does your department or do you have any involvement in negotiating for the provision of commercial air services to rural and regional areas? In January the Government was negotiating to restore commercial flights from Dubbo to Bourke, Cobar, Walgett, Coonamble and Lightning Ridge, but that does not appear to have happened. Does that responsibility fall under your portfolio?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No, it does not. I understand that it is the Transport portfolio.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It has to do with rural affairs.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Do you have any involvement in providing advice?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No, only that as rural affairs Minister I do what I can to encourage it. We do not have a role in licensing or working out routes. A number of country towns have exclusive routes to them. That is all taken up in the transport department.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Returning to Fisheries, the Federal Government is currently negotiating with commercial fishers about the development of marine protected areas in commercial waters. Does your department have a role in those negotiations? Are you involved with the commercial fishers, most of whom would have their home port in New South Wales waters?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We do not have a direct role. I did have a discussion with the Minister at the time and indicated that we would want to be involved in discussions on the impact upon commercial fishing. We do not have a direct role in determining what happens. Of course, they are in Commonwealth waters, outside the nautical limit of our fishing areas. We will be taking a close interest but we do not have a direct say. Our Marine Parks Authority in New South Wales meets with the Commonwealth agencies to discuss some of these issues.

CHAIR: What is the 2010-2011 budget allocation for the National Centre for Rural Greenhouse Gas Research?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take that question on notice.

CHAIR: There is no predicted change in the numbers of farmers attending PROfarm courses in the coming year. It appears that participation has dropped significantly. Can you give a reason for this decline?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We offer a range of opportunities for training to farmers through different methods with our officers in the field. We have been looking at a number of uses of broadband to deliver training for farmers as well as the PROfarm courses. I will pass on the specific PROfarm question to Mr Newcombe.

CHAIR: Mr Newcombe, could you also let the Committee know the current historical funding level for the PROfarm training program?

Mr NEWCOMBE: I will take that specific question on notice, if you do not mind. We certainly have noticed a decline in the level of activity in the PROfarm courses in the past financial year. We have attributed that mainly to the economic climate and the prolonged drought. We have been looking at other ways to increase the uptake of that activity, particularly, as the Minister said, in looking at ways to deliver some of that training via e-learning.

CHAIR: Are you saying that the drop in numbers is drought related and not because you are looking at networking and electronic means of dealing with those educational systems?

Mr NEWCOMBE: It is both. We consider the drop has been as a result of the ongoing drought. We are trying to find other ways to deliver more efficiently to those farmers.

CHAIR: What percentage of New South Wales agricultural land is managed using minimum or reduced tillage techniques? What percentage of farmers use minimum tillage techniques?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am not sure that we will be able to give you a specific figure, but certainly our field officers will have an idea. We will take that on notice and get you as much information as we can. It varies depending on the region and types of information.

CHAIR: What financial contribution or programs does Industry and Investment provide to encourage reduced or zero-tillage cropping?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Our extension officers in a number of areas will work with farmers in helping them with their no-tilling techniques.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Where there are still extension officers.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We have a strong number of extension officers around the State.

CHAIR: How many do you have?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I believe we have 150 extension officers around the State.

CHAIR: How many of them are agronomy and livestock officers?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will take that on notice and get a breakdown for you. That figure includes both.

CHAIR: For the past three financial years how much direct budget allocation or in-kind support was given for research and development of genetically manipulated crops and animals?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I am not sure whether I will have the precise figures on that. We have a large research component in the department. It is one of the biggest government research organisations in Australia. A lot of what we do is working with industry on crops, particularly. Examples I have seen recently are very productive rice crops using less water.

CHAIR: Are these genetically engineered strategies?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We do not do any GM work but we are involved in using biotechnology. Obviously, we do a lot of research work on crop improvement. We are not doing work on genetically modified crops.

CHAIR: It is interesting for me to look at rice production. I believe one member of The Nationals here or in another inquiry said that because of the water there was a bumper crop coming this year. However, in my area, which is the far north of New South Wales, dry rice production is occurring now. I guess this means that, given the amount of rainfall that occurs naturally, we are dealing with rice production in a more amenable environment without the need for irrigation. Has your department looked into that as a means of effective cultivation, or even to moving the industry to where it can operate in an environment that is more natural for rice?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We are aware of some small dry land rice farming efforts in the north of New South Wales.

CHAIR: It is great rice too.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: It is great duck hunting too.

Mr STEVE WHAN: The issue with rice is getting a critical size of the industry to process together. The Riverina is good because it has that breadth of area.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: The Riverina developed the technology that requires less water, is that right?

Mr STEVE WHAN: SunRice, in conjunction with this department, has enabled world record production per hectare of rice this year.

CHAIR: But not compared with dry land rice?

Mr STEVE WHAN: My understanding is that in respect of tonnage of land, the Riverina is setting world records because of the efficient use of the water that that area has available. My understanding of the North Coast efforts with dry rice farming is that they are fairly small at the moment. Our department will always work with farmers who want to try crops in different areas and see how they work.

CHAIR: I take it that in answer to my question you cannot give us an idea of the direct budget allocations regarding genetically manipulated crops and animals.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We do not do any work in that area.

CHAIR: For the past three financial years how many direct budget allocations or how much in-kind support was given for research or development of organic agricultural systems?

Mr STEVE WHAN: A significant amount of work is being done in organics. I will ask Dr Sheldrake to answer so that he does not have to just write it out for me to read.

Dr SHELDRAKE: I will take on notice the issue of the dollars we commit on an annual basis. Our Bathurst research station primarily focuses on organic agriculture. That is looking at organic viticulture and organic crop production.

CHAIR: Given that Alstonville is a tropical fruit research station, does that look at the organic side of things?

Dr SHELDRAKE: I will take on notice the details of the specific projects that might be going on at Alstonville. If there are projects around organic forms of farming at Alstonville we will provide that in our response.

CHAIR: Thank you. Given the impact that climate change will have on our future food security, in particular the need to ensure that we have a diversity of plant species and genome types that are able to adapt to changing climatic conditions, the funding cuts to Landcare and Caring for our Country program, along with the increasing privatisation of plant breeding and agronomy services, showed a worrying trend. Would you agree with that? What financial commitments are being made to reinstate plant breeding, front-line agronomic services and conservation programs in the New South Wales public service?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Some of that funding was Federal funding for the Landcare and Caring for our Country programs.

CHAIR: Okay.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We certainly work very closely with industry on plants and plant types. But I am concerned about trying to ensure that we do more across government to look at food security in New South Wales. We have established a senior officers group to look at issues surrounding security of food. That is being chaired by the Department of Premier and Cabinet and has representatives from my department, from the Department of Planning, and the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water.

CHAIR: What is total budget allocation of Industry and Investment NSW for biosecurity expressed as a per hectare spend in New South Wales?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Expressed as a per hectare spend I would need to take on notice.

CHAIR: Can you give any indication of the budget allocation in general terms? How does it compare with Victoria and Queensland, either per hectare or whatever measure you want to use to do that assessment?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will ask Dr Sheldrake to answer what he can of it and we will take the rest of it on notice. Do you want a figure on biosecurity overall?

