

EVIDENCE TAKEN BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5

INQUIRY INTO THE NEW SOUTH WALES RURAL FIRE SERVICE

**At Lismore and District Workers' Club
Lismore**

On Wednesday, 8 March 2000

The Committee met at 9.00 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R. S. L. Jones (Chairman)

The Hon. R. T. M. Bull
The Hon. R. D. Dyer
The Hon. J. R. Johnson

The Hon. A. B. Kelly
The Hon. C. J. S. Lynn
The Hon. D. E. Oldfield

CHAIR: I welcome the media and members of the public to this hearing of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 for its inquiry into the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

Members of the media, I advise that under Standing Order 252 of the Legislative Council evidence given before the Committee and any documents presented to the Committee that have not yet been tabled in Parliament may not, except with the permission of the Parliament be published by any member of such Committee or by any other person. Copies of guidelines governing broadcast of the proceedings are available from the table by the door.

Members of the public, I wish to advise you that Committees are regarded as an extension of the Legislative Council, governed for the most part in their proceedings by the same rules as those which prevail in the House.

While the Committee welcomes members of the public to view these proceedings, you should observe the same courtesies as are expected of the public attending when the House is sitting.

Members of the audience are required to refrain from any interruptions to the proceedings as a courtesy to the Legislative Council, particularly any injection or any demonstration of support or dissent in relation to these proceedings.

RAYMOND JOHN COLLYER, Fire Control Officer, of Wyrallah Road, East Lismore, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr COLLYER: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr COLLYER: I am.

CHAIR: Would you like to make a formal statement?

Mr COLLYER: Not really, no.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: In your submission you talked about the executive management. You said that the finance section of head office is in dire need of a revamp. You might just like to expand on that.

Mr COLLYER: I will make comments here that will be specific to Lismore and my experience, so I do not profess to speak for the whole service. I just think that the claims made by local government councils should be honoured in a quicker manner than they are. I think it is unreasonable that local government should wait excessive periods for reimbursement of claims submitted through the Rural Fire Fighters Fund. That is the main reason there.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: There seem to be three main issues in this inquiry, which I would like you to address singularly. Firstly, there is quite a body of opinion that the Rural Fire Service should be decentralised not only from Rosehill command but also decentralised into regions.

The second issue is the dual responsibility to both the council and Rosehill of FCOs.

The third issue that appears to be creating some tension appears to be in the area of training, whether training should be compulsory or voluntary and at what level there should be different rates. I just wonder whether you might like to comment on those three issues?

Mr COLLYER: The decentralisation one: I am quite happy at this stage for the head office to remain at Rosehill. We do operate through regions, which seem to work quite well. There is a command structure, and that goes back down through councils. I am quite happy with the way that works at this stage.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Just before you go on, do you believe that there is intervention at the appropriate times? Obviously, if there is a section 44 you would need Rosehill to be involved, but do you believe that as a local FCO you are in control until such time? Would you just elaborate a bit on that?

Mr COLLYER: I believe that the local authority is the one that makes those decisions. Previously there could have been intervention on that sort of scale, but at this stage the local authority, which is the local FCO, is in complete control until he considers that the resources he has got are not adequate to cover what we are looking at, what fire or what emergency we are looking at. So I feel that the FCO is certainly in control there, in conjunction with region. So the command structure is there, and it works.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: What about the dual reporting roles?

Mr COLLYER: That presents problems. I have no problems with that. I think that eventually FCOs should answer to the one master. I do not ever think that you just leave local government out of it, but I think the dual accountability has got problems because operationally we answer to the commissioner and administratively to local government and the general manager. So that does create undue problems to FCOs.

Obviously, once again, I have a great working relationship with Lismore but it does not necessarily mean that that is the same throughout the State.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Who do you answer to at the council?

Mr COLLYER: I answer to the Group Manager City Works, Mr Bill Moorehouse. That is my immediate superior, and from there if anything goes further, but Bill is my main contact at Lismore council.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Do you get any interference?

Mr COLLYER: No, I have a great working relationship with Lismore council. As I say, what I speak of here is me specific and if I generalise I speak specifically of Lismore.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You did say that it is either one or the other. What is your preference?

Mr COLLYER: I think the department, the Rural Fire Service. There will need to be probably legislative changes and all the rest before that can happen, but I think, eventually, the FCOs should be accountable directly to the department.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Does that cut you out of having some input locally. Obviously you are going to have some input locally, but does that cut you out of local decision-making processes, do you believe?

Mr COLLYER: I do not think it can. There has to be some sort of secondment back to that local government area because we do work within the parameters of the local government district of this State. So you cannot walk away from that completely. There has to be accountability at the top department and then there has got to be a very close working relationship with local government.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So you believe the current system with some modifications?

Mr COLLYER: I think with modifications, yes. It makes it difficult and can create problems in the day-to-day administration if there is not that close working relationship with the general manager. That is all I can say there. If you have a good working relationship with local government, everything is fine.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: The third issue I spoke of is training. I do not know how your brigade members and volunteers feel about training, but you might just like to elaborate on that.

Mr COLLYER: Well, you picked my favourite subject, actually. I have been in other organisations involved with training and since my involvement for 25 years with the Rural Fire Service in training.

As I have said in my submission, I feel training is essential at all levels. I think it is unfair to seasoned, untrained people to do the job, because it just places them and their colleagues in danger.

The Rural Fire Service certainly has now gone to competency-based training, so the old perennials about, "I have been doing this for 30 years," or whatever always create the problems that people perceive they are being forced to do training.

If someone can do a job, as we use the vernacular, it is a tick and flick. If someone can demonstrate competencies, they are there. So this perception that you have to go and sit through a formal class is false. It is there for someone to demonstrate his competencies and they are considered to be trained.

We do chainsaw the whole works and jerks of all the training and on every course in chainsaws specifically, because that is considered specialist training. The individuals come there and are asked for their experience and often they say, "I have been doing this for 20 years or 30 years." On not one course that we have done has an individual who has said that at the beginning come and said, "I have learnt nothing," or "I have got nothing out of this course." So, to me, the whole gamut of training is essential.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Do you feel it should be compulsory?

Mr COLLYER: Well, compulsory is a strong word. I would suggest that an active firefighter, if you are familiar with the term active fire fighter, and anyone who is actually participating on the fire line, should up to a standard.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: And how do your members feel about training? Are they enthusiastic?

Mr COLLYER: Speaking specifically Lismore, overwhelmed. I have been here five years, going on six years, and we cannot supply enough from basic fire fighter all the way through. I would stand by my record on training in Lismore. The volunteers embrace it enthusiastically and we never have a shortage of people wanting to do courses.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: What about the volunteers? Have your numbers stayed static or are they increasing or declining?

Mr COLLYER: That is a good question, because when you are saying numbers, the active fire fighters remain. The people who join the brigade for whatever reason might do a course, and you have 20 people or 25 people on a basic firefighter course. In two years time there might be still 10 of those active. A lot of people come and join brigades or do that sort of training for their own benefit, and we encourage that.

The active membership in Lismore is remaining fairly static, but I think in a lot of smaller country towns, and Lismore is certainly a major regional centre, the younger blokes who used to stay on the farm have nothing to keep them there, so they are moving on irrespective. It has got nothing to do with the Rural Fire Service. I think we are all finding it difficult, but I think the whole volunteer ethos in Australia has changed. Years ago people used to join or whatever. I would suggest that Apex, Lions, the whole lot of those, are suffering the same problem.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: The landholders are still continuing on as members?

Mr COLLYER: Yes, and we certainly encourage them.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Superintendent Collyer, in your submission you make reference to the Sydney-based councils assisting the country councils by providing near new units on a regular basis. That is the expression you used. Could you please explain to the Committee how that system works on a practical day-to-day basis?

Mr COLLYER: The cost of new appliance is extremely high, and there are obviously councils that cannot afford the cost of new appliances. I think it has been a policy now for quite a few years that the more affluent councils in Sydney buy a new appliance, keep it for two or three years and get a new appliance. That second-hand appliance becomes available at a very reduced cost to councils like Lismore or wherever else, and that is the system that is working great.

When I say near new, I am talking of putting three-year-old or four-year-old vehicles, which are practically brand new in anyone's books, out into the field at a 50 per cent reduction in the initial cost. In that way the affluent councils are assisting the smaller councils to get pretty brand new vehicles out in the field.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: You are saying that in a practical sense that system works quite well?

Mr COLLYER: I think it works fantastically, yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Could I ask you what you mean by, to quote your words, brigades are being equipped to the level they wish to perform? Are you advocating that the current annual bidding system is the most appropriate given the diversity of brigade responsibility throughout the State?

Mr COLLYER: The bid system as it is now, I feel could be revised, I suppose. That bid system works on - once again I will speak for Lismore. We go through a process of a needs analysis.

Each brigade through their group officers tells us what they need. At the end of the day it is still the FCO who makes the bid for equipment by the need to which they perform.

There are brigades that possibly never see a structure fire; there are brigades that deal with a multitude of vehicle accidents and all that. So you cannot have every brigade equipped to the same level, because it is a waste of resources.

Brigades that deal mostly with grass and bushfire fires are equipped to that level, and the person who best knows that is the FCO and the group officer. The more busy brigades are, through their FCO's knowledge, are given better gear and more gear.

CHAIR: How much training do you do for structure fires?

Mr COLLYER: We give our firefighters what we call basic, that is a 16 to 20-odd-hour course. Then after probably 12 months of experience within the system we have a village firefighter course, and that is over probably 20 to 30 hours. At the end of that they are equipped to deal with the average normal run of the mill if there is any such thing structure-type fire.

CHAIR: One person has said to me that he believes that the Rural Fire Service is being used as free labour instead of the New South Wales Fire Brigades in certain areas. How do you feel about that?

Mr COLLYER: I think that is a pretty sweeping statement. You could accuse every volunteer organisation of being used as free labour. The simple fact of the matter is that New South Wales Fire Brigades cannot possibly look after the 98 per cent of the State that the Rural Fire Service looks after.

The brigades in the country areas are there on the spot. If owners out in the bush relied on New South Wales Fire Brigades to respond to the 30 kilometres, 40 kilometres or whatever it is to get to a structure fire it would be ridiculous. I do not think that is a fair statement.

CHAIR: You were at the Casino meeting?

Mr COLLYER: I was.

CHAIR: Some people who were organising there said there was intimidation by officers in uniform. Can you tell me your view of that meeting and how it went?

Mr COLLYER: I think that particular meeting at Casino was organised by individuals who came there. There was no agenda presented. The meeting was called to order and the opening statement of the chairman was, "Who has any complaints?" I think that was the opening statement of the chairman at the time.

There was silence from the floor and then the question was posed again, "Surely there must be someone with complaints". That did not set the mood of the meeting. There was certainly no intimidation. In my opinion people spoke on both sides. The individuals who supported the RFS spoke. There was no intimidation, I feel, and I did move the motion at the end that was eventually passed.

CHAIR: Could you elaborate on your dissatisfaction over the reimbursement from head office?

Mr COLLYER: What is the question again?

CHAIR: Would you elaborate on your concern about the slow reimbursement from head office?

Mr COLLYER: I alluded to that earlier. There is a reimbursement system through the Rural Fire Fighters Fund, where councils get equipment through the catalogue, and other items are classed as additional items which council pays and seeks reimbursement. I feel that once a claim is submitted to head office it should be a normal process. If it is a legitimate claim and properly constituted and put together, it should be honoured within 30 days. That does not necessarily happen at this stage.

CHAIR: This is causing problems, is it?

Mr COLLYER: I feel it is. It is placing an unnecessary burden on councils who are carrying debts for too long.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: So you are not talking about the periodical reimbursements?

Mr COLLYER: No, I am talking about additional items like if you build a tanker locally, if the claim is put together properly and submitted in the correct manner and the claim is legitimate, I do not think there should be any reason why that should not be paid within 30 days.

CHAIR: You say in your submission that tanker trailers and other inadequate apparatus seem to be wanted by certain individuals and it is a dangerous and backward step. Some people have said that they want these tanker trailers because they are useful in stopping small fires and are mobile. Can you explain why you feel they are dangerous?

Mr COLLYER: In my previous life I have been a truck driver and I drove quite a few thousand miles per annum on the road and I saw people towing trailers and caravans. That is okay on the road. They cannot back them.

The average person has no perception of how to reverse an articulated piece of equipment such as a tanker trailer. You add the adrenalin flow of a fire or up a narrow strip and that particular piece of apparatus becomes a death trap. So far as I am concerned they might be okay out in the flatter country out west, but in Lismore or in hilly or undulating country there is no place for tanker trailers. I think they are a death trap.

CHAIR: Are you aware of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service Association option C where they are proposing State Government employment of youth, for example, with the local management council's backup?

Mr COLLYER: I am not au fait completely but I am aware of the four options that have been put together, yes.

CHAIR: You would not know whether you would support personally option C?

Mr COLLYER: Not without studying it a bit further, no.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Comment in regard to the command patrol arrangements with the fire control officers in your submission you said that you believe they should be employed by the Rural Fire Service and seconded to local councils to administer brigades within the district. I read in other submissions a proposal that they be under the operational and administrative command of the local council but revert to operational control when it gets to section 44.

I should have prefaced that question by there is a perception in a lot of the submissions that they are losing local control, that it is a faceless far-off bureaucracy, and the fire control officer is their local link with that. There seems to be - it is a contentious issue but there seems to be a strong view that --

Mr COLLYER: As I said before, I do not feel the local FCO is losing control. He is in complete control of everything until it gets to a stage where he is requiring outside assistance. It is his ball game. It is his castle as far as that goes until he perceives that it is out of his control.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Can you understand the perception, probably in more remote areas, that people would have that this person is taking instructions from somebody far away rather than from the local - being part of the local community, if you like?

Mr COLLYER: Once again, if the FCO is in control, there should be no perception that someone far away is doing it. If the FCO is in contact with his brigades, there should be no perception of that until it actually happens and I suggest there would be a group officer system and a bushfire management committee that would certainly be aware that things are getting out of control and other resources are going to be required. It does not happen where someone comes along and says, "Here I am, stand aside", so at all times the FCO is in complete control. He is the operational person in charge of his district.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: I think the feeling that Mr Lynn is speaking about might have been brought about by the fact that the current Act has a specific clause in it that councillors could not be deputy fire control officers. What used to happen quite often, councillors were and they had a bit of hands-on control.

Mr COLLYER: I think it is a good thing that councils are not in that because there could be a conflict of interest somewhere. I think it is a good thing that the Act says that current councillors cannot be FCOs.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: And do you think that that led to the perception Mr Lynn was talking about?

Mr COLLYER: It may have. As I said, I am speaking specifically Lismore and I have not had much to do with west of the range and I know a lot of the problems that are perceived to be the problems are from west of the range. I feel the FCO is in complete control.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: What do you think then is the root cause of that area which seems to be a contentious area?

Mr COLLYER: I do not really know at this stage. As I said, I speak for Lismore and I know what I do here. I cannot speak for the way other FCO's operate and each individual operates in his own way. There are certain things that other guys do that I do not do and vice versa, so it could be a local issue of those areas that have got that problem and have to sort that out themselves, I suggest.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: In another submission there is a feeling that with the term you used earlier on, active firefighter as opposed to volunteer firefighter, that there is a hijacking of the volunteer ethos, if you like, that you want to be more professional and that that term "active firefighter" is taking over from volunteer. Do you have any comment on that?

Mr COLLYER: Well, we have addressed that exact problem with the term, "active firefighter" and it was a concern expressed by one of the brigades and we have tried to clarify the matter that, you know, once you are a member of the service there is no leaving you out or hijacking. I feel that the need to have that professional attitude with the things we are doing today is important.

The term, "active firefighter" in my terminology is someone who participates on a regular basis on brigade activities, certainly undergoes training and is conversant with exactly what is going on today, not 10 years ago, not five years ago.

The person who was in the system five years ago who may not have been to a meeting in that time but considers themselves an active firefighter I think are having themselves on. They are not current. Things have changed dramatically. They probably do not even know how to start the modern-type pumps.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Would the term, "active volunteer" be more neutral?

Mr COLLYER: Use the term you wish, active volunteer, active firefighter. Active member I use as against a member and then you go down to an associate member. An associate member can be any one who joins the brigade or just to be there, to lend assistance when required.

I often get the term thrown to me that a certain individual is a member and you ask the captain, "Is he a current or an active member?" and the captain says, "He does not come to meetings but he is there when I call him". I put to you that that is not a safe way to run a fire service. We want people who are trained, up to date, there and know what they are doing at all times.

CHAIR: Can you recommend any improvements to the current tankers you have? Are there any things that you feel are wrong with them or inadequate?

Mr COLLYER: All the tankers? No, that problem has been addressed fairly adequate in recent times. There is local builds and Lismore certainly participated in a local contractor building our vehicles out at Yamba. The builds are there and the tankers are designed to the specific requirements of Lismore. That is an individual choice on what you want but I think there is enough local input now with local builds that you can get a tanker designed and do the job fairly well.

CHAIR: What about protective clothing?

Mr COLLYER: I would suggest it is probably up there with the best, the gear that we have got now. You have the overalls, the full gamut of protective gear. Our blokes are pretty well protected. Once again that goes back to the those brigades that need that are equipped with it.

CHAIR: One person said that the female equipment is not suitable for the female form, for example.

Mr COLLYER: I would suggest for most of our lady firefighters, the two-piece is quite adequate for the particular purposes that they need, as against overalls.

CHAIR: There is one submission that says they feel that country members are not adequately represented on the Rural Fire Service Association. Do you have any view about that?

Mr COLLYER: The RFSA is at all of our meetings here. The RFSA is open to all members and, once again, the people who decide to become members of the RFSA are encouraged. We supply the delegates with vehicles to go to regional meetings. Once again, you cannot force people to join

these things. It is open to membership. I would suggest that the people who want to join are quite free and if they do not want to join it is their own choice.

CHAIR: You mentioned in your submission that you have seen the service evolve into a fire service that the public of New South Wales can be proud of. You also said we could remain a service of individual brigades with no formal structure and inadequate training. Do you think if the service was divided into two divisions, one rural and one urban, as has been suggested by some people, that it would see a return to that sort of service?

Mr COLLYER: I do not want to go back 15 years where we were. I think where we are now is where we should be. Things have evolved and it has evolved through necessity. It is a bit like other organisations and I have been involved with quite a few, where the evolution of the RFS has come about by the need of people moving from the city areas and the areas of Lismore and adjoining councils have certainly got those sort of things where people expected to see a fire tanker role up to the door the minute they put the phone down.

If we remained where we were 10 or 15 years ago we could not supply that service. At this stage I am quite happy with the two services. I think we have evolved into something that is an asset to the State of New South Wales. I am very proud to be part of that, and I do not want to go back 10 years. I think we just keep going forward.

CHAIR: If you were employed directly by the RFS, would you want to change your relationship with the council?

Mr COLLYER: I hope not because it is essential that we maintain the close working relationship with council in the sense that if there is a need for equipment, bulldozers, graders, all that sort of heavy earth-moving equipment in a fire, there should not be any great hassles involved with not having a working relationship with the individual who is going to authorise that from council. I would hope that it would not change that relationship. To answer your request, I do not really know. It would come back to the individual, I would suggest.

CHAIR: Do you think the volunteers would react differently if you were employed centrally as opposed to being employed locally?

Mr COLLYER: My suggestion to that would be that I do not think the volunteers care who leads them so long as they are well led, well trained and given good direction. I do not think it really matters where the individual FCO sits and who pays his wages. If he is doing his job as a leader, the volunteers, I would suggest, in my opinion, would not really care where he sat.

CHAIR: One of the problems that the Committee has heard is that the service is centrally based, city based, NSW - Newcastle, Sydney, Wollongong-based?

Mr COLLYER: Yes.

CHAIR: And there is not enough country input. So you do not feel that?

Mr COLLYER: I attended a State training committee meeting in Sydney on Monday, so that answers that. I am from the northern region, a delegate to the RFS training committee, and I was there with 22 other delegates from all over the State of New South Wales representing their districts. You cannot get better than that.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Just to go back to the active membership versus other members, you alluded to a financial contribution, I think, at some stage. How do you classify people as being members? Do they make some contribution?

Mr COLLYER: That is, once again, an individual thing. Some brigades charge a membership token dollar, or whatever. Some use that as their fundraising, a \$5 membership. That is an individual brigade thing. A member is someone who comes along and by either dint of paying a dollar or turning up to meetings, applies - we have an application form - and becomes a member. It is like joining the Lions Club, I suppose. Someone moves and seconds and you are a member.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: So, therefore, you have got then the group of active members, who are trained?

Mr COLLYER: I call it the A Team, I think, in my submission, yes.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Is it not true that the other volunteers, who might come along and run the communications centre or look after meals or supplies and so forth, are equally as important?

Mr COLLYER: Of course, yes. There is no suggestion that they are not equally as important, but those same people who just want to be the radio operator, you would offer them basic training to give them a bit of an idea. If you are out on the fire line and they are saying they want a Macleod tool or they want something here, I would suggest that the person on the radio should at least have the knowledge of what the hell a Macleod tool is. So I would suggest basic training would be there. But, no, they are equally as important. No-one is less important in the service, but there has got to be a differentiation of roles.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You say you do some local builds yourself?

Mr COLLYER: Yes.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: How is the cost structure compared with getting them from Sydney?

Mr COLLYER: It is on a par.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: And you have not experienced any problems? None of the brigades try to build them themselves, do they?

Mr COLLYER: That might have been the go 30 years ago. I think it was?

Mr COLLYER: I think there are some instances where they have had them for three or four years and the council cannot claim the money back.

Mr COLLYER: I am aware of the one you are talking about. There are Roads and Traffic Authority regulations and everything now. No, if you start building them yourself, you are asking for trouble.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You probably may not know a lot about the question I am going to ask you. It is more to do with the funding. There have been some complaints about the way it is funded and it has been said that perhaps contributions should not come from councils and the insurance companies but there should be some sort of a general levy because there is the suggestion

that a lot of people do not insure their rural properties. Have you got any handle or gut feeling as to what sort of percentage of rural properties might have fire insurance cover?

Mr COLLYER: I do not, but I think there are people who are more conversant with that than I. But, yes, I am aware that the perception is that a percentage of people pay their rural insurance and contribute through their levies and their neighbour does not pay insurance and gets the same service.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Expects you guys to turn up.

Mr COLLYER: Expects the same thing. It was suggested that we go and ask them are they insured and if they are not we do not put their fire out.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: The problem with that of course is that the fire starts in their place and crosses the border into the next property?

Mr COLLYER: I am not aware of those figures but I am aware of what you say and some levy on every property - I do not know. That would be certainly a government decision on that one.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: I have one more question. It is in regard to a submission we had at the meeting in Casino. It says in the submission:

The meeting was surprisingly well attended with about 80 people in total and of whom about 60 were by appearances and action an organised RFS contingent, with the overwhelming majority of them in uniform. The remaining 20 or so constituted the public and about five of these were volunteers in uniform.

Is it normal practice for you to go to those sorts of things in uniform?

Mr COLLYER: I am glad you brought that point up, because I will shoot that one down immediately. The majority of people who were at that meeting - there were certainly salaried staff, and to answer your question, it is a bit like this meeting here. If it is in the interests of an organisation I serve, it is my decision whether I go or not.

The majority of people there might have been in uniform but they were volunteers, and there were two or three people from my service who are volunteers who give their time and wear a uniform. They were not salaried staff, so to say it was an orchestrated thing on RFS staff, that is wrong. It was not. I know that three or four people of mine were there, and they are purely volunteers, but the comment was made "All the white shirts", and that seems to be the derogatory term. But they were volunteers. And there were salaried staff there. Of course there were.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: So it is normal practice if you go to a meeting like that to wear uniforms?

Mr COLLYER: Well, it concerned our organisation, our future. Yes, I feel that if someone is calling a meeting saying that there are all these problems within the service, it is normal. I would certainly attend, yes. If someone is bagging your industry you are not going to sit back and say, "We will do nothing about it."

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Could you explain why you believe that the lessons of 1994 for the rural areas were not heeded and that the same mistakes were repeated in 1997 at Coonabarabran with the under-utilisation of resources?

Mr COLLYER: Well, in 1994 I think it was generally accepted that a lot of local people were not used. I was at Coonabarabran in 1997, and I think the same happened out there. Once again, I do not know. I cannot answer why that did not happen. But as I have said on previous occasions, it is up to the FCO within his area to fully utilise his own resources. Why that did not happen, I do not know. It would be the decision of the individual FCO at the time.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: With regard to the question of fire control officers' accountability, how do you think the system being advocated by you could work if the assets of the brigades were vested in local government?

Mr COLLYER: Well, they are vested in local government now. All the equipment that is supplied by the RFS is vested in local government, which maintains and keeps that gear in operational readiness.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: If the Rural Fire Service ran the operation totally, what would you do with the assets? Would they still stay in the control of local government?

Mr COLLYER: That is to be decided by brains bigger than mine. I do not know.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: We are in trouble.

Mr COLLYER: I have not sat down and worked the semantics of that out. All I think is that it is the same as a lot of other concepts being mooted. I am paid to do a job. At the last count, there were 24 hours in a day, and I am running out of them. So I cannot do any more.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Obviously we want feedback from people like you who are at the coalface, so to speak, and it is important that we can get some quality feedback. You have said that someone else is going to decide. We want people like you to decide these sorts of issues.

There is a proposal that has been taken from the association regarding the setting up of local management councils to own the assets and look after the assets on behalf of the group. We need quality feedback from people like you on these particular proposals rather than leaving it to someone at Rosehill to decide.

Mr COLLYER: I grant that, but for me to give you an answer now I think is a bit unfair. I would suggest if you wanted that you would certainly get a group of people to sit in and workshop the thing out and come out with the answer. Once again, I suggest you have to go through the districts so that at the end of the day the decision is going to be the best for everybody.

It is obvious that no matter what decisions are made in this service, or any service, you are not going to please everybody. That is an impossibility. I think you guys know that as well as anybody.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: We do.

CHAIR: We have heard various comments and criticisms of the service and you are probably aware of those. Do any of those have validity in your view? Those criticisms actually caused this inquiry to happen. You said in your submission that you cannot for the life of you imagine why we are having this inquiry.