Dr SHELDRAKE: I will take the figure on biosecurity, but what I would say is that New South Wales is leading Australia in terms of biosecurity. We play a significant role at a national level in determining the national policy on biosecurity and implementing it. The investment that we are putting into our Elizabeth Macarthur Agriculture Institute at Camden, which is our primary plant and animal health biosecurity institute, is a \$57 million upgrade. Industry and Investment NSW is a leader in biosecurity in Australia.

CHAIR: How does Industry and Investment NSW prioritise funding or grants regarding noxious weeds reduction and eradication programs? What criteria are used to develop prioritisation?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We have a noxious weeds advisory committee which proposes the priorities and strategies for that. We have local committees which then consider grants applications from areas around the State. We obviously look at the national status of various weeds as well. There is \$8.769 million in the Weeds Action Program and that links in with the Invasive Species Plan. We are trying to get regional partnerships that maximise the use of regional resources to fight against weeds. We work with local government and we provide free training in performance measurement, monitoring and evaluation techniques.

Over 2009-10 we had 241 grant applications for noxious weed control from 108 organisations. This year we have had 19 applications, with an overall increase in the number of stakeholder organisations. What we are trying to do is take a more strategic focus on invasive weeds and ensure that we get longer-term strategies to take them out. I had the pleasure in the Monaro recently of being at the launch of a strategy for combating serrated tussock, which is obviously a significant weed. The State Coordinator has been put on to assist with that. Again, that is indicative of taking a longer-term approach to some of these weeds.

CHAIR: Under the results indicator, which measures how well the agricultural sector coexists and supports the natural environment, there is little indication how this money is spent. What types of projects and/or activities are being funded? How are these funds being disbursed to eligible applicants under the Rural Assistance Authority?

Mr STEVE WHAN: In relation to any specific aspect of those, they distribute a lot of the drought support funds for New South Wales, payments and loan approvals for people who have been in natural disaster situations, and conservation grants.

CHAIR: I was thinking more of conservation grants. I will take your information, but I was thinking more of where it supports the natural environment in conservation grants.

Dr SHELDRAKE: There is a series of eligible activities that farmers can apply in terms of conservation. I cannot give you a breakdown now, but we will certainly take that on notice.

CHAIR: Perhaps you could take that on notice and include the total number of applicants, what is eligible or not, and how many there were for the Special Conservation Scheme.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Perhaps I could add that my understanding is that there has not been a very high take-up of those grants. I am expecting that that is something that we will probably look at as we look at the Federal Government's new drought programs, which involve grants for water conservation works on properties and other works on properties to improve their viability, as well as the loans.

CHAIR: We will take a short break and move on to Emergency Services.

[Short adjournment]

SHANE FITZSIMMONS, Commissioner, New South Wales Rural Fire Service,

GREG MULLINS, Commissioner, New South Wales Fire Brigades,

MURRAY KEAR, Commissioner, State Emergency Services, and

STACEY TANNOS, Chief Executive, Emergency Management NSW, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I declare the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of Emergency Services open for examination.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It has been a busy day for the fire brigade, with the gas leak at Darlington and Cabramatta. A recent "Commish's Corner" editorial by Commissioner Mullins highlighted that during the 2010 winter fire season—up until the editorial was written—there were seven more deaths than for the entire period last year. I note that the commissioner asked for greater input from NSW Fire Brigades personnel in community safety activities. I note also that Fire Brigade Employees' Union [FBEU] SITREPs 25 and 30 indicated some issues with that. A SITREP from the FBEU states:

This week the Union was informed that in one zone, management are setting quotas for firefighters to undertake community safety activities.

This is not on.

What policies does your Government have to encourage proactive engagement and increase the number of personnel undertaking community safety activities at a time when we have a high number of deaths due to fire in this State?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We have certainly seen a tragic winter. At one stage there was a shocking number of fires that the commissioner told me were occurring around the State. That reinforces the need for community education. The Government and the Fire Brigades expect our permanent firefighters in particular to be involved in community education as part of their duties. I will hand over to Commissioner Mullins to comment on particular policies about requirements, if they exist.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Before we hand over to the commissioner, do you have a view as to that SITREP put out by the FBEU?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will not comment on the FBEU's SITREP. My work is directly with the commissioner in ensuring that our firefighters are active in our communities in education as well as performing their key role, which is fire prevention and extinguishment. All firefighters I meet indicate to me their willingness to be involved in community education. Indeed, they enjoy it. I think it is something that general firefighters enjoy and do willingly.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So you are not concerned by the union's attitude that it is not on to set quotas for community participation?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The union has not raised any issues with me.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It has raised them on a public website.

Mr STEVE WHAN: It has not raised any issues with me. I am not aware whether it has raised them with the commissioner. I would expect that if it had issues with any comments or directive from the commissioner it would raise them directly with him.

Mr MULLINS: This is an area in which the Fire Brigades is doing more and more. When I joined the fire service in 1978 our role was just fighting fires. Since that time the role has become much broader, with hazardous materials spillages, rescues of all types—

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It sounds like a challenge, according to this SITREP, to get all members of NSW Fire Brigades on board to do community safety activities.

Mr MULLINS: That is what I was getting to. One of the issues that has been transitioning firefighters to be more proactive in their communities because every fire that we can prevent is much better than putting one out. Even talking to firefighters in Japan, for example, they see every fire as a failure. We are trying to work on some culture change.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: The United States of America fire chief was here late last year.

Mr MULLINS: Kelvin Cochran.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: He is very much of the attitude that community safety was a very important part of getting down fire rates and death rates. It seems that it is a challenge for you and your organisation.

Mr MULLINS: I do not agree that it is a challenge. I am actually concerned about that SITREP that went out because it goes against an award undertaking in 2004 by the union.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It is interesting that you are concerns but the Minister is not.

Mr MULLINS: We have not had a chance to talk about that particular SITREP.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Yet, we have had seven more deaths up until this time this year than we had for the entire last year.

Mr MULLINS: I would have to say that the Minister has been very proactive on radio, television and in print media, with me backing up the messages that both Commissioner Fitzsimmons have been putting out there on smoke alarms and home escape plans. The sort of work that firefighters do on a day-to-day basis is they go to primary schools. We have the Fire Ed Program that is aimed at children aged 5 to 7. We have a new program that we are rolling for children aged 8 to 12. We have the Pre Ed Program where firefighters go and talk to kindergarten children about fire safety in the home. We have the Saver Program where firefighters go into the homes of the elderly and change smoke alarm batteries. We have a Rescue Ed Program where firefighters go to high schools and talk to year 10 students about the dangers of driving quickly and about car accidents. A normal day for a firefighter in 2010 compared to what I had in 1978 is totally different.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: How many, if any, of the fires this winter have been insulation fires? Up to the end of 2009, according to questions on notices and answers I received from the Fire Brigades there were 79 incidents of insulation caused fires in New South Wales?