Mr COLLYER: That is exactly right. If we go back to the Casino meeting, which was called because of the newspaper articles that all these troubles are out there and the system was falling apart

and volunteers were leaving in droves, to answer your question, that is why I attended because I felt that those statements were false and I am not going to sit back and let those sorts of things be printed which I think are wrong. You have got to look at where it has come from.

CHAIR: Where has it come from, in your view?

Mr COLLYER: Certainly from the northern region. I speak, I think, quite openly on this one. The northern region is from Kempsey to the border out to Tenterfield. I would suggest that it is quite harmonious here. There are little problems, and I would be kidding myself to say there is not. I would suggest that that is the same with any organisation.

You have to ask the question: why on earth has this Rural Fire Service been and is where it is today since 1947 when we are talking about volunteers? There are bloody paid organisations out there that cannot keep a structure together let alone 60,000-odd volunteers for that long. So we have to be doing something right somewhere along the line.

If there are problems, sort it out at a local level. If there is a problem out there, what is it, try to work it out. The tanker trailer one is one. Is that earth shattering that a couple of individuals want a tanker trailer on their private property? I do not think it warrants an inquiry.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: There seems to be two views, that east of the divide is well resourced and west of the divide there is a perception or perhaps it is based on reality, that it is not well resourced. Do you feel if there was some sort of a separation or a separation of the command, one that obviously works well for you east of the divide and another one that catered more for the situation that exists west of the divide, that would do anything to resolve the issue?

Mr COLLYER: The dreaded piece of mountain up the middle, yes. To answer your question, no, I do not think we should be divided. We are one service. If we start doing that you will have divisions immediately. You will have three fire services. There could be, but I put it to you that the population on the eastern side of the range is whatever percentage of the State.

On the western side different firefighting tactics are required and there are vast areas of open land. Probably most of the assets of the State park-wise and all that are on the eastern side so, no, I do not think there should be a division in command and control. It should all be a central control run through regions as it is now and that is the way I feel it should continue.

(The witness withdrew)

IAN KEITH RODGERS, Chair of the Northern Region Conference of the Rural Fire Service Association, Davis Road, Green Pigeon, Box 206, Kyogle, and

TERENCE KITCHING, Fire Control Officer and Honorary Secretary, Castlereagh Branch of the Salaried Officers Committee, 12 Albert Street, Inverell, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Mr Rogers, did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr RODGERS: Yes, I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr RODGERS: Yes, I am.

CHAIR: Mr Kitching, did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr KITCHING: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr KITCHING: I am.

CHAIR: Would either of you care to make an opening statement?

Mr KITCHING: I wish to indicate to the Committee that we are here to present the RFSA submission to this inquiry and to provide a rural perspective, for want of another term, on that submission.

If possible I would also like in a moment to submit something in evidence. It is actually a newspaper article and with the Committee's permission, I would like to read three small parts from an article.

CHAIR: Certainly.

Mr KITCHING: By way of background, the letter is to the *Northern Daily Leader*, a Tamworth newspaper, on Monday, 6 March, this year, and the letter is from a Leanne Quinlivan-Scurr of Sanctuary Point.

Further by way of information, she is a second-generation rural firefighter and the widow of a volunteer rural firefighter, Senior Deputy Captain from the Wingello Brigade David Quinlivan-Scurr, who died on 1 January 1988, when he and seven of his colleagues were on a backburning operation in the Wingello State Forest.

That is by way of information. The three small paragraphs I would like to read basically relate to training and the training issue:

Training and protective clothing are areas in which there must be no compromise. Anyone not wanting to put the time and effort into training is a danger, not only to themselves, but also to other crew members and the public. And anyone silly enough not to want to be protected should not be involved with the RFS.

The RFS is an emergency service, not a boys' club and it would be unthinkable were we to have hundreds of brigades, each doing things in the way they saw fit and then hoping they could come together as a unit during major emergency operations.

In conclusion I want to make it very clear that while there can always be improvement, there has been tremendous change in the RFS during the last 10-15 years and those who benefit from that change are the community and the majority of firefighters."

I ask that that be accepted into evidence.

CHAIR: It has been accepted.

Mr RODGERS: I would like to make a statement as well as Terry, that I am hearing representing the RFSA from a country point of view. I am aware of the submission being put in by the RFSA and I will answer questions on that submission or any other questions.

CHAIR: So you are both aware of option C then. Is there wide support for option C?

Mr RODGERS: In the northern region there was discussion on all four options. The majority of that meeting went for option C out of the four options that were presented.

CHAIR: What were the for and against voiced at those meetings for the other options? Obviously we have some information in the submission from the RFSA.

Mr RODGERS: Basically, the general feeling of the meeting was that we must get away from councils. How we do it is irrelevant. Long term we need to get away. Whatever steps we take in the meantime to achieve that, the meeting was prepared to go along with.

CHAIR: There are apparently about a dozen or so who wish to break away from councils so far. We do not want those to be named unless they want to be named, but are their reasons similar to the reasons of Coffs Harbour?

Mr RODGERS: In our region we have two, Coffs Harbour that has actually broken away from council control and Richmond River is in the process of moving down the same track.

CHAIR: How will this affect the relationship between council and the service? Will the council not be so co-operative?

Mr RODGERS: It is a hard question and it comes down to individuals as well but I do not see that it necessarily does. If you relate the Rural Fire Service to the New South Wales Fire Brigades so far as council involvement and commitment, the New South Wales Fire Brigades decides what resources need to be put into a council area, put the resources in the area and send council the bill. Council happily pays the bill, end of story.

Somehow or other with the Rural Fire Service it is completely different. Local council wants to have its finger in the pie and run it. I do not believe it is appropriate for that to happen because in Kyogle's situation, and I have been a councillor on Kyogle council for eight years. I served two terms. I no longer am there. I was out at the last election, but the petty politics that councillors bring to the service are detrimental to the service. That is why we need to get councils out of the equation, I believe.

CHAIR: Would there be a reaction from any volunteers because the service is more centrally controlled?

Mr RODGERS: I do not believe so. I think it is such a complex issue that most volunteers are probably not even aware of the complete structure. You know, you ask questions of volunteers and they do not know how it is funded; they do not really know what bits council controls and what bits Sydney controls or Rosehill controls. So there is a fair lack of awareness really as to just exactly what the situation is.

CHAIR: Are you aware of any resistance to training? Apparently we have heard some older people who have been fighting bushfires for 30 and 40 years say they do not need to be trained and they have walked away. Do you find that is the case or are they still staying there?

Mr RODGERS: Basically they are still staying there. We have had probably a few in our area who voiced those opinions but when you finally get them along to, be it a training day or some other brigade organised function where skills are used, they find that they are learning things from those days and generally speaking they then start putting their hand up for further training. So there is that perception there and there is that voiced sort of resistance to it but once you can break through, in our area we cannot supply enough training.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Mr Rodgers, at page 4 of your written submissions to the Committee you say that you are basically satisfied with the overall level of funding. However, you say you would like to see a more equitable distribution of funding whilst acknowledging that there has been a shift over the last number of years to address this problem. Would you like to expand on that and be a little more specific for the Committee?

Mr RODGERS: I believe that there is a disproportionate allocation of funding between east and west of the divide, if you want to call it that, but basically the reason for that comes down to council politics. While ever it is in council's hands to decide the level of funding, an underfunded rural council is going to look at the bottom line and say there is an expense we can chop down.

Because of the bidding system, the bidding system relies on councils putting up their hands for funding, and most of the inequity is brought about simply by that point. Whereas if it can come back to a centrally-based organisation where the commissioner is responsible for providing the service, he would then have to look at east, west and every where else and say, "Okay, that area needs more funding, that is where the funding goes, that is where the resources go".

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Do you think that has also a little to do with the fact that most people live on the eastern side of the ranges and that most of the assets are on the eastern side and therefore the councils are bigger and have a lot more money? For example, Hornsby puts in \$600,000 a year over and above any RFS contribution and matching so they put that in extra. Some of those western councils would not have a total rate base of \$600,000.

Mr RODGERS: No, exactly right. In Kyogle's case, my whole point in standing for council was because of the bushfire brigade at that time. At the time that I stood for council the council was spending in the order of about \$35,000 to \$40,000 per year on its bushfire services.

In my time over that period of time I have now got that up to where we are spending of the order of about \$500,000 per annum, and we are now getting to the situation where we have adequate resources and there are only about three or four trucks in the system that need to be replaced, so we have had that complete turnaround, and that has been supported by Rosehill to get that level of funding up.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Is \$500,000 the total budget including all the contributions from Rosehill?

Mr RODGERS: Yes, that is total budget.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: So originally it was only \$50,000?

Mr RODGERS: It was about \$35,000 to \$40,000.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: In total?

Mr RODGERS: In total.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: So what was the council's contribution? Five grand?

Mr RODGERS: Something like that, yes, 25 per cent of that at that time, so it was about, yes, 10 grand.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: So you were saying, Mr Rogers, that over recent years in connection with the equitable distribution of funding matter there has been an improvement?

Mr RODGERS: Oh, most definitely.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: But you are saying that there is still some way to go?

Mr RODGERS: I think there is, yes, but when you go to the Pilliga, or places like that, Cessnock, different places around the State you see the level of equipment that people in those areas have got and our adjoining council, up until a matter of about three or four years ago, hardly had a truck and they had to put the petrol in their vehicles by holding chook raffles. We were bad but they were a hell of a lot worse.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: I just want to ask you about one other matter. In your submission you state that there is basically no problem with the appropriateness of equipment except you express a concern that mid-range tankers are being supplied with limited crew carrying capacity. Would you tell the Committee what your concern is in that regard?

Mr RODGERS: I believe that if a vehicle needs a number of people to operate it efficiently there should be that number of seats available. In other words, if a vehicle needs four or five people to operate it, there should be that four or five people.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: What is the incidence of the supply of these mid-range tankers that you regard as inadequate?

Mr RODGERS: Just single cab canters and trucks like that that have only got a crew-carrying capacity of two or three people.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Have you seen that military-style vehicle? You might not have seen it. We were shown a video last week in Sydney of a vehicle produced by ADI?

Mr RODGERS: No, I have not seen that one.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: It is from Victoria.

Mr KITCHING: Rather expensive, I understand.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Mr Rogers, in your submission you said:

If a Local Government Council is not supportive of the Rural Fire Service, a sufficient level of support may not be made available to the volunteers of that area, even though the Rural Fire Service sets standards which it believes should be provided to all volunteers.

I see here where you also support that the fire control officer should be under the command and control of the Rural Fire Service and not the local council. In the example you have just quoted you said there was an allocation of about \$50,000 a year and you were part of the bushfire brigade and you decided to take positive action about that. You got on to council and, as a result of your action, it is now \$500,000 a year. Now, politics will exist at all levels, both at local government level and also at Rural Fire Service level, I am sure you would say there would be some sort of politics there.

Do you think that at the local level - and there are people like you throughout this State who give their time - that it would be not more effective through the process that you have taken to get the local community made aware of the need and supportive of the need because it may well be that from Rosehill, where you have the entire state of New South Wales, that a small brigade out there will not be taken note of under that huge system and it becomes a case of the squeaky wheel getting the oil rather than it being a combined effort of local government?

Mr RODGERS: It comes back to a needs-based analysis, really. If the need is there, it has got to be met. I do not think it is the squeaky door thing. If a proper needs-based analysis is done and put in place, I believe that if there is a need there the commissioner must make sure that that happens.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: You spoke initially I think about the perception that people have, which is somewhat different from the reality?

Mr RODGERS: Yes.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: And there seemed to be a perception in a number of the submissions that I have read that the Rural Fire Service is seen as a far-off bureaucracy and it does not take any note of local people. What do you think causes that and what can be done about it?

Mr RODGERS: That is a fairly difficult question.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: If I could just add a little bit. If the fire control officer is under the control of the council, he is obviously seen to be part of the local community and representative of that local community on various committees and so forth in the process of rural fire fighting. If the fire control officer is taken away from that committee and is directly responsible there and virtually can ignore or can be seen to be ignoring - it may not be the reality, but certainly the perception - the requirements of local councillors and so forth, do you think that that would create a problem of perception in that area?

Mr RODGERS: No, not necessarily, I do not think. I am not quite sure where you are sort of going with that one.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: It is the perception as to whether the fire control officer will be seen as a bureaucrat of a faceless bureaucracy, as some people have said, at Rosehill and be part of that system or whether that fire control officer will be seen to be part of the local community?

Mr KITCHING: I do not believe it will, and I refer again to option C of the RFSA's submission. If that is adopted, the committees come with it, which means that the local people come with it. You have still got input from local government. You have still got input from the brigades. You have got input from the Rural Fire Service. You have the fire control officer and you have a management structure there which is purely local with input again from the service from above and from local government from the side or wherever, which is where you want to put it. So, no, I cannot see that happening.

At a meeting of the regional conference and the Regional Salaried Officers Committee in Gunnedah on 9 January, where we looked at the submission, it became quite obvious that particularly the volunteers saw that as the thing being transported in total as distinct from separated, and I think that stood out. It was not an issue in Castlereagh region.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Could I then ask you your views on that? There was one submission put to us that local government or councils should have control of the fire control officer over all matters up to a section 44 situation, when it would then be referred to operations control. Could I have your views on that?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, I have seen that submission. I am currently in that situation in my private employment, of course. It seemed to be a problem for the brigades as well, not only for us. For a long time the fire control officers in our region thought it was their problem only, and it was not until this meeting in fact in January that we realised that the brigades also found that to be a bit of a problem.

Whilst they in unison agreed that there must be some attachment to local government, and we firmly believe in Castlereagh that we cannot totally divorce from local government, we need the local government input. There is no doubt about that. But the problems of operational command and the level of where you cut off for administrative and where you take over for operations is a very grey area, and that seems to be the problem that I think we need to fix, certainly from our point of view as fire control officers.

As I said, I was amazed that the volunteers perceived that as well and in fact raised the issue at Gunnedah when they were looking at these options.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Can I just go back to option C, and you are both fairly familiar with it. I think one of the most interesting parts of that option is the local management council. How do you envisage the council operating and what size would it be? Would it be over a couple of local government areas or larger than that?

Mr KITCHING: I believe that it should operate on a zoning basis. I believe that to put one in at every local government level would probably be somewhat non-constructive. I think zoning is obviously being adopted by the Rural Fire Service and certainly with the support of most. There are not too many who are not supporting the zoning proposal within the service at this stage.

On that basis particularly I believe it is a very workable, fairly easy, and not too heavy, by the same token, but you are still getting your local government input; you have got your Rural Fire Service input; you have got your volunteers input, which is the most important thing, and it really is the most important thing. We as managers are no good unless we have got that input from our volunteers.

The way the system works currently with the Rural Fire Service Association and the joint committees statewide is that we are now getting for the first time volunteers' input directly into the decision-making process both at Rosehill and at local level through regional conferences, et cetera.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So there are some zones in the annual report?

Mr KITCHING: Yes.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So they would be the zones that you would envisage?

Mr KITCHING: I think the zoning proposal has a long way to go. I do not believe anything is set in concrete as such. I think the size of the zones has to be addressed. I think how the zones are set up has to be addressed as well. It is embryonic at this stage. But it is progressing at a fairly substantial rate.

Certainly in Castlereagh we already have two zones, one formal zone with pari-Tamworth-Manilla, and two informal zones with Nundle, Quirindi and Murrurundi and an informal zone with Bingara, Barraba and Yalleroi, and they seem to be working very, very well, and they are cost effective.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So you would see these zones as doing the acquisition bids on behalf of all of the brigades in that area?

Mr KITCHING: Yes.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: And controlling the asset?

Mr KITCHING: Yes.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So local councils would be just part of the management committee of that zone and would have some inputs through that avenue rather than any other direct role?

Mr KITCHING: Yes. That, effectively, is not cutting out your local constituents. Your local constituents then have input into the Rural Fire Service through their local government avenue as well and you have the brigades, of course, with their input; you have the managers from the commissioner down having their input on the other side as well. So, to me, I and our group saw it as probably the best option, and in fact a better option than the one we are currently operating under because we do not have a lot of the input directly.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So each brigade would be represented?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, indirectly, through, obviously, elected representatives. Obviously, in Castlereagh we have 1,400 brigades I think.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: 1,400?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, that is in the Castlereagh region, or something like that, so it is quite a substantial number of members to put on one committee. It would be totally inoperable. But obviously through things like our regional conferences with the RFSA, elected delegates can be put on, and if you come down to three councils, brigade officers meetings can be joint brigade officers

meetings from each district and they can elect their representatives, and they, as a general rule, will elect the person they believe will do the best job for them.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So this could be an opportunity for local councils to still play a role in terms of bringing together brigades in their council area, getting their requisitions and all other issues and then taking it on to the zone level?

Mr KITCHING: Yes. One of the current problems that we suffer is local government. In Castlereagh we are having a number of problems with local government capping, or effectively capping, expenditures, and Ian alluded to this earlier. That, in itself, creates a problem because you have to modify our equipment bids in particular to try to meet a cap.

Now, at the same time, we have got rising program charges, which are the departmental charges, which are effectively pushing down our equipment bids, and quite substantially. So, by having this other committee, this option C, the funding comes to that committee and the decisions are made there as to what is appropriate and how it is distributed as distinct from currently. I suppose, in retrospect, it is actually being made by general managers, who are not fire managers as such.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Just talking in the Castlereagh area about equipment acquisition, are your brigades tending to want tankers only or is there still some demand for trailers and single tanks and single engines?

Mr KITCHING: Tanks and pumps are basically pretty much finished. We have had an influx of people from other areas who come and knock on our door and say, "Excuse me. I am here to pick up my tank and pump." This has actually happened to me on about five occasions in the last 12 months. Where we came from before each landowner got a tank and a pump. I have to say, "That is not how the system works here and certainly not how it is meant to work. So, no, if you want a tank and a pump, there is a local supplier, Jones Plumbing. Please go down and avail yourself."

And the tanker trailer issue: tanker trailers are generally becoming more and more recognised as an encumbrance on the fund. They are expensive, because we now have to bring them to registerable standard, and that is costing us money each year to keep them at that registerable standard.

In the case of Inverell, to bring 65 tanker trailers to registerable standard was something of the order of \$67,000 initially. Just prior to that they did not have to be to a registerable standard. Now, they have to be. That was over \$1,000 a tanker trailer. They actually have a retail value, or an auction value, of probably \$400 to \$450, so there was some inequity there in the amount of expenditure to bring these things up to level.

In Inverell, and I quote Inverell in this case, I average five tanker trailer usages per annum. There are 64 or 65 tanker trailers out there. Five of those are used each year at actual firefighting. The rest is done by tankers and crews.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: I guess one of the reasons for change is that big trucks and tankers are more efficient and tend to be used for fires whereas under the old scheme of tankers and pumps there was abuse. Has that been the situation in Castlereagh?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, indeed, and, again, I have to default to my own area where approximately three years ago during a survey I went to find a tanker trailer on a particular property. I did eventually find it. It was actually dug into the side of an earthen wall on a dam and was actually hard plumbed in with galvanised pipe.

It took quite an amount of work to actually get it out from there, and in fact, it was removed from that particular property and placed on another property. It was in fairly dry conditions, and it was used to supply water to the house, a rental house, I might add, too, not the owner's house.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Mr Rogers, in your submission you particularly say:

My main suggestion for change is in regard to the RFSA.

You speak particularly about the election of the State executive and how that tends to give the impression that there is not as much voting power or representation as there might be. What have you done and what response perhaps have you had from what you have done about this? What have you done about this so far as the RFSA is concerned?

Mr RODGERS: I have mentioned it at some meetings, but a motion will be put at the next conference, which is to be held in a couple of months time, which will then go to State council along these lines of trying to get the constitution changed to take the executive from the elected representatives from each of the regions, because our region believes that there is no earthly need to have the executive elected from the floor and then make up the balance of council with elected representatives.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Is this being received reasonably? Are you expecting there to be much support for what you are putting forward?

Mr RODGERS: I think there will be some support but I think there will be some resistance from the status quo.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: The other particular point that you make is with regards to spray bars. Could you elaborate on your concerns with the employment of spray bars?

Mr RODGERS: Basically I do not believe that spray bars will give the level of protection that people are hoping they will give. I have been involved in several instances through another incident support services. I have talked to people who have been caught in overrun situations and with the conditions applying at that time I do not believe that any spray bar system would give adequate protection for it.

The fact that there is some protection there can tend to make people go into situations where they should not go, and I believe the correct way of doing it is through training to get people not to go into those situations. The technical committee is looking at spray bars and doing tests, tunnel tests and all that sort of thing on them, but at the moment it is still up in the air. There are still some in service. We are still providing some spray bars on trucks but I just do not feel that they are efficient and will give the level of protection that some members believe that they have.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So you believe they should be removed altogether?

Mr RODGERS: Not necessarily removed, but I think the whole thing has got to be researched to either come up with something that is efficient under the worst situation or if you cannot put stuff in that is 100 per cent foolproof, yes, they should be removed.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Do I take it that your main concern is that people perhaps have an overreliance on the ability of the spray bars to get them out of trouble?

Mr RODGERS: Yes.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Gentlemen, are you aware that the steering committee of the bushfire brigades claims in their submission that there were too many rules and regulations and that the RFS should be divided into an urban and country division?

Mr KITCHING: Yes.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: What comment do you have on those propositions?

Mr KITCHING: I am probably the first of the inland representatives to this Committee from my side of the service and we categorically say that that would be nothing but counter-productive and that comes from the brigade level up, that it would be counter-productive. As was stated earlier, I think by Mr Collier, you would end up effectively with three services and you would end up in certain areas, certain districts, where you would have two or three services, namely, New South Wales Fire Brigades, New South Wales Rural Fire Service and whatever the third service ends up being called, all within one area. How do you manage that? I do not see that it is possible to manage that successfully.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: I come from the same side of the Blue Mountains that you do and I agree, you would end up with an A, B and C and I know where the C team would end up. I am a former general manager of council so I am interested to hear you say a lot of the decisions are made by the GMs of councils. My experience is different. We were always allocated a lot more money than you would ever get out of the RFS. I wonder whether you still have the same situation with option C.

Do you not have in your organisations, though, group captain meetings and a situation where the captain of the group captains meet with the captain of the group captains in neighbouring council areas? You might have 50 brigades in one particular council area. They elect group captains, who elect chairmen and those chairmen meet perhaps with an equivalent person in surrounding areas.

So, firstly, the group captains have a big input into what their bid is and then they co-ordinate with their neighbouring ones to make sure that on the borders they have got their areas covered so that they can carry across. So, to some degree that regionalisation is moving into the system now. Is that the case in Castlereagh?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, in some of Castlereagh that is the case. In other sections of Castlereagh, there is one particular council that will not allow the appointment of group officers or group captains full stop because --

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Have they implemented the 1993 Act yet?

Mr KITCHING: No, nor the 1997 Act. In fact, I believe that particular council is on the wane with that decision at the moment, but until recently they had point blank refused to allow the appointment of group captains. Certainly in my own area and in a lot of the other areas, yes, group captains are elected.

In some cases they are elected to a specific group of brigades. In other places they are elected to all the brigades and they move about, depending on where they are required. They are generally located strategically throughout shires geographically, but not specifically to a particular number which is probably not in the true spirit of the Act but it effectively works that way.

Again, all fire control officers that I am aware of certainly in Castlereagh have captains' meetings and group officers' meetings and we use our group officers for our ideas bouncing. I mean, it is the old story. We have got to get the input from the troops on the ground. The troops on the

ground are effectively electing group officers as their representatives for that purpose aside from their fire control activities that the group officers do as well.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: If option C did not come in, proper development of that system could be another option. Have you considered the cost involved in implementing that particular model and, if so, where would the money for the transition come from?

Mr KITCHING: In the event of zoning, one of the things that has concerned a number of us in Castlereagh has been that we have 142 local government councils at the moment all wanting to build quite substantive fire control centres. These are not cheap. You are looking at the order of somewhere between \$150,000 to \$250,000 in our region.

Do we build 142 of them or do we build 60? If you look at a quarter of a million dollars a throw, there is a substantial saving to be made in that, and do we need 142 of them or do we need 60? I believe now in with modern communications and techniques that 60 is probably around the number. I do not know the exact number, but it would be substantially less than 142.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: In your region do they combine them with the State Emergency Service?

Mr KITCHING: In lots of cases, yes.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You want two-way radios and a whole host of equipment that is identical.

Mr KITCHING: Can I say that there are some problems at the moment with the State Emergency Service and in fact it reared its head at Inverell where we were looking to build a new joint operation centre at Inverell and the State Emergency Service does not really want to have anything to do with it. They wish to stand alone and it seems to be current policy with the State Emergency Service that they want to stand alone. That has become apparent in Inverell as the minutes of the Inverell council meeting will show.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Do you believe members are adequately covered for workers compensation in the event of injury in more recent years?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, I do, with some reservations. There appear to be some people who effectively stand somewhat outside that system, and I am specifically talking about a self-employed person. A self-employed person who is injured and has to have time off work from his own employment is currently not being given what I would call adequate justice under the workers compensation system.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Why, because it is difficult to ascertain what their income is?

Mr KITCHING: The system of doing it at the moment is quite difficult. I will use a current example of a bloke who is a harvesting contractor for silage. That is seasonal. He happened to injure his foot at the beginning of the season so he lost a considerable amount of his annual income in that three-month period, and that was his prime three or four-month period of the year for his harvesting activity.

What was trying to be done to him, and they are trying to address this at the moment, they averaged his income annually which does not quite work for the three months where he is almost

bringing in his total income in three months. There are some sort of problems there, as I understand it, outside the current workers compensation system and need to be addressed.

CHAIR: Do you have any more examples of that?

Mr KITCHING: That is the only one I have at this stage.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: A person on his own property fighting his own fire is covered.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Yes, but the point Mr Kitching is making is for how much. Say he is off for the whole year, how do you establish a farmer's income?

Mr RODGERS: If a farmer has a negative income for a number of years, you cannot use his taxable income.