Mr MULLINS: I believe that was actually 69.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Between 1 July 2009 and 13 September 2010, 69 fires involved roof insulation materials. The Fire Brigades mainly attributed those fires to exhaust fans or down lights installed in ceilings, overhead insulation material and setting of lights.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Those down lights and insulation could have been there originally and then the insulation went in and created those fires.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Chair, I do not think that speculating on causes of fires without the inspection of them and the careful investigation by the Fire Brigades is very fruitful.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Do you have any—

CHAIR: It would be good if the Minister could finish his answer.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Of the 69 fires, 58 involved cellulous fibre insulation materials. That is the kind of insulation that is made from recycled paper into a granular material which is treated with a very mild fire retardant and compressed, and then pumped into roof cavities using a vacuum unit. That has caused some problems. The Fire Brigades have been doing research which I have seen on insulation fires in ceilings and

placement near down lights with a view to building that into the community education campaign which we run very actively through the community during the year. Contrary to the comments of the Hon. Melinda Pavey that I was not concerned about the union's comments, what I said was not that I was not concerned it was that they had not raised those comments with me.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Is there any statistical information about when the insulation fires that you relate to, the 79, when that insulation was installed?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I do not have information on that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I am happy for you to take that on notice if you do not have an answer.

Mr MULLINS: Yes, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I refer to the management of the NSW Fire Brigades in relation to workers compensation, sick leave and overtime. Earlier this year I had a meeting with the new Deputy Commissioner, Rosemary Milkins who is present, following my call for papers in relation to some of the difficulties that the Fire Brigades was going through. We shared the comment that it had been annus horribilus for NSW Fire Brigades. Where is NSW Fire Brigades is at in relation to overtime. It has been an ongoing issue. Approximately 5 per cent of your budget every year goes to overtime, around \$20 million over the past few years.

Mr MULLINS: That is not correct. It is not 5 per cent.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What is the figure for this year?

Mr MULLINS: The figure this year is below budget. We came in at \$16.2 million.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What was it last year?

Mr MULLINS: If I could go back to 2008-09, it was \$18.9 million, down from \$20.4 million.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I have it in the annual report as \$19.8 million.

Mr MULLINS: That does not accord with my figures. I have \$18.9 million. I do not know if that is a transcription error.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: No, mine is a cut-out from the report. The previous year was \$21.3 million.

Mr MULLINS: That was 2007-08, yes, I believe so. So we had a 7.4 per cent reduction in 2008-09, a 14.3 per cent reduction in 2009-10, and we are budgeting for a 9.3 per cent reduction to \$14.7 million this coming financial year.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: For 2009-10?

Mr MULLINS: No, for 2010-11, so our overtime reduction strategies have been very successful. We have saved about \$4.2 million over the last couple of years and that does not take into account the wage rises over that time of 4.6 per cent, 4 per cent and 4 per cent. In real terms it is actually much more than that, so our overtime reduction strategies have been very successful.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Is that due in part to the \$57,000 consultancy that you undertook in 2008-09 called Fraud Prevention and Governance for the improvement of corporate governance, investigate the controls in place to ensure all overtime payments are made according to departmental guidelines?

Mr MULLINS: Do you recall who the consultant was?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Management Services.

Mr MULLINS: I am not aware of that particular consultancy, so I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: It was in the annual report and they were engaged to assist in the improvement of corporate governance. I just figured it had something to do with overtime.

Mr MULLINS: It is probably best that I do not speculate, but I do not recall that being associated with overtime reduction. A lot of our overtime reduction strategies came from a report by IAB Services, which some years ago did a report for us on what the driving factors were, and since then we have had an arbitrated award decision in 2008 in which the union committed to working with us on overtime reduction strategies and sick leave reduction strategies.

Mr STEVE WHAN: The Fire Brigade has taken a number of actions since early last year to bring down the level of costs in its budget. We have engaged a number of consultancies and certainly added to the administration of Fire Brigades with a view to bringing down overtime, as you have heard, but also workers' compensation costs, which have been a significant cost factor for Fire Brigades as well.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: In relation to workers' compensation sick leave, in 2006 your Government said it would aim to reduce the average sick leave for the New South Wales public sector by one day a year for each full-time employee by 2008-09, saving around \$45 million in replacement costs for front-line workers. I understand, Commissioner and Minister, that the Auditor-General is currently preparing an update to that report. Could you tell us what that report will say in relation to NSW Fire Brigades and that target?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We obviously cannot speculate on what the Auditor-General might say in relation to his report.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What have you said to the Auditor-General?

Mr STEVE WHAN: In terms of our record in Fire Brigades with injuries, there has been a significant reduction in frequency of injuries across the organisation. In 2007 we had 824 claims; in 2008, 728; and in 2009, 709. Obviously the Fire Brigade is one of those organisations that does have significant workers' compensation costs.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: What was this financial year's figure?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I have the 2009 figure here. I have a calendar year figure, but 709 is the latest figure.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: For 2009-10.

Mr STEVE WHAN: That is correct.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: That figure has not been made public yet?

Mr MULLINS: No.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So 710?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No, 709. We have undertaken, as part of the work that is being done, to bring the Fire Brigades budget into its expected range. There is a lot of work that is being done on follow-up of workplace injuries and that is something that has been significantly boosted with the resources from the Government. We have allocated \$1.25 million to health safety and injury management in the Fire Brigade, which recognises that we did need additional specialist staff to assist firefighters who had suffered injuries to return to work as soon as possible. We are now starting to see the benefits of that, but obviously that is a long-term process, which will not immediately produce results but will over a period of time.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Can you make any comment on the suggestion that the sick leave figures in the Auditor-General's report will show that the NSW Fire Brigades has the highest of all government agencies. Is that anywhere near the mark?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We do not know what is in the Auditor-General's report, or the comparison with agencies. However, it would not be unexpected that Fire Brigades, along with police, would be probably amongst the higher due to the nature of the work. The Commissioner might like to comment.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Commissioner Mullins, have you received any correspondence from the Auditor-General prior to the report being finalised? Have you seen any documentation or comparisons?

Mr MULLINS: I have not seen a draft report.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Has anybody from the Fire Brigades?

Mr MULLINS: I do not believe so, but I do know that the data we have provided may well show that we are one of the highest users of sick leave. As the Minister said, one of the things we need to take into account is we are often compared to agencies where people work in offices. Our people do not work in offices.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Interestingly, the annual report shows that 27 per cent of injuries to Fire Brigade members actually occur at the station or office. Around 12.4 per cent of injuries are sustained during sport or training and 25 per cent of injuries happen at the incident or fire ground, so it is not the most dangerous part of the job according to the annual report and statistics.

Mr MULLINS: I am not sure if you understand the nature of a firefighter's work during the day. When people get to work they have equipment to check such as breathing apparatus cylinders and rescue equipment has to be properly serviced—lots of heavy equipment. We do have slips and strains. People train on every shift and that can involve running with hoses and going into towers and abseiling. It is not a gentle form of work.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: How do these statistics compare to other jurisdictions like Queensland?