Mr KITCHING: This particular gentleman's prime income was during a harvest season for silage which is a particular three or four months of the year and that was the time he was off, yet his entire year was averaged.

CHAIR: So how can that be fixed then?

Mr KITCHING: I think on a case-by-case basis. Had the guy injured himself in the off season he would probably have been doing quite well, but the fact is he injured himself in his on season for harvesting and at this stage he is coming off considerably worse because of the averaging effect of his income.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Do you support the current efforts by the RFS to concentrate on upgrading the State tanker fleet?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, totally. I do. Our region as a general rule does. We are quite happy with the range of tankers that are being provided. The only problem that we do mention and do raise is that the current government contracting system is tending to put a lot of our local suppliers at a disadvantage, not of necessity outside the contracting system, but at a disadvantage.

The current State Government contracting system is apparently making it reasonably hard for our inland contractors particularly to actually get into the system to provide and build these trucks. They have got the ability, the wherewithal. They are having problems with the contracting arrangement, getting into the government supply system.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Can you expand on that? I do not necessary expect you to do so right now but can you that that on notice and send us a little more detail? That is of particular interest to us. Also as a follow on from that, you hear comments occasionally by people that a pump unit costs \$1,000 through the service whereas they can get it locally down the store for \$500. Do you have any comment on that?

Mr KITCHING: Yes, I do because people come to me as a fire control officer and say, "Oh, look I can buy that pump down town." Yes, they can. I am not going to argue with that. Except the pump down town is a bare pump. If we get the pump through the government supply system, it comes with all the other things - suction hoses, stores fittings and all the other bits and pieces. That, generally, is not taken into account.

If you went down town and asked to be supplied with the same pump as was contract supplied, you would find the price is fairly much the same, because they are looking at the base pump and not the additional stuff that actually comes with the pump through government supply and government purchase.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Is that optional or it just comes?

Mr KITCHING: No, it just comes as part of the package, yes.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short Adjournment)

BRUCE ALEXANDER SCANLON, Self-employed, 134 Newmans Road, Woolgoolga, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity do you appear before the Committee?

Mr SCANLON: I am appearing here today as a volunteer.

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr SCANLON: Yes, I did.

CHAIR: Are you familiar with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr SCANLON: Yes, I am.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage during your evidence that in the public interest certain evidence or documents you may wish to present should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee would be willing to accede to your request and resolve into confidential session, but I should warn you that the Parliament may override that decision at any time and may make your evidence public?

Mr SCANLON: I am aware of that.

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr SCANLON: Yes. I have previously made a submission to this inquiry. I stand by that submission and would like to expand on some of the points raised in that submission.

I would like to reiterate on the statements I have made in the summary basically in relation to the Rural Fire Service. Volunteerism for the benefit of others is part of the Australian way of life. No better working example can be seen than that which exists in the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

I would like to expand on my submission in relation to funding. I submit that the Rural Fire Service expenditure of the available funding on tankers and other firefighting equipment has been appropriate over the last few years. However, the availability of funding has not been sufficient to meet the needs.

This, I believe, is basically due to a lack of funding in years gone by, which has created a backlog. Even though the funding now is substantially increased over previous years, I think it is still insufficient to safely equip the volunteers for the job that they have.

There are additional funding expenditures being imposed all the time on the Rural Fire Service. Just recently, if I can give an illustration of four of those points, is the introduction of flash hoods, which is the balaclava-type protection for firefighters, part of the personal protection equipment. They cost the service \$37 each. If there are conservatively 35,000 active firefighters out of 69,996, that is an cost this year of \$1.295 million additional.

One of the things that was raised in a recent coronial inquiry was the necessity to lag the brake linings, that is, put protection on the brake linings, of operational vehicles so that if they are in a fire-entrapment situation the brakes still remain operable. To impose that and fit lagging on all operational

vehicles, which means retrofitting, not just new ones coming up, would be a cost of about \$1,200 per vehicle.

Conservatively, there is probably an average of about two vehicles per brigade, some less, some greater - 48,000 vehicles. That is an additional cost of \$5.76 million this year.

Fire-proof blankets: average issue per vehicle of five. Some vehicles more, some vehicles less. The calculation I have made is a cost of \$105 each. I believe they actually cost \$123 each - 48,000 supplied. That is an additional cost of \$2.52 million this year.

The small item of bush fire fighting boots, previously \$50 a pair. The new price is \$144. To cover that every two years works out at about \$1.645 million.

Just those four items is an additional expenditure of \$11.25 million this year. So even if there was a \$10 million increase in funding, it still would not even cover those four basic items.

There is also an increase in the cost of category one tankers, which is the larger general-purpose tankers. They have risen from \$148,000 to \$178,000, an increase of \$30,000 each.

So you can see what I am saying about funding. It is being increased but it is still very much behind what is required for the safe operation and protection of the volunteer fire fighters in this State.

The other thing is that I do not know whether all the members are aware of the different areas of responsibility of the New South Wales fire brigade and the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

Some people mistakenly believe that we go to bushfires and the town brigade goes to house fires. The State is actually broken up into two areas of responsibility. The New South Wales Fire Brigades handle all the fires and incidence in their area of responsibility. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service handles all the fires, whether they be bushfires, grassfires, or house fires, in their area of responsibility.

Now, there is a memorandum of understanding where there is co-operation between the two when assistance is needed near the borders where they cannot be handled one thing and the other but it still remains that the area of responsibility for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service is about 89 per cent of the State.

We also, under the new Act, have responsibility to State Forests, which is about 5 per cent of the State, and national parks, which is about 5 per cent of the State. So the New South Wales Rural Fire Service has responsibility for fires for 99 per cent of the State.

The New South Wales Fire Brigades has been area of responsibility of 1 per cent. Now, that 1 per cent of the State has a more dense population. They also have a greater concentration of assets, but the funding difference between the two is that for 99 per cent of the State, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service gets about \$80 million per year to protect 99 per cent of the State and the New South Wales Fire Brigades, to protect 1 per cent of the State, gets \$272 million. I think that is a gross disproportion of funding and it is to the disadvantage of the rural areas of New South Wales.

On funding generally, I think that the whole collection of funding should be looked at and reviewed, and I believe there are some steps, being 10, to do that.

Collection of funds from people who insure their properties was mentioned earlier. The question was asked: what percentage of people insure their property? The figures that I have from people who have looked into it are that about 53 per cent of people adequately insure their property. The remainder do not make that contribution to the fire services, that is, both services, the New South Wales Fire Brigades and the Rural Fire Service. I think this is a bit of a disadvantage, or it is not really fair and just for the people who do insure their premises.

The other thing is that, taking Coffs Harbour as an example, 60 per cent of the land mass at Coffs Harbour is actually occupied by State Forests. State Forests does not pay any contribution to the Rural Fire Service. So in Coffs Harbour 60 per cent of your land mass is virtually making no contribution. Of the remaining land mass, 40 per cent actually pay insurance policies, which makes the contribution.

Anyone who has insurance coverage from an overseas-based company, or even a company based outside the State, under the old Bushfires Act did not have to make any contribution. Under the new Rural Fires Act, there is a section there for them to make a contribution, for the insurance companies to collect those moneys, but I believe at this stage that has not been exercised.

So if you insure through Lloyds of London you make no contribution to the fire services of New South Wales. I think this should be addressed for the equity and the benefit of the ratepayers and the people who receive the service, that is, the property owners, who depend on the Rural Fire Service to extinguish fires or prevent their house from burning down.

I have submitted a paper through the New South Wales Rural Fire Service Association, of which I am an active member, and I am also on the State executive, in relation to a funding proposal that this be looked at. I have a copy of that proposal which I would like to submit through this inquiry.

Mr Scanlon's funding proposal submission tabled

That sets out the proposal as I see it. That paper was presented to Coffs Harbour branch. It was referred to the northern region and endorsed unanimously. I took it to the State council in December last year, and the State council endorsed it unanimously.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Has anything flowed from it?

Mr SCANLON: Not at this stage. A motion was put that it be referred to the committee that is inquiring into funding the Rural Fire Service. I have not received any information back as to what is happening at this stage.

I would like to expand my comments in the submission on training. A criticism of the Rural Fire Service made by some uninformed individuals is that "members should not be forced to do any training". No member is forced, made to or pushed to do any training. There is no compulsory training. Anyone who tries to tell this Committee that is either unaware of the facts or trying to mislead the Committee.

The fire ground is a very dangerous environment. Rural fires are actually more dangerous than fires in residential areas where you have buildings. Rural fires are uncontained. You cannot be definitely aware of what fuels are available; weather conditions have a major effect; lack of water; communication; and increase in distance. Rural fires are more dangerous than ordinary residential fires.

Any Rural Fire Service member that goes on to the fire ground owes it to themselves and the people they are working with to make sure they have a certain level of competency. This can be

obtained in four basic ways: by completing the relevant courses and being assessed as competent which is basically the training system; a person can undergo an assessment only if they feel they have that knowledge or those competencies or they can make a submission to have any recognition of prior learning commonly referred to as RPL.

If they have learned those skills in some other form or in some other area, all they have to do is make application to have those skills accredited; and recognition of current competencies. If they are acquired competencies, maybe through experience, self-study, any system that they may use to acquire those competencies, they just apply for those current competencies to be recognised.

I repeat, any volunteer that goes on the fire ground should have a certain level of competency. That starts with basics. People who take on the responsibility of the field officer's position, deputy captain, senior deputy captain or group captain, not only have their own life to think about, they have the responsibility of other members as well as the property they may be trying to protect and there are additional levels of competency that they must demonstrate before taking on that position. I think that is fair to everyone concerned.

If someone has been a firefighter for 30 or 40 years and they are not prepared to demonstrate that level of competency, I do not think it is fair to ask other members to be under their control if the level of competency has not been established. I would like also to point out that the Rural Fire Service about four times a year puts out a Rural Fire Service Bulletin. I would like to refer to a couple of items in volume No. 21, which came out in September last year, if I may.

There was an incident where two brigade members attended a grassfire and they became entrapped in the grassfire due to a change in weather conditions and various factors. They were not equipped with the approved and issued personal protection equipment and, as a result, suffered burns. The vehicle was also burnt. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service inquired into this incident and found a number of things, one of which was the firefighters were wearing short sleeved polyester cotton shirts, denim jeans, thick work socks and elastic-sided work boots.

His shirt had begun to burn and melt around the sleeves, chest and back that were close to ignition. The jeans had scorch marks from cuffs to knees and there were indications that they, too, were about to ignite. Inside the jeans, parts of the elastic-sided boots had melted on to the jeans. The boots had scorching to the elastic soles. Their pull-on loops had melted and the sides of their soles had begun to melt.

There are illustrations here as to the areas that these two members received second and third degree burns to their bodies, front and back. It also found out that the damage to the firefighter's own clothes indicated that they would have been unlikely to have suffered any substantial injuries if they had been wearing service approved protective clothing. Recommendations were that the fire ground standard operating procedures and training emphasised taking up a safe attack position in fires and other recommendations.

There was also another incident in relation to a chainsaw accident where a member had part of his foot hit by the chainsaw that he was operating at the time and suffered damages to his toes and foot as a result of that. That member had not completed an approved chainsaw course even though he was experienced from the land. He had been taught a chainsaw operation by his father. The service did a quite comprehensive report on both those incidents to establish what went wrong so they could stop that sort of incident happening in future.

That is part of the ongoing thing that the service does to try to prevent incidents from happening and to incorporate any deficiencies in the training system. The training system that we have

is constantly being upgraded due to incidents such as this. For the benefit of the members, I would like to table that document for their reference.

Document tabled

The third main item is the separation from council of Coffs Harbour Rural Fire Service. There is one area in my submission in relation to that. I stated that at the time of putting the submission together it was due to be completed by 1 March but, actually, due to the commissioner and other members being involved in this inquiry about that time, that finalisation day has been put off to 1 April, but it is still proposed at this stage to go ahead on that date.

A few things led to Coffs Harbour making that decision to separate from council, one of which was a very hostile council that we had, and two or three of the 660 members that we have in Coffs Harbour were not happy with the way things were going, what they were receiving.

They, through political pressure, put pressure on the then mayor, who called the inquiry because there were so many things wrong with Coffs Harbour Rural Fire Service. That inquiry went for about 12 months and was actually conducted by the Internal Audit Bureau. It finished up with a very lengthy report.

Part of that report contained allegations made by these two individuals that were so sensitive that it was not for public release. Virtually all the allegations made against those members were proved to be unfounded. It put a great strain and stress on the volunteers and the staff in Coffs Harbour and the volunteers thought, "Well, we are not in the Rural Fire Service volunteering to put up with this. It is likely to happen again as long as there is interference by council."

CHAIR: Individual council members rather than the entire council, presumably, are you saying, or council officers?

Mr SCANLON: Well, councillors, and it was a unique system of council that operated at that time where there was a quorum in council on a voting situation that whatever the quorum decided on went through council, so it was, some may say, a one-man-run council. I would not disagree with that.

Since then there has been a change of council and that problem does not exist. However, we realise if we are going to take action to remedy that situation, it would take time and we may have a new council by the time that that problem is solved. That has happened, but, then again, there is another council election in three years or so and it could be back again at that stage.

CHAIR: Do you know of any other councils in a similar situation?

Mr SCANLON: I believe there are somewhere between eight and 14 councils seriously looking at what has been done in Coffs Harbour.

CHAIR: For similar reasons?

Mr SCANLON: Similar basic reasons, I think, yes. It is the unique balancing situation that I agree that you have got to have local input from council into the local Rural Fire Service but once you have got interference for political reasons it is more of a disadvantage than an advantage.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: What form did that political reasoning take?

Mr SCANLON: I believe there were a couple of disgruntled people who were tied up with another organisation which the then mayor and some other councillors had some connection with, and instead of any problems that arose with a volunteer or with a captain, the thing to do would be to go to the fire control officer and resolve it, discuss it.

If it cannot be resolved to that stage, the normal procedure, or if it directly involves the fire control officer, as part of it was, it should then go to the regional officer for resolution. If it is a management matter within council and it cannot be finalised with the FCO, it should, in our case, go to the director of engineering and/or the general manager for resolution.

What was happening was that individuals were going directly to the mayor, who was then interfering directly for reasons other than the best interests of the service.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: He was interfering directly with the staff?

Mr SCANLON: Yes.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: In complete contravention of the Local Government Act?

Mr SCANLON: Yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Your view is clearly that dual accountability is unacceptable, and you have cited Coffs Harbour council and the problems there as a case study, I suppose. Could I ask you whether you could comment more broadly on the dual accountability problem and how you see it being resolved statewide?

Mr SCANLON: We are probably in for a difficult period inasmuch as it virtually will happen in Coffs Harbour, and I think that there are a number of other shires that will take a similar path. Whether they adopt the module that is being worked out to apply to Coffs Harbour or whether they adopt one of the other four modules that are being proposed I do not know, and there could be some difficulties in that interim period where you have got different shires, some shires where there is no dual accountability and other shires where there are systems of dual accountability.

From an asset point of view - assets were mentioned earlier - with what I would describe as a hostile council, we managed to transfer the assets for a nominal fee of \$1.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: You see, the reason I asked the question on a general basis is that at the bottom of page 6 of your submission you say:

The present system of dual accountability of FCO to the commissioner and the general manager of local councils is clearly not an acceptable system of management.

Now, that is a statement of general principle. Admittedly, you used Coffs Harbour as an example of the difficulties that can arise, and did arise in that case. Am I correct in assuming, though, that you argue from the particular instance at Coffs Harbour to the general conclusion that the dual accountability model is wrong and there should virtually be a reappraisal of that statewide? Am I correct in thinking that?

Mr SCANLON: To the benefit of the Rural Fire Service generally, yes. I think dual accountability is a system that really cannot work when you have got one person who is accountable to two different bosses virtually, depending on what is happening at the time, coupled with the different legislation for service standards and what have you which the FCOs must comply with.

I know some general managers are having difficulty just keeping up-to-date with the requirements that the FCOs must meet. From a management point of view, you may have a general manager, and I know this has happened, saying to an FCO, "Well, you must do this," when the FCO has turned around and said, "Well, according to the legislation, I cannot do that. According to the service standards, I have got to do blah, blah, blah."

Not many general managers, I do not think, can really grasp the fire management service as well as the local government job which they have, which some of you will know is extensive enough as it is.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: It would appear to me that it was a compromising legislation because of a lot of hostility from local areas and local people about losing control of running their local fire service to Rosehill and this dual accountability was a product of that suspicion, I guess, of change, but from your perspective we should go the full hog now and have it under the Rural Fire Service completely?

Mr SCANLON: I think in one of the early drafts of the Rural Fires Act it was an option to be taken up. That option was deleted from the draft under, I believe, pressure from the Farmers Association.

CHAIR: The New South Wales Farmers Association, Coffs Harbour Branch is really quite critical of the RFS. Do you accept any of its criticisms?

Mr SCANLON: I have not really had any of the criticisms directed to me.

CHAIR: You will be able to hear them shortly?

Mr SCANLON: I believe there are probably some individuals in the Farmers Association who are not very happy with the Rural Fire Service. They have had an opportunity to put up criticisms and any alternatives in the past, but I have not seen anything productive that they have put up.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Just with regard to your opening points about costs and the inability to keep up based on the increasing costs of materials, in particular the boots that you were talking about going from \$50 to \$140 - I am sorry, I missed the very beginning of what you were saying - is that just in the last 12-month period?

Mr SCANLON: That is, I believe, within the last month or two. It was not a gradual increase. The price when the last catalogue came out was \$50 per pair and the next issue was \$144 per pair.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Is there any difference in the boots?

Mr SCANLON: I believe that they come under different standards of the Australian Standards Association.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: But are the boots any different?

Mr SCANLON: Not that I am aware of, no.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So they have just got a new classification from Australian Standards?

Mr SCANLON: I am not aware personally of any deficiencies in the previous boots. There are two different types of boots worn. One is a basic pushbike riding boot, which is an ankle-length, lace-up type, and the other one is a structured-type riding boot, which is slightly different. One of the changes is that it has a zipper up the centre for rapid deployment.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So, so far as you are concerned, we are dealing with the same boot but it has a new classification and the price has jumped three times almost?

Mr SCANLON: I am not aware of any substantial difference in the types of \$50 boot and \$144.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Can we check that, Mr Chairman?

CHAIR: Yes, we can ask questions on that and the other matters too.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: And the tankers going from \$148,000 to \$178,000. Is there any substantial change in the tankers, or in either case or in any of the other cases has there been any explanation as to why there have been such drastic increases in price?

Mr SCANLON: That question would probably be better directed to a fire control officer who was dealing with these matters on a day-to-day basis. As a brigade captain and volunteer, I am probably not as aware of the finer details of the costings as some other members would be.

CHAIR: We can ask the commissioner those questions when we see him next time.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: In your submission you make the statement that New South Wales Fire Brigades has a \$272 million allocation for 1 per cent of the State compared to \$80 million for the Rural Fire Service which has responsibility for 99 per cent of the State. But in that figure, with the New South Wales Fire Brigades being a professional service, they have a large salary wages component. If you take that out, do you have any idea what the difference would be?

Mr SCANLON: Firstly, I would submit the New South Wales Rural Fire Service is just as professional if not more professional than the New south Wales Fire Brigades.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: I am not speaking about the professionalism of the organisations, I am talking about the fact that one is a salaried organisation and one is a volunteer organisation. If you take the wages and salary component out --

Mr SCANLON: The wages and salary is an integral part of that costing. Then, again, just off the top of my head, I think the numbers in the New South Wales Fire Brigades are around 2,500 as opposed to 69,994, but even taking into consideration wages, and I think round about half if not more than half of the New South Wales Fire Brigades are not full-time salaried, they are paid a retainer which is still a payment but they do not receive the full salary income. They are paid so much per month to be on call and for each call they receive a call out which does not come to as high a figure as a full salary.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: If you take those components out, are you aware of how big the difference is in the allocation of funding?

Mr SCANLON: It is still grossly in favour of the New South Wales Fire Brigades so far as expenditure on equipment and things like that.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: My other question refers to the other statement you made in regard to \$11 million of additional equipment without an increase in funding. What has got to give to make way for that \$11 million?

Mr SCANLON: What other things are cut out?

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: What will you not get that you would like as a result of having to expend that amount of money?

Mr SCANLON: The funding, once the final figure is reached, it then is allocated - each region is allocated a certain figure of funding. It is up to the regional officer to then divvy up that funding in the shires that he or she has within that region. It is up to the fire control officer to use the funding they receive in the best way they can as managers. So it is multilevelled.

What is actually cut out may depend on the regional officer. It may depend on the fire control officer. It may have some bearing on the program cost for head office at Rosehill.

So what is cut out I could not say, but almost any brigade in the State you can go to, and the further you travel away from Sydney the stronger the chance is that there is equipment that they need to operate safely and effectively, whether it be pagers, additional fire ground radios, tankers, a multitude of things for them to operate to the standard they are trained to and expected to operate, virtually every brigade has a wish list that cannot be met and that is why I think the whole funding picture should be looked at for a redistribution. Instead of 73 per cent of the funding coming from the insurance industry, I think it should be changed so that there is a fairer collection of funding.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Whilst I and others would accept the statement that funding may not have met all of local government council needs throughout the State, are you aware that the allocation to Coffs Harbour shire has increased from \$716,000 in 1995-96 to \$880,000 odd in 1999-00? Also during that period, provision has been made for the purchase 12 tankers at a cost of \$1.3 million?

Mr SCANLON: Yes, I am aware of those basic figures. In Coffs Harbour there is a vehicle replacement program where the fire control officer is trying to remove all petrol driven vehicles from the fire ground. That has not yet been completed. Whilst there remains one petrol driven vehicle on the fire ground it is an additional danger.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: How many vehicles are there you under the command?

Mr SCANLON: I cannot tell us that off hand. I can give you an estimate. I think there would probably be close to about 40 in Coffs Harbour.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: How many of them are petrol?

Mr SCANLON: There are not many. I am unaware of the exact number. There are not many at this stage but that has been due to a very strong vehicle replacement program that the fire control officer at Coffs Harbour has been implementing over the last few years.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: But progress has been made?

Mr SCANLON: Progress has been made and that has been one of his paramount concerns.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: How many over 15 years?

Mr SCANLON: There are a few. I cannot give you the number. There might be less than half I would estimate. However, five years ago the number was substantially greater.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Are you aware that the New South Wales Rural Fire Service has already indicated that in next year's budget a particular amount has been set aside for the retrofitting of lagging to the fuel and brake lines of tankers and the purchase of fire blankets and that this is part of a three-year program?

Mr SCANLON: That moneys have been set aside for it, additional funding?

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Yes.

Mr SCANLON: I know there was additional funding being sought by the Commissioner for this. I did not know whether or not it had been approved.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Could you identify the people or groups of people who are suggesting that the current tankers have shortcomings when trapped in fire situations?

Mr SCANLON: I would be one person who would suggest that the current tankers have shortcomings when trapped in fire situations. They have a fair amount of plastic, vinyl, foam in them that will burn. I do not believe that it is really practical to build or design a vehicle that is fireproof. If you build or design a vehicle that is fireproof, the cost will be prohibitive. It will reduce the number of new tankers available and, as was mentioned earlier, like the fire protection sprays on the vehicle, it would give the members a false sense of security.

The emphasis that we have at Coffs Harbour is the training of members in the appreciation of the fire so that whether they be trained at basic level, group leader, crew leader, whatever it is, they do not put themselves or their crew in that situation. One thing that we do rely heavily on for that to work properly is adequate radio communication. Due to funding restraints and a few other problems, we do not have that but if --

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Is progress being made in that field, though?

Mr SCANLON: Well, that is debatable because the Motorola system that is mooted for the Rural Fire Service has already been reprogrammed, I do not know whether it is twice or three times at this stage, and I think there is another reprogramming fitting scheduled for that system to work. When that is done, it still will not be ideal because the system that has been chosen still has some shortcomings in its performance.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: I am interested in the key competencies for people who hold positions of responsibility. You spoke about these earlier. Are these competencies already part of the Rural Fire Service or are these suggestions of yours that you would like to see implemented?

Mr SCANLON: That is the department's policy, which is clearly documented by the department's training services. They are basically the competency levels of basic firefighter, advanced firefighter, village protection firefighter, crew leader and group leader.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Obviously you get quite a bit of enthusiasm from your members on brigades for these courses but what about the average volunteer, the property owner? Are they complying with these new competency goals or not?

Mr SCANLON: What do you mean by the average volunteer?

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: It might be the same in Coffs Harbour. In a lot of brigades you have members of the brigades, volunteers that are very enthusiastic, always working on the tankers and then you have others that are adherence but they are there, quite often just property owners who have an interest in saving their own property rather than the whole district.

Mr SCANLON: In Coffs Harbour there is a very small handful of people who have been members and firefighters for many years and for some years have held field positions such as brigade captain who have now got to demonstrate if they want to retain that position, if they want to be the brigade leader they have to demonstrate a level of competency which, as I said earlier, can be done in four ways. Some brigade members, some old, experienced brigade members have been prepared to demonstrate that competency and, therefore, retained the eligibility for the position that they have held for some years. Others for a number of reasons are not prepared to demonstrate that level of competency.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Who makes the hard decision, the FCO or the local brigade members?

Mr SCANLON: The decision for what?

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: If a brigade captain is not prepared to demonstrate that he has the key competencies, the brigade captain is elected by the --

Mr SCANLON: A decision was made a few years back in Coffs Harbour and it is effective as of the brigade elections this year which are now starting to happen, the annual general elections, that for a person to hold a field position, that is captain or deputy captain, they must demonstrate that level of competency for crew leader.

(The witness withdrew)

MICHAEL WARREN MEREDITH, Vice-President, Coffs Harbour Branch, New South Wales Farmers Association, 222 Bark Hut Road, Woolgoolga, sworn and examined:

JOSEPH MORAN, Grazier and Member, New South Wales Farmers' Association, "Heatherleigh", Moleton via Lowanna, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Mr Meredith, Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr MEREDITH: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes.