Mr MULLINS: I am not sure.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Psychological injury or stress leave was at 5.22 per cent. Last year at budget estimates Assistant Commissioner Benson said that it had increased by 3 per cent I think—you had an extra 30 or 40 people. Can you tell me for this financial year how many people have been off on stress leave, what the increase is, and how long those people have been off?

Mr MULLINS: There are 62 people who have been off with psychological injuries.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Is that an extra 62 or is that in total?

Mr MULLINS: That is a total for the year.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Sixty-two people this year on stress leave?

Mr MULLINS: Last year there were 41 and the year before there were 49.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: So you have an increasing trend in stress leave or psychological leave?

Mr MULLINS: Yes, we have. We had a reduction last year and it has gone up this year. The majority of those are to do with workplace stress and post-traumatic stress disorder. As you would appreciate, we are the largest provider of rescue services in the State—horrible accidents, like the ones we had recently at Woolgoolga, up your way, and Nambucca Heads, where a firefighter was killed and then the daughter of a firefighter was killed. They have a big impact on people. That is on the increase and some—

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Do you think the clouds of the Independent Commission Against Corruption inquiry and the KPMG inquiry—some of those issues—are having an impact on officers to increase that number?

Mr MULLINS: I would not like to speculate.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Have you had correspondence or representations to that effect?

Mr MULLINS: I have had representations from people who are very unhappy about some of the media coverage.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Just media coverage—not unhappy about management within Fire Brigades?

Mr MULLINS: I have had a lot of representations from people. I know the Minister spoke in the House about the thousands of men and women out there who would never be involved in any wrongdoing or bullying and harassment but they are being tainted by some media reports. I am not at all happy about the way that is going.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Do you think that is a media problem, a media stress?

Mr MULLINS: No, I am not saying that. But people have come to me—you asked whether people had come to me. They have definitely come to me in droves and are very worried about the implication that because you are a firefighter you may be involved in dishonest behaviour, misconduct or fraud or corruption, and it is not true.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: When do you expect the Independent Commission Against Corruption [ICAC] inquiry report to come out? Has there been any update?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The ICAC will obviously make the decision on when to release its inquiry. It does not inform us of the timing of the release of its reports.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I thank the commissioners and others for attending today. I think the commissioners in all three services do a fantastic job for their services. The ability to use volunteers, particularly in the two volunteer services, is a very valuable support for what the Government spends. Looking at your budgets, the Rural Fire Service gets 14.6 per cent of its funding from the Government, 11.7 per cent from local government, and 73-odd per cent from the insurance industry. The budget papers state that the 2010-2011 contributions provided to the fund—the fund where all the moneys go—will be \$220 million, but expenditure will be about \$270 million. So expenditure is higher than the money going into the fund. Is that what has happened historically? Has the fund been run down or do you always have surpluses? How does that work?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The fund is not being run down but I will ask Stacey Tannos from Emergency Management NSW, who is responsible for the management of that fund, to answer.

Mr TANNOS: I may be able to shed some light on that. The total expenditure you are referring to is for the Department of Rural Fire Service and not for the Rural Fire Fighting Fund. They are two separate entities. The total expenses also include the cost of running Emergency Management NSW, my organisation, which incorporates some funding for the Natural Disaster Resilience Grants scheme and the Natural Disaster Mitigation Program.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: So there is other funding coming in?

Mr TANNOS: Yes, and it is not part of the contributory system, so they are two quite separate entities when it comes to reporting. The total expenses you are referring to is for the Rural Fire Service.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: The same methodology appears to be applied to both the SES and Fire Brigades in terms of the funding split. From where is the local government contribution of 11.7 per cent paid—the Department of Local Government or individual councils?

Mr STEVE WHAN: From individual councils. We have lowered that in the last couple of years as the SES has come into that formula.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Is it paid on a per ratepayer basis?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Each service determines differently the amount of money it needs to raise. Emergency Management NSW administers that, but, broadly, the SES is moving to a population-based

determinant; Fire Brigades determine theirs based on the services in the community—for instance, whether you have a retained station or a 10/14 station—and the Rural Fire Service determines it on statewide costs as well as local bids for equipment and machinery. It is fairly complex in a way. Mr Tannos could probably add to that if you wanted.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: No, it just seemed to me it would be complicated, given that all three services operate with the same system yet some of them operate more in CBD areas and others in rural areas.

Mr STEVE WHAN: It is the same funding source but different methods of determining the contribution by the local government area.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: There are 10,000-odd volunteers in the SES. What is the annual turnover in volunteers? How many do you lose and replace each year?

Mr STEVE WHAN: It is reasonably stable, but I will pass that question to Commissioner Kear.

Mr KEAR: A study was done in about 2005 of the turnover rate of the New South Wales SES. Currently we turn over about 60 per cent of volunteers every five years.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Are any exit polls done on volunteers who leave to find out the reasons they leave?

Mr KEAR: Yes. As in that study, we do an exit interview with most of the volunteers in local units. Not everybody gets one. Some people move and we do not get in contact with them. Generally they are questioned about why they are leaving. Some of the main reasons are transferring for work and other family members transferring for work, and there is a lot of movement from western New South Wales towards the coast.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Are there any age barriers at either the top or the bottom end to being an SES volunteer?

Mr KEAR: There is certainly no barrier at the top end. We take volunteers from 16 years of age but they are restricted in what they can do until they turn 18 years of age.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I will ask the same question of the Rural Fire Service. What is the volunteer turnover?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: It is very similar proportionally to what Murray is talking about with the volunteer culture.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: About 11 per cent or something like that?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: It works out to several thousand per annum and there are as many people retiring or moving on as there are applications to join. The predominant reason for departure given in the surveys is interstate or out-of-town movements. We are also seeing a lot of brigade members resigning from a brigade and re-establishing membership with another brigade when they move to a different part of the State. Our figures show that for the last five to 10 years we have had a fairly stable total membership base, albeit that membership statistic will move around to different geographic parts of the State.

You will see people move from really remote rural areas to villages or town centres and there is some movement to the coast. There is some movement in the demographics, but the total number remains reasonably stable with departures and recruitments. We have embarked fairly heavily in the last few years on cadet programs and youth initiatives particularly to engage younger members in the organisation, especially through school programs. We are having a great deal of success with some of those recruitment strategies and engagement initiatives.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Is the Rural Fire Service a rank-based system? Excuse my ignorance.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Rank is apportioned to brigades, from brigade level to the State Commissioner, if you like, and that ranking structure transcends both the salaried side of the organisation and the volunteer side.

Rank is not absolute. There is a whole host of varied roles that members, both salaried and volunteer, undertake and in which they are engaged operationally and administratively but which do not require any ranking structure whatsoever. They perform all sorts of functions, from community engagement to operational logistics to catering and radio communications right through to front-line firefighting. Not every position needs a rank.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Does a brigade self-manage its monetary resources or is there a central salaried officer who does all that?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: There are two dimensions to that. The Rural Fire Fighting Fund that you mentioned earlier, which is the \$200 million budget, is administered and managed through the salaried side of the organisation but local brigades have the ability to raise funds and expend funds in the interests of brigade activities. That usually consists of local fundraising activities and donations, which provide supplementation to things they like in their station and support their equipment and operational needs at the local level. The fundamental provision of resources, assets and equipment is through the funding system.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Is that system similar to the SES system?

Mr KEAR: Yes, it is very similar. There are three components to the funding, if you are referring to it from a local unit perspective. The first component is the central fund from State headquarters. We would supply a range of equipment—the equipment that they carry on their vehicles: the rescue, flood and storm management equipment. Second, a contribution is made by local government in regard to the maintenance of vehicles and some small expenses. The third, which is similar to the RFS, is that units are allowed to raise their own funds through donations and fund-raising activities for expenditure on volunteer and member facilities et cetera.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Funds are required for the maintenance or replacement of critical equipment. Do they have to raise volunteer funds for that?

Mr KEAR: No. Certainly in the SES that is correct. At the State headquarters we have a statewide network of asset management in regard to the tools that they use on the job.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: That certainly is the case for the Rural Fire Service. The only other dimension that is important to note is that the volunteer Rural Fire Service Association also separately raises funds in the interests of its members. It will provide monetary grants and equipment grants to brigades across the State. In relation to front-line firefighting equipment, there is no need for brigades to be raising their own money to replace that. That is what we now fund.

CHAIR: We are now in the second financial year in which the new cost-sharing funding model for the SES has been in place. Under that arrangement costs are shared by insurance companies, local councils and the State Government. Are there any cases whereby local councils are providing more funding to the SES under this model compared with the situation before the new shared costs funding model?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will hand over to Commissioner Kear in a moment. I point out that councils are providing funding through their 11.7 per cent statutory contribution. However, in the vast majority of cases they provide additional funds of varying amounts for the buildings and for other items around those buildings. Commissioner Kear might want to add to that.

Mr KEAR: When the model was first introduced in 2009—the first year that the SES came on board similar to the two fire services—the local government contribution was reduced to 11.7 per cent. Prior to that year the two fire services' contributions were 12.3 per cent and 13.3 per cent respectively. That reduction in the two fire services' contributions from local government equalled how much they had to pay to the New South Wales SES in that first year. There was no increase to local government caused by the introduction of the SES on that model. In answer to an earlier question the Minister said that in this financial year the New South Wales SES had gone on to a population-based calculation of how local government contributes to the SES. On a pro rata basis that is about \$1 per head in New South Wales. Depending on how many people are in that local government area that is how much they will contribute to the SES.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I point out we are phasing that in over a five-year period.

CHAIR: Has there been feedback from local councils on the new cost-sharing model to date?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Yes. There has been mixed feedback. In many cases local government is fairly hard pressed and obviously would prefer not to be contributing. However, it strongly supports the SES and the Rural Fire Service for that matter. In that sense local government appreciates their commitment. Obviously, any change to the way in which we raise funds will produce winners and losers. On a population-based model some councils will end up paying more in the long term and some will end up paying significantly less. Clearly, there will be those who are paying more who would rather not be paying more. Now that councils are making an 11.7 per cent contribution, some of them have discussed with us what other contributions they should continue to make.

CHAIR: Do you take into account the fact that some councils might have different problems, responsibilities or vulnerabilities in those circumstances? I am thinking in particular of those councils that might have a small population but that are inundated on a regular basis by significant tourist populations. How would the funding work in those areas? An unfamiliar population can often create some of the biggest problems.

Mr STEVE WHAN: The population funding model does not affect the level of resource allocation. For instance, a council on the North Coast that might have a low resident population but a high influx probably would benefit from the population-based funding model. If there were a flood in the area councils would still have all the resources that could be marshalled to assist them. The population model probably would benefit those councils that have a high influx of tourists.

CHAIR: What progress has been made by emergency services in New South Wales in their lobbying of Federal Government agencies to allow people with hearing or speech impairments to send SMS messages to the 106 emergency number?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Mr Tannos might be able to answer your question. If not, I will take it on notice.

Mr TANNOS: We will take that question on notice.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We will take that question on notice to get the latest progress on that issue.

CHAIR: What is the role of the SES in floodplain management? Are there specific budget allocations that support the involvement of the SES in floodplain management?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will pass that question on to Commissioner Kear.

Mr KEAR: Under legislation the SES does not have a role to play and does not receive any sort of advice in regard to building on floodplains. Outside that legislation it is often asked for its opinion by local government in regard to the suitability of building on floodplains. We have a planning section at State headquarters that does all the research in developing flood plans for communities that underpin local flood plans. In addition, flood planning experts are located at each of our 17 regional offices. Through that integrated network we give advice not only to local government but also to other consent authorities relating to the appropriateness of building on a floodplain.

CHAIR: I refer to the Rural Fire Service. What progress has been made in securing increased funding for the successful hotspots fire project?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The hotspots fire project has been successful and it is very positive. I have been in discussions with the groups involved about continuing that project, but I am not able to give you any further update on that at the moment.

CHAIR: Referring to NSW Fire Brigades, the forecast percentage of homes with fire alarms for this year is 94 per cent, which is not a great improvement on the figure last year of 93.6 per cent. As well as sending letters to homes where fire officers have responded to a fire and noticed that smoke alarms were absent or not working, does NSW Fire Brigades also send out communications to the wider community about the importance of complying with smoke alarm legislation?

Mr STEVE WHAN: We have a significant number of educational campaigns that point out to people the laws regarding smoke alarms, and that also encourage people to put them in place. We have worked with the community and with some of our commercial partners on material relating to planning for fire prevention in the home. That material, which will be distributed to children and families, will assist them in planning for fire

prevention in their homes. We are undertaking a lot of community education to get out those messages. Of course, our fire brigades, on things such as open days, will hand out fire smoke detectors and so on. Commissioner Mullins might like to add something. It is difficult to get to 100 per cent but, obviously, we would hope to do so one day.

Mr MULLINS: As the Minister said, we have in place a lot of programs. We try to get to various communities and, in particular, those parts of the community that we have identified as being at risk. We have programs targeted at culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We have identified in some communities that certain cooking practices result in fire risks. We had some difficulty, for example, with Somali communities in some areas. We were able to recruit some fire prevention volunteers from those communities who were trained up and who then went into people's homes and pointed out the sorts of fire risks and the need for fire smoke alarms.

I referred earlier to our fire education program at schools which we found to be particularly effective. Children were going home and talking to their mothers and fathers and saying, "Where is our smoke alarm? It is the law. We must have it." The two key messages we try to send to people are, "Please have a photo electric smoke alarm—they are more effective—and also have a home escape plan." Every State is finding it quite problematic to get that last little bit up to 100 per cent. South Australia is a bit further along than us, but it has had the legislation longer.

CHAIR: For those homes where fires have occurred and there has been either no smoke alarm or one not working, have Fire Brigades taken legal steps to prosecute owners or is it really just an educational situation?