CHAIR: Mr Moran, did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr MORAN: Yes.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr MORAN: Yes, reasonably well.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage during your evidence that in the public interest certain evidence or documents you may wish to present should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee would be willing to accede to your request and resolve into confidential session. But I should warn you that Parliament has the power to override that decision at any time and may make your evidence public.

CHAIR: Would either of you care to make an opening statement?

Mr MEREDITH: Thank you for the opportunity to address this inquiry. My bush fire service commenced in 1979. In that time I have been a brigade member, a trainer and a fire vehicle builder. I am still a brigade member. As you are well aware, I am a member of the New South Wales Farmers' Association and have been a member for about 12 years. To the best of our ability we will attempt to represent our organisation, the New South Wales Farmers' Association and, in particular, its members.

Could your attention be drawn to the number of people in country areas who are completely unaware of this inquiry. Many people I talk to even in the more settled areas rarely see a newspaper, so if the matter is not on local television or on the local ABC radio program then they will not know. So please be aware of that. That for all I know there could be hundreds more who would have submitted written submissions or desired to appear before you if they had but known.

Originally the rural population clamoured for legal protection in fighting bushfires. Subsequently, as the movement became more formalised, the need was for equipment and guidance in the use of that equipment. Until the early 1990s, the crying need was for money. The supply and state of equipment was, to put it mildly, abysmal.

There was some advantage, then. One, the movement was from the people for the people; it was a grassroots organisation. As a gentleman before said, it was about assessing needs and it was something that grew from a dire need.

Two, it was almost solely geared to fighting bushfires, mainly by the use of hazard reduction and hard-won experience.

Three, there were few, if any, power plays, nor fights between vested interests, and with FCOs as a group of people, honest trustworthy and very hard working, whether paid or honorary, there was little need for inquiries or a formal system for the resolution of disputes.

Since 1995 there have been changes. Significant is the new Act of 1997 and a name change, amongst other consequential organisational changes. Unfortunately, the top structure has changed but the bottom has not to the same degree. Changes are alluded to in publications and in the press but have not been made clear to the RFS members or the public who pay for the service.

So far, these changes, as they have been implemented, indicate to us a service based on serving itself. This is evidenced by five moves: the first, to lessen the autonomy of the grassroots brigade; two, the move away from the generally dispersed group meetings to centralised captains' meetings, and the third to take over tasks from other services, particularly the New South Wales Fire Brigades, with, in some cases, insufficient preparation for the task.

The fourth has been a determined effort to inhibit discussion on RFS matters, whether by the public or volunteers. And the fifth, attempts to break away from the RFS's association with local government, which, unfortunately, separates it from local matters and the ratepayers, who are the general public.

So in the twenty-first century, the RFS finds itself needing a formalised system of dispute resolution and, consequently, inquiries such as this one.

My organisation believes that in any inquiry conducted by or on behalf of the RFS, evidence should be taken on oath if requested by any integral party. This document "Our Vision" is unnumbered, undated, but it is produced by the New South Wales Rural Fire Service. May I table that?

"Our Vision" tabled

This document has been produced by the Rural Fire Service to show the way ahead. It contains ethical needs, such as truth, honesty and integrity, admirable attributes, the evidence of which many will eagerly anticipate.

There is mention of improvement, customers, service, protection of the community, but nothing about landholders, land users, farmers, crops or local government or those who, through the five levy on their insurance, pay the overwhelming majority of funds to finance the RFS.

We have people in this State who have suffered the loss of their houses, crops, buildings, animals and sometimes their own lives because of fires which need not have happened or could have been controlled better. Sitting next to me is such a person, Mr Moran.

He lost a considerable holding of timber and feed for his cattle through a fire in 1994 known as the BoBo fire. It was caused officially through an arsonist, unexplained causes, a backburn, anything to avoid the real reason.

In its early stages it was handled, I submit, very badly, with the appropriate bushfire headquarters being the last to heed its own members. In 1996, after much pressure from the New South Wales Farmers Association, Coffs Harbour Branch, and then the New South Wales Farmers

Association itself, there was a formal examination of evidence to see if an inquiry into the BoBo fire should be held.

There was such an examination, and the tribunal, with a dissenting minority report by the New South Wales Farmers Association member of that tribunal, concluded that there was no need for a further inquiry into the fire.

To the best of our knowledge, those who took legal action as a result of this fire have all been compensated to their satisfaction out of court. With the Chair's permission, I wish to table the reply by the Coffs Harbour Branch of the New South Wales Farmers Association to the official report by the BoBo Fire Examination Tribunal.

Reply by the Coffs Harbour Branch of the New South Wales Farmers Association to the Official Report by the BoBo Fire Examination Tribunal tabled

In conclusion, could I raise another matter which is not, I believe, covered by the terms of reference? I draw your attention to the uniforms worn by the FCOs. They appear to be uniforms of the State Government and yet the commissioner in a letter to me, which is contained in my written submission to you, completely disowned FCOs except in a section 44 situation or a burn-off, and I ask: is this a conflict? Is there a precedent? What should the public assume these people to be - State or local government officers?

CHAIR: What do you say about the controversy over the dual accountability of fire control officers? What is your position on that?

Mr MEREDITH: From an association point of view?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr MEREDITH: The association has still before it a past motion that says local government should be involved. I know that Dee Wilkes-Bowes gave evidence last week and she put forward, I think, a proposal that is based roughly on the Western Australian system.

My own personal view is that it has been made an impossible situation. I do not think much has been done to try to resolve it, so you have this parting of the ways between the two. I do not know how you can possibly run an effective bush fire fighting system considering the history that has gone on by separating the two and trying to run a centralised system such as Victoria has been running for many years.

The differences in climate and geography are such that you would end up with four separate systems, possibly, to accommodate that.

I know that proposals, or a proposal, for option C was put last week, and it was referred to this morning. If I remember rightly, it incorporates some form of zoning system. As one witness put to you: do you build 146 control centres or do you build 60?

The ability to communicate today means that there are areas no doubt where there could be a very effective zoning system. I can see that at times in particular local government areas, and Coffs Harbour was one of them, the situation was and is downright impossible.

CHAIR: Is it getting better, do you think, with the separation?

Mr MEREDITH: I do not believe that the financial side has been taken into effect. If there is a separation and there is a section 44 fire, as we had in 1994, the resources of the Coffs Harbour shire, or the then city, were put at the disposal of the fire authorities. Now, are they going to do that in the future or to the same extent or with the same speed or with the same attitude? I do not know.

CHAIR: Are you aware of option C to the extent that you could comment on what you think would actually work with the zone management and local management councils and direct employment of the fire control officers?

Mr MEREDITH: I think so but I have to say that I have not thought it through. I can see that it would, again on how it is now. Whether it would work or not would depend on whether the Local Government Act and the Rural Fire Service Act are clearly compatible and do not clash. I think if they clash there is a problem in any case whichever organisation is in existence.

CHAIR: Mr Moran, do you have a general statement you would like to make at all?

Mr MORAN: Not really. I have not had much notice I was going to be here. I have a lot of information there, if you want to ask questions.

CHAIR: I will continue with just a couple more questions and then I will pass you on to Mr Bull. Forty-seven per cent of properties are not insured and State Forests also do not provide a contribution. How do you think we could bring those into the system so that they make a contribution?

Mr MEREDITH: I believe Coffs Harbour now has just short of 30,000 individual rate assessments each year, and that pretty well covers property, other than that which is owned by the Crown. I personally am a believer in "everybody pays", and I think there should be a levy on every rate assessment.

CHAIR: And on State Forests as well, presumably?

Mr MEREDITH: There is a problem, because if you do a rate assessment for Pittwater, it is quite a different lot of money if it is done on a percentage basis to what it will be out at Wee Waa. Obviously there has to be some sort of balance.

CHAIR: So a levy on rateable properties?

Mr MEREDITH: There has to be either a percentage adjustment or some money would have to flow from Newcastle-Sydney-Wollongong, often called NSW. It would then have to flow out to the outer reaches.

CHAIR: Clearly it is unfair right now when half the people are paying most of the cost. It has to be fixed up by some means.

Mr MORAN: There certainly has to be something.

Mr MEREDITH: You can get a pretty horrific fire levy. You still have to fight your own fires. I am not talking about myself, but it does happen elsewhere, and you can be next to someone who is boasting that they do not pay for their insurance, and if they do get burnt out, then the money comes to them through a fund or something, and you wonder who is the fool.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Firstly, in your submission you say that the Rural Fire Service needs to be committed primarily to bushfire suppression followed by rural fire fighting where essential to stop empire building. Now, you are obviously concerned about the FCOs being responsible to Rosehill, or Rosehill having too much say on the local fire operations. Would you like to expand a bit?

Mr MEREDITH: Well, the first thing is that there is no-one else organised for bush fire fighting. If the Rural Fire Service does not see that as its primary task, who does? That is the first thing.

Second - and I can only talk about my own local government area, and I can talk about three brigades which are similar to my own - my own brigade abuts the Pacific Highway. Three minutes fire-truck-drive down the road is the New South Wales Fire Brigades.

My brigade is responsible now for the section of the Pacific Highway that is along its own border. That is the information supplied by the brigade. I asked my captain if we had been consulted, because perhaps I was not at a meeting where there was such consultation. No. Have we had any training? No. Do we have any equipment? No. But we are responsible for a section of the highway.

On the other hand, the New South Wales Fire Brigades has just moved from inside Woolgoolga on to the highway, so they are much faster to get to the scene of an accident.

Further, my own brigade is waiting for a new shed. To go to the current shed, they have to leave, get in their cars, go down the Pacific Highway towards Woolgoolga into a place called Safety Beach, pick up the tanker and bring it back out again and go along, if you will, behind the New South Wales Fire Brigades.

When the New South Wales Fire Brigades attend and they see further south the Bonville brigade or the Boambee brigade they turn round and go home. They do not interfere and they do not get involved.

Vehicle accidents are an extremely complicated and technical matter, especially if it is a vehicle carrying anything hazardous, and there are even special techniques for getting at people who are trapped in air bags and so forth.

Further north in a place called Halfway Creek on the way to here it is the only brigade, so they have to be involved; there is nobody else. But I cannot understand the philosophy that has been applied to Coffs Harbour, and I personally think it is dangerous.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Has your brigade had sufficient training in handling those road accidents?

Mr MEREDITH: To the best of my knowledge we have not, no.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Do you carry foam on your trucks?

Mr MEREDITH: We have bush fire fighting foam and foam for our own service trucks but we have none of the suits or the specific arrangements. We have a broom and in fact we did have a call out where the brigade was called out to an oil spill. The local town brigade turned out. They were sent back. A phone call had to go to the depot in Coffs Harbour, and this is at night of course, the fellow had to go down, open the depot, get the disperser, bring it out and work on it.

My question to the captain when she gave this story, was, "Didn't you take our truck" and she said, "No, I just went in my car. I worked from my mobile phone" and I said, "Well, was the FCO in the headquarters" and she said, "No, he was at home". I said, "So you were not taped?" I mean, phone conversations are taped for obvious reasons and she was there, responsible for an oil spill. To me it is not on.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: If I can go back to the original question of your preparedness for road accidents and that sort of thing, this empire building, do you believe it is more a perception than a reality, the fact that there are probably more uniforms and more vehicles? Is that your major concern or is it loss of local autonomy?

Mr MEREDITH: Loss of local autonomy. You constantly come up with a sort of a dichotomy. The official statement which Mr Koperberg made in a magazine published in December, the *Bushfire Bulletin*, indicates that local government has control. That indicates they have hiring and firing responsibility and local control. Our former mayor says they do not, and I have heard enough stories elsewhere from people who keep saying that they cannot get rid of their FCO if they do not like him --

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Is that any reason to get rid of someone, just because you do not like them?

Mr MEREDITH: Well said. No, I think it is a bit more serious than that. Firefighting is a serious business and if the FCO has been behaving in such a way that they think, and I am talking now about council, that council thinks they should not have him, they have a problem as I understand it.

Mr MORAN: Would you believe completely misleading council would be a justifiable reason to get rid of a fire country officer? Would you like me to tell you a bit more of what happened to us? At Eastern Dorriggo we had a brigade and there was a motion put through by the general manager and the fire control officer to split this into two brigades, Ulong and Lowanna.

This was duly done on 13 May, 1996. Nobody in that brigade was notified that this was going to be done. The councillors at that meeting asked the fire control officer had everyone been consulted. Yes, they had all been consulted. I was the president of our local fire brigade in Eastern Dorriggo. None of us knew - that was on a Thursday night - until it came out in the paper on the Saturday morning. Do you think that is a fair and equitable way of dealing with brigades under your control?

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: I am not here to answer your questions. You are here to answer mine.

Mr MORAN: I will give you leave to answer one. You have had a little bit more experience of these inquiries than I have.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: You made a couple of comments in regard to the uniforms of the Rural Fire Service. In one statement you said that respect is not conferred by the wearing of a police-like uniform; it is earned by the genuine display of honesty, integrity trust and respect. Earlier in your submission you referred to it as a State-type uniform and I think inferred that the wearing of that sort of uniform can intimidate people.

Just on the issue of the uniform itself, is it because it is a militaristic-type uniform with lots of trappings on the shoulder pads or do you think if it was a more Australian-type uniform that it may be more acceptable?