Mr MULLINS: Thus far we have taken an educational approach. However, earlier this month I wrote to the Commissioner of Police, Andrew Scipione, seeking to form a working party with the Department of Planning and police as well as the Real Estate Institute, which has been active and helpful in pushing the smoke alarm message, to see what we can do about landlords who may not be aware that they need to have smoke alarms.

CHAIR: You are looking at possible prosecutions of landlords rather than home owners?

Mr MULLINS: Yes. If we believe somebody is responsible for having a smoke alarm in a place and a tenant dies or is injured, I have sought advice from the Commissioner of Police about what prosecutions might take place.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Are there further cases of sexual assault allegations in NSW Fire Brigades currently being investigated by New South Wales police?

Mr STEVE WHAN: You need to be specific—further what?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Are there allegations of sexual abuse currently being investigated by police other than those reported already in the public?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I do not know that there has been a definitive number reported publicly. I do not believe it is possible to say whether there are further cases over what has been reported publicly. I will ask the commissioner to make some general comments. The main point to make is that all complaints received have been appropriately dealt with immediately. The police have been investigating a number of complaints and they will take appropriate action and finalise those investigations. Any complaint received by the Fire Brigades is dealt with appropriately under procedures we have put in place.

Mr MULLINS: Obviously, this matter is of deep concern to me, the Minister, the Government, the community and all firefighters. I make a correction: There have not been any allegations of sexual assault; there were allegations of indecent assault that the police have looked into. One matter is before the courts: Five serving and two former firefighters have been charged with indecent assault in company. Police formed Strikeforce Sime to look into matters raised about the NSW Fire Brigades and 59 matters were referred to the police. I have been briefed in the last couple of days that Strikeforce Sime is winding down and has had its resources reduced because there have been no new claims. Of those 59 matters, 47 have been referred back to NSW Fire Brigades and no criminal charges will be laid in respect of them. About 12 required follow-up by NSW Fire Brigades. I understand that two have resulted in preliminary inquiries by our new workplace

standards and conduct branch, which was established after \$1.3 million was set aside by the Government for that unit.

Our workplace conduct review by KPMG found no evidence today of the sorts of actions that were alleged to have happened in the 1970s and 1980s. I said before that I was a bit concerned about some media reporting. In response to your question as to whether people have approached me with concerns about a culture of ritual initiation or bastardisation, yes, they have. What we believe we have found from the past is that there was probably a culture that allowed that to go on in pockets, but the police have certainly found no evidence of a widespread culture of that nature. Certainly it does not happen today. If it did, we would deal with it quickly with the full weight of the law. There is no way in the world I would tolerate it, the community would tolerate it or other firefighters would tolerate it.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: You are talking about that type of ritual activity, but the KPMG report also pointed out that bullying and harassment is still an issue within NSW Fire Brigades, which I imagine is the reason we have a new deputy commissioner, Mr Milkins, and you have undergone major changes to your human resources department. Three weeks ago in the Minister's electorate there was a punch-up. Do we have any other records of punch-ups or fighting within New South Wales fire stations over the past year? Do you track that statistic?

Mr MULLINS: One difficulty we had in the past was that we did not have the ability to track a database of certain types of incidents. I do not know of any current cases where there have been workplace assaults. In my 32 years in the Fire Brigades I know of one other, and it was probably in 1979. It was a minor issue, but I do not know what other people's experiences have been.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Other people have come to me with other examples post 1979.

Mr STEVE WHAN: I suggest that if people have come to you with other examples, they should be reported.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I have encouraged them to ring the hotline.

Mr STEVE WHAN: They should be reported through the appropriate authorities.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Yes.

Mr STEVE WHAN: It is important to differentiate between the sorts of allegations of bullying, harassment and initiation-type things that happened in the past. Unfortunately, in many workplaces in Australia there still are occasional examples of harassment. NSW Fire Brigades is working to establish a culture that makes it very clear that that is not tolerated and it will resolve any issues.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I raised the issue concerning Queanbeyan fire station with you, Commissioner Mullins, during the supplementary budget estimates hearing last year. Do you remember?

Mr MULLINS: No, I do not recall that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: You said it was just a matter of people leaving—coming and going—and that it was not so much a management issue but pressures and the tensions within stations between retained and permanent officers.

Mr MULLINS: I do not recall you raising that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Are there still those tensions between retained and permanent officers?

Mr MULLINS: There can be. There have been instances when there have been tensions when a large regional centre gets to the point where it requires full-time firefighters around the clock. There can be cultural issues between the paid on-call firefighters and the full-time firefighters—not in every case, but it has occurred and we have dealt with it.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: Are you aware of a police inquiry currently being undertaken within NSW Fire Brigades into missing equipment?

Mr MULLINS: No.

Mr STEVE WHAN: Is that in any particular area?

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I have just been told that there is a police inquiry underway into missing equipment. You are not aware?

Mr MULLINS: I am not aware.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: I am checking those facts.

Mr MULLINS: I am not aware of a current police inquiry into missing equipment, unless you can be more specific. There may be some minor matter somewhere, but nothing has been brought to my attention that has not been resolved.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: This year I attended a Blue Mountains call centre where staff expressed concern that the centre was closing. Staff in the Illawarra call centre were also concerned that that centre was closing. I was advised by one of the inspectors or commissioners who came to see me at that meeting that NSW Fire Brigades invested \$10 million in Fujitsu technology for a new fire computer-aided dispatch [CAD] system, but one of the stumbling blocks was that Treasury had not given an allocation for a new building to house the equipment. How is that issue being resolved?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The commissioner can add to this, but the computer aided dispatch system is something that New South Wales Fire Brigades is planning. It is a very important development in the long term. It will bring the dispatch of fire brigades up to the very latest technology. It is an example of the Government's commitment to continuing to improve the way in which we respond to emergencies. My understanding of this project at the moment is that we are not at the stage of developing a facility like that.

The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY: But you have invested in the technology.

Mr STEVE WHAN: There is a lot of work to go between starting the planning for the introduction of a system like that and rolling it out. The commissioner may wish to add something to that.

Mr MULLINS: Yes, we are looking at putting in place a new computer aided dispatch system, and that will include new telephony, new radio consoles, new mapping and computerised mapping. We will be going to the same platform that is used by the New South Wales Police and the Australian Capital Territory emergency services. My colleagues who are present today, Commissioner Kear and Commissioner Fitzsimmons, and I are on a steering committee. The systems will be used down the track for call taking. We will take calls for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and overflow calls for the State Emergency Service. We are all on the same platform so we need a more robust system and a more modern system.

In terms of closure of communications centres, there have been discussions with staff from day one—consultation. If centres do close, staff will probably go to fire stations in those areas and, I suggest, would be better utilised in that role because the new technologies will enable us to simplify some processes. It will not be so staff intensive. But that certainly has not been resolved. I think some of the things you were told by staff were not quite accurate. Treasury has funded the technology. We are looking at premises. For example, in Newcastle we are looking at moving into our zone office at Cooks Hill fire station. At Katoomba, we may or may not do that. At Wollongong, we may or may not do that.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I would like to discuss hazard reduction. I will ask a question about the volunteer services. Do you have any cross-training between the services? Are State Emergency Service volunteers trained in some of your work, and vice versa, or not?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: There is cross-training of sorts across all the agencies. Fire-specific training is all done to national competency standards between the Fire Brigades and the Rural Fire Service, and similarly with National Parks and the Forests NSW State forest resources. When it comes to the State Emergency Service we do bushfire awareness-type training, which gives them the familiarity and the safety aspects, and the

knowledge and understanding. It is not unusual to have the State Emergency Service, with its expertise in things like catering and logistics, to help us either in firefighting operations or, indeed, hazard reduction operations.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I take it that hazard reductions do not just employ the technique of burning, backburning, or whatever you want to call it. You use other physical methods—in other words, straight-out labouring, hard, hard work.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Yes, that is right. Hazard reduction can be both mechanical and/or burning. Obviously, when it comes to burning, we use only trained fire personnel involved in the burning.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I understand that. We have had the tragedy in Victoria and there has been a full royal commission inquiry about it. The report has been made available. I would assume that the Rural Fire Service, the New South Wales Fire Brigades and the State Emergency Service probably have taken the time to study the findings of that. Minister, do you foresee any changes to the way in which we handle hazard reduction paradigms in New South Wales, for example, as a result of the royal commission?

Mr STEVE WHAN: The Government will respond fully to all recommendations in the Victorian report and indicate which ones are relevant to New South Wales and which ones are not.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Good.

Mr STEVE WHAN: We are already ahead in a number of areas, but certainly the need to continue to increase the amount of hazard reduction we do is something that we have taken on board. We disagree with the royal commission in a couple of critical aspects in relation to hazard reduction. The major one is that they have decided that they would like to set a target of 5 per cent of public land to be hazard reduced. In New South Wales the Rural Fire Service and our people who deal with this believe that setting a hectare figure is not conducive to saving properties and lives. We need to target our hazard reduction in areas where we are going to save properties and lives. That may mean that you end up burning a lesser area, but you do it in a more strategic location.

It is very easy to burn hundreds and thousands of hectares simply by dropping incendiaries in low-populated areas, but that is not necessarily going to actually save lives and property. That is something which we focus on in New South Wales. I am interested in the point on hazard reduction burning. One of the really successful things that we have introduced in the last year is work crews who assist us with the preparation for hazard reduction burns. We have people we employ on temporary contracts—generally Rural Fire Service members, or probably all of them are Rural Fire Service members. Commissioner, would they be Rural Fire Service members?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Yes.

Mr STEVE WHAN: They are all Rural Fire Service members. They go out and do a lot of the preparation work. That means that the volunteers can achieve a lot more hazard reduction in their areas. There are some very positive developments happening there. We will be giving a full Government response to the report fairly soon.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Given that the Blue Mountains area is probably Sydney's equivalent of some of the areas that tragically burned in Victoria—in other words, a huge area of bush that is fairly heavily populated in areas—and given that I have heard reports from firefighters in that area that the estimated fuel load in some areas is up around 50 tonnes per hectare, particularly on the western Blue Mountains area going through from Katoomba right through to Mount Victoria, and given that we have had a pretty rainy winter season, Minister, what is your view, or the view of your experts, on the risk in the Blue Mountains this coming summer? Will you be doing anything different this year from what you have done in previous years?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will let the commissioner comment on his assessment of the risk this summer in the Blue Mountains, but we should point out that we have been undertaking a significant amount of hazard reduction work in the Blue Mountains. The Blue Mountains can be a challenging area because of the weather conditions in the area.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: And terrain.

Mr STEVE WHAN: And terrain, and so on. Obviously, you have to wait for appropriate days to be able to burn. Sometimes that is a fairly limited number of days. But I am advised that over the past four years, 704 hazard reduction works have been completed in the Blue Mountains, protecting more than 4,200 properties. The past year was a particularly successful year since we have been able to put in place those crews that I mentioned and the Assist Infirm Disabled and Elderly Residents program, which is a program that we have to assist people who are not able to do work around their own properties. I will ask the commissioner to add his comments on the Blue Mountains.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: The other thing I would add is in relation to the notion of around 50 tonnes per hectare. It is just a falsity. There is no truth to 50 tonnes per hectare.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I would not know.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I know that it is said anecdotally from time to time, unless someone is picking up a bag of wet fuel and weighing it, which is how you reach a score of 50 tonnes per hectare. It is fair to say that there would be areas of the Blue Mountains, as there would be elsewhere across the State, where there would be parts of the bush that have very high fuel loads. But in the typical forested environment like the Blue Mountains, you reach a state of equilibrium between decomposition and accumulation rates.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: They typically peter out at around about 15 to 25 tonnes per hectare, depending upon the conditions and bark types and that sort of thing around the forest. Having said that, coincidentally, as soon as I can knock off here, I am heading to the Blue Mountains tonight to meet with all the senior volunteers from the Blue Mountains because there is some misinformation running around. The statistics I have looked at only this week show that they have at least 30 burns already planned ready to go. All the environmental checks are clear. It is fundamentally about whether there is opportunity in the Blue Mountains, with the altitude, the moisture retention, in particular the rainfall we have had in the past 12 months—that is the biggest impediment—and that topography and access issue that you spoke about as well, which can be challenging.

I will be meeting with them this afternoon to find out what we can do. The Minister mentioned that the Blue Mountains is one of the trial areas where we have put into effect mitigation crews. It has demonstrated that where we put in mitigation crews and where we have deployed them over the last few years, we actually see up to a 25 per cent increase in the effective delivery of hazard reduction because they are doing a lot of the mechanical preparation work that we would otherwise be relying on volunteers to do.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Could I ask you to very quickly describe what that is?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: What a mitigation crew is?

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: What do you do?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: To give you an idea, in the past months mitigation crews have done in the order of 1,200 kilometres of fire line preparation work.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: So it is raking and cropping stuff?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: Breaking lines, operating small machinery such as trittraters and those sorts of things, to get in and around the properties, and cleaning up trail breaks and vantage lines to allow hazard reduction to be deployed, contained and managed.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Hence my question about cross training and the use of SES volunteers. When they are not doing fire work, could SES volunteers be used for that sort of work, or are they not trained properly?

Mr FITZSIMMONS: We would not normally engage the SES people to do that physical work. They normally come in when we are doing the hazard reductions to assist in the other areas of work that they specialise in.

Mr STEVE WHAN: What you will find in a lot of communities is that people are members of both organisations.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I understand that.

Mr STEVE WHAN: So you get a bit of crossover there.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: You made the statement that the New South Wales Government does not necessarily believe in one size fits all. How much have you done per hectare? Can you give us an idea of what the hazard reduction program is for the current fire season in terms of hectares?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will pass on to the commissioner. But, again, in terms of targets, obviously we will be looking at targets for national parks. We try to work in each area locally. Every area has plans for the areas that they want to hazard reduce.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Who determines the plans?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Our bushfire committees in each area. We would not have a target in terms of number of hectares; we would have a target in terms of the number of projects we wanted to do, the works we wanted to do. But I will pass to the commissioner again.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: Before we do that, given what has occurred in Victoria, does the New South Wales Government have any plans to increase legislatively the powers of the rural fire commissioner in determining what has to be done and when?

Mr STEVE WHAN: No. We are well ahead of Victoria; we already have the powers. The commissioner has the capacity to make directions. In some respects in terms of command and control models, Victoria is playing catch-up a bit after the royal commission. If you are interested, I am sure the commissioner could give you a more detailed briefing about some of our hazard reduction work.

The Hon. ROBERT BROWN: I would be interested, but not here.

CHAIR: In the past I understand that when visiting an incident area people would get a message if their building address is in that area, a text message about an emergency—that type of thing. Have we seen any change in technology where people with a mobile phone who are in an area can get that type of warning message?

Mr STEVE WHAN: That is the next stage of the SMS messaging system. It would be very desirable, of course. There have been some technical difficulties with doing that. I understand that Telstra, which is the contractor, has been working on that. Mr Tannos might have more information on exactly where it is up to.

Mr TANNOS: As recently as last week the Federal Attorney-General put out a media release saying that they were funding the move towards a location-based national emergency warning system, telephony system. At the moment it is based on billing address. The telcos are saying that they are very close to having that technology available. In discussions that I had with members of the National Emergency Management Committee only yesterday I was told that the expectation is that they would like to have it in by the end of the year, but that is all but one of the telcos. There is some ongoing work; work is currently underway.

CHAIR: In November 2009 the Parliament passed legislation that gave responsibility for tsunamis to the SES as the SES had already formulated the New South Wales tsunami plan. What parts of the budget allocation have been provided to acknowledge this new responsibility, particularly in relation to operational readiness and training?

Mr STEVE WHAN: I will ask Commissioner Kear to add to this, but in the last budget the State Government made a substantial increase in allocations to the SES particularly for staff to assist with volunteer training. In part, that was recognition of the increased role that the SES has with tsunamis. It was also in recognition of the fact that the predictions of climate change are also accompanied by predictions of a lot more storm events over the years to come, and we need our SES to be well prepared for that.

Mr KEAR: The preparation of the New South Wales SES in regard to tsunami planning and education uses the same groups of people who do planning for storm and flood. We received additional resources from the Government in regard to our planning capability, our operational management capability and our training capability across the regions. Those staff will be used not only for additional training along the coast in regards to tsunamis but across the State in regard to other hazards that the New South Wales SES looks after. We have also done a number of workshops up and down coastal communities in regard to preparing not only local government but other stakeholders within those areas to understand the impacts of tsunamis in their areas. So those extra resources and the resources we already had have been applied to those workshops.

CHAIR: I am thinking mainly of summer. How do the arson or suspected arson rates compare with recent years? What strategies, if any, have impacted on fires suspected to be the result of arson?

Mr STEVE WHAN: Our fire agencies are involved with a task force that works with the police, but the police are obviously the primary response to arson and they have programs specially available. One of the fire commissioners might like to add to that.

Mr FITZSIMMONS: I can add to that. We have a multi-agency task force in New South Wales that looks at deliberately lit fires and takes a particularly proactive stance on militating against deliberately lit fires and making sure we have a comprehensive and integrated approach to investigating cause and origin and providing information to police to follow up with any investigation. It is also the case that we have had a doubling of on-the-spot fines for bushfire offences, such as lighting under inappropriate conditions. We deploy a number of unique strategies to target different areas to reduce the probability of arson. We combine with local government, local land management agencies and community interest groups to have much greater levels of surveillance and impede people accessing bushland areas to start fires.

We are also part of a national body that is focusing on the reduction of deliberately lit fires across the country, which is making sure that police agencies and fire agencies in the relative jurisdictions across Australia share and collaborate on strategies and initiatives. It is also about sharing data on people of interest and other matters to make sure that we can optimise our level of awareness and prevention in relation to deliberately lit fires. By way of a related measure, this year for the first time the Rural Fire Service has engaged under secondment a dedicated police officer to work with the Rural Fire Service for at least 12 months, with a view to extending that. He will focus on improving and refining that interrelationship and a sharing of information and data around suspicious fires and fire ignitions.

It is also about embedding training and awareness among senior members of the organisation, volunteers and salaried officers alike, in relation to what to look for, what to pick up at scenes, how to manage scene preservation, and all those sorts of things. So we are looking at a multi-faceted approach between the agencies with police and with our colleagues across Australia to make sure that we are deploying the best strategies available to militate against deliberately lit fires.

CHAIR: Looking at NSW Fire Brigades, the projected percentage for confining a structure fire is, I understand, 66.5 per cent, which is no change from last year. What activities and changes in budget allocations will be undertaken to improve on this figure? Would improvements to this aspect of firefighting also help to improve the percentage of property that can be saved per fire incident?

Mr MULLINS: Some of our other key performance indicators, for example, average dollar lost per fire is staying stable or reducing. Now the confinement to room of origin is not going in the direction in which we would like, and some response times are staying fairly stable, but due to traffic congestion and other factors, a little bit longer than we would like but overall the percentage of property saved is going up. We are addressing that in a number of different ways. We are restructuring our education and training area. We are actually a world leader in what they call compartment fire behaviour training. When I was a young firefighter we were taught fire science. I will not go into a long explanation but when competency based training came in that went. Working with the Swedish we have been able to develop a very advanced training program with Queensland Fire and Rescue Service. Some of the main experts in that area are in Queensland and New South Wales.

We have trained all firefighters in level one CFBT. We are rolling out level two training. New technologies such as compressed air foam systems. There is a lot of research and development on how to knock down fires faster, high-pressure hose lines, positive pressure ventilation, so pushing heat and smoke out of buildings using motorised fans and lots of research and development going on about how we can contain fires a

lot faster, keeping firefighters safe. There has been a big allocation this year for personal protective equipment. Firefighters' uniforms will protect them a lot better than they have in the past. I hope that answers your question.

CHAIR: The 2008-09 annual reported a 27.5 per cent increase in NSW Fire Brigades responding to non-fire rescues. What is the breakdown of types of rescue within that category? Does that significant increase have any funding and resource implications for the other services provided by the NSW Fire Brigades?

Mr MULLINS: It is a growth area of the fire brigades' work and it reflects the diverse nature of a firefighter's job these days. Firefighters do not know what they are going to face when they go to work, and that has been a major challenge to us in terms of training. The equipment carried on a fire engine these days covers basic life support. There are automatic external defibrillators, rescue equipment, resuscitators, breathing apparatus and chemical equipment. In terms of resourcing full-time fire stations, there is very little implication whatsoever in terms of funding because fire engines go to serious accidents where there is an extrication for fire protection and they just so happen to carry rescue equipment as well and sufficient crew to carry out both tasks.

In country areas there can be some very minor budget implications because we are sometimes responding into areas where the Rural Fire Service would normally provide fire protection. We are responding in a rescue role but when we respond within the town limits we would be going there anyway so there is very minor resource implications. So we have been able to assume a greater role in rescue at very low marginal cost.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.