Mr MEREDITH: I was in the army for 27 years. I do not regard it as a militaristic uniform. I regard it as a State uniform, not unlike the uniforms that prison officers and police wear. In fact I think the uniforms are issued by the police department. I am not against the uniform. I think an FCO should have one, but I do ask, and you have there Mr Koperberg's letter to me in which he said "I have absolutely no control over fire control officers except in a section 44 situation or a burn off" in which case there is a closed system apparently.

Now, I want to know, and I am only talking about FCO's at the moment, they are paid council officers - they are not like if a council parking officer wears a uniform, he does not wear the uniform of the grey nurses, the parking police, he wears a completely and identifiable uniform. In this case, I submit to you, it appears to me to be a State Government uniform but they are not representing the State Government.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: What difference does it make if they are all in track suits? Is it that you believe that there are just too many people in uniforms?

Mr MEREDITH: No.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: It is a bit like a situation where you think that just because the Salvation Army is out at a fire or out at some catastrophe and 10 of them are in uniform and you might have 200 St Vincent De Paul men who have no uniform but everybody will make the comment, "Aren't the Salvos great" and they are but they have a distinctive uniform.

Mr MEREDITH: My point is deeper than that. I am asking if they are in a standardised uniform throughout the State, who is running them as a uniform body if Mr Koperberg is not, and that is according to his letter. That is the basis of my question.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: It is also probably the basis for this inquiry. This is one of the fundamental issues that has to be resolved on the future role of council and local government in bush fire management, bush fire services management. Everything leads back to this eventually. At Coffs Harbour you are in the process of a legal agreement to exit local government out of the local bush fire operations. Is that something that you personally are happy about happening now?

Mr MEREDITH: Personally I think it is a disaster but I think it is the only way Coffs Harbour City Council can go.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Mr Meredith, near the top of page 8 of your submission you say that experienced bush fire fighters are leaving because they have been driven out, cannot put up with the red tape, cannot be bothered with something that was once a pleasure to them or are getting older. Now we are all getting older, but leaving that aside, is that anything other than an emotive statement or is there any factual basis to that?

Mr MEREDITH: I believe there is a lot of factual basis. For instance, in 1994, of the three experienced group captains in Coffs Harbour, two have gone and if you were to ask them --

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Left or died?

Mr MEREDITH: Sorry, one has completely left the service and one is a life member of the brigade. I do not know whether - I presume he is not a firefighter as such but he is a life member. They have ceased to be group captains. They were very experienced. One was extremely experienced and they just fell into the category of being felt they were driven out and they in fact took their matter up with council and with the mayor.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: If I could put another quote to you also from page 8, you say that training is an excellent substitute for experience, especially if it is impossible to get the necessary experience, but it must always be just that, basically a substitute.

Mr MEREDITH: Yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: I take it that you are not advocating learning on the job by trial and error, are you?

Mr MEREDITH: No. I spent a life time or a near professional life time in training, because if it does nothing else the army trains. I was part of that system. What I am getting at, though, is take an analogy, if the army can, it will use people who have been in fighting to train people who are coming on and when you do not have fighting you just have to rely on training.

Bush fire fighting is quite different because you can join a brigade and very shortly afterwards find yourself in a hot summer and you are an active bush fire fighter with the necessary training. But experience, as I have said there, a person with experience is a valuable asset and should be used to the utmost, whether they are used as firefighters, trainers, advisers. I know in my past elsewhere that any resource that was available you used.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: In your submission you use the term, "bigger is not better" and you say there is a need for smaller tankers. Are you aware that there are in fact some 12 categories of tanker available?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: And that each of the 12 categories have variations that can be applied to meet local needs?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: You are aware of that?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: So why are you saying there is a need for smaller tankers? Presumably smaller tankers are available?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes, but the way it seems to work is the bigger the tanker the better. Now my own brigade years ago had an offer of what is called a Cat 7. We realised we could not get a Cat 7 through the bananas so we asked for a smaller Cat 9 which we received. It is that sort of approach. My own basis for that to start with is the need for diesel trucks.

You may note that I have mentioned the Senate inquiry into disaster management and that Senate inquiry mentioned that after 11 years, and that was I think 1991, from a coroner's inquest into an 8-point disaster where he had recommended the dieselisation of the New South Wales bush fire fleet at the time, after 11 years they mentioned it still had not happened. I am mentioning that today it still has not happened.

My own belief is that to make money go further one needs to look at trucks that deliver the same number of people, have foam-proportioning equipment to make the water go a long way further

and techniques that avoid having to have large vehicles stuck in the bush, and there are some techniques. For instance, they were used in 1994 in Warringah shire in the Sydney bushfires.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: You have recommended in your submission that tanker trailers should be retained across the State. Given the difficult terrain and topography of significant areas of the State, can you tell the Committee how you have reached the conclusion that the retention of tanker trailers for firefighting will, in your view, provide a safe working resource?

Mr MEREDITH: There is an old saying that five minutes saves five hours. If the trailer and the people are nearby and they can get to the sign of smoke quickly and extinguish it, then the problem is over. You have not got a big fire. While I heard the gentleman before mention the expense of trailers, it is possible that the five uses that he did say were occurring each year may well have stopped five large fires. I just would not know. But that is always the problem with any sort of emergency equipment. Its quick and ready use possibly inhibits expenditure on it.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You do not think that interested landholders - and all landholders are interested in fire suppression especially on their own place - would try to find the financial resources to have that sort of equipment on their place anyway? For instance, I have got my own fire trailer, which I bought from the local stock and station agent. I do not expect to have a tanker on a small property, so I look after myself. If a small fire breaks out I can put it out.

Do you not think it is more the local landholder who would be looking after himself in that respect rather than spending money for the Rural Fire Service to put money into that area?

Mr MORAN: You mean the fire tankers?

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: No, the trailers.

Mr MORAN: I am in the process of doing that, of getting a trailer, because, as I said before, we have been split up into different fire brigades. It was only for one reason: to get a certain person to become captain, and that happened last night. Their annual meeting was last night and they are flat out getting enough people to fill the positions. They had some positions they had to leave vacant last night with the active and non-active members.

I think definitely the trailers would still be good in country where you cannot get the big tankers in. I am against big tankers because they are big. They might be good on the open country where you cannot get big tankers in, but in the rough territory and where we are, in the mountainous country and the heavily timbered stuff, trailers definitely still would be useful.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Mr Meredith, I just want to come back to two things that have been said to clarify it for myself. With regard to your point about training, I understand that you are saying that it is preferable that people should not only have the competence to train others but also should have fire experience as well as opposed to those who have no fire experience but have been trained to train?

Mr MEREDITH: I think you have put it admirably. I think definite experience and with adequate training.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Back to the uniform situation, do I gather with the uniforms the point you are trying to make is not so much the uniform itself but the apparent statewide nature of the design of the uniform and to uphold that those FCOs really work for the commissioner rather than work, as they are purported to, for the council?

Mr MORAN: Exactly.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Just to follow on from that, do not the dog catchers and the ordinance officers in the councils have identical uniforms across the State?

Mr MEREDITH: Frankly, I would not know.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Well, they do. And also those employed by local government. When you were talking about the fire at Woolgoolga and you were looking after the highway, I think it is called primary accreditation?

Mr MEREDITH: The people behind me might know. I do not.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: I think that is the term. Are you aware that the Woolgoolga Fire Brigade is primarily an accredited road rescue unit, so it is the primary accredited road rescue unit in your area? In fact, the Woolgoolga Rural Fire Brigade would be called out to provide fire protection only and, in that regard, only class A foam, the foam used by the firefighters, is required to be on board. In other words, what you have said is not necessary. Woolgoolga Fire Brigade, the town brigade, covers the highway. It is the primary accredited brigade. The rural fire brigade is actually only looking after the fire side of it. It is not primarily accredited to look after road accidents.

Mr MEREDITH: It is not the information that I have, but I hope you are right.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: So you are not aware of that?

Mr MEREDITH: No.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Were you aware that the category of tankers identified in each rural fire district is determined upon a standards of fire cover report?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You might just expand on the standards of fire cover report, because I do not think we have talked too much about that in the inquiry. I think it is something we should look at for that area. This report is compiled from input from the local FCO and the regional co-ordinator, in consultation with head office, to take into account fire history, topography and existing resource levels of fire brigade units. You say you are aware of that. You might be able to just explain to the Committee just what the standards of fire cover is about.

Mr MEREDITH: I think that there are people, again, behind me far qualified than I am.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Could you tell us a little bit of how much you understand it?

Mr MEREDITH: Well, I understand that the fire need of the area concerned is assessed and the appropriate vehicle is selected. In the case of the last such document passed by council in Coffs Harbour that I know of, we found it by accident because one of my members found the proceedings of the council very untidy in the library so she tidied it up and then we found who was getting what vehicle. Our group captains did not know, and certainly at this time we did not know.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You are saying that your group captains were not involved in it?

Mr MEREDITH: The two group captains that I am thinking of definitely did not know. I cannot elaborate except to say that there is an assessment of the need. Quite often I feel that it is wrong because you will find people with a tanker that is inappropriate, normally too big for the area.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Are you aware that it was the New South Wales Farmers Association representative on the Bushfire Council who moved the adoption of the technical subcommittee's report that tanker trailers be removed from the equipment catalogue?

Mr MEREDITH: I am not aware of that.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Are you aware that the service has reintroduced tanker trailers in the western region where the terrain allows them to be use safely?

Mr MEREDITH: So, therefore, my suggestion is right, I presume?

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: No, I ask you the questions.

Mr MEREDITH: No, I am not aware but I think it is a good idea.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: You have criticised the service for not getting it right with its tanker replacement program. Do you know how many new or reconditioned tankers have been funded over the past five years?

Mr MEREDITH: I know it is listed in this document, this magazine here. I know it is in the hundreds. Would you like me to table that?

CHAIR: I think you have already.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: It is 1,318. Do you know how many tankers will be funded over the next three years?

Mr MEREDITH: I know that it is in here, but I would not dare say.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: It is 1,000.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: If you know the answers, why are you asking the questions?

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: I am providing the information.

CHAIR: Would you please table that document.

Magazine tabled

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Do you concede that the Government's tanker replacement program being overseen by the service is, in fact, the most significant modernisation program that the fleet has ever seen?

Mr MEREDITH: Yes, I do. I do not know that it is adequate, but, yes, it would have to be.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: This must be some advance, if you concede that?

Mr MEREDITH: I might add, Mr Chairman, the prices of the vehicles are pretty horrendous - I think \$190,000 for a Cat 1 - and it goes down. At morning tea time I was made aware of a factory in Queensland which is producing what appears to be a vehicle between a Cat 7 and a Cat 9 for something like under \$30,000 on the basis that they produce one a day, and they have a production line system. I have forgotten the name of the firm but I think it is IXL in Queensland.

But what I would say, sir, is that there should be - I am trying to stick to Australian-made, if I can - a vigorous search and continual testing to ensure that the best possible product is produced. For instance, at a meeting in Casino last October, it was alleged that everything was perfect, as it were. Two weeks ago at the brigade meeting the FCO told us that there was not one - and these are his words that I am now using - fire protection system for a tanker that the CSIRO regarded as acceptable, including freshly or newly made tankers.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Mr Moran, you said earlier that no-one at East Dorriggo Brigade knew about the proposed split in the brigades and that the council proceeded without consultation. I have here the Internal Audit Bureau report that you referred to entitled "Inquiry into Coffs Harbour City Council Bushfire Service", which states:

In February 1996 the mayor visited Mr Kavanagh's home and discussed the petition with him.

Can I assume from this document that your earlier comment was incorrect given that Mr Kavanagh is the captain of East Dorriggo Brigade?

Mr MORAN: He was the captain then. He did visit there and he said there was a move but there was nothing really specific discussed about when it was going to happen or anything like that.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: But it does say "the mayor visited Mr Kavanagh's home and discussed the petition with him"?

Mr MORAN: But not at any length.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: So they did know about the proposal?

Mr MORAN: There had been several meetings over about three years and the vote was round about 70 to 10 or 15 or something like that all the time and there was a petition taken around. Not everyone was asked to sign the petition, just certain ones. It was put through council, and the person who is the captain, who was made captain after, he wrote the submission that went into council, "We will do this; we will do that." That was his own writing.

CHAIR: We heard a comment from Ray Collyer that local brigade disputes should be resolved at the local level. However, we have heard from some individual brigade members of problems that they have encountered within their brigade which have not been able to be resolved. Do you believe that there is a need for an independent grievance process to assist in these sorts of disputes? Have you given any thought to how such a process might work? Would it be feasible to use a mediator who sits outside the RFS?

Mr MEREDITH: Mrs Colby in her report suggested that there be a grievance process. The one that I put to her was that the problem be solved with advice to the person who was not solving the problem given the time delay, and this is a standard military procedure of redress of wrongs, to go to the next highest up with that advice. She said that is the system in the State Government. I agree with you.

Round about 4 March 1997 a number of us made submissions to that inquiry. We were called in individually to an acting regional co-ordinator - I think it was Terry Jones - the mayor and the general manager.

The general manager assured me, and I presume that he assured all the others, that they would introduce the same system as the council had introduced for its own staff.

Occasionally I ask my brigade captain if anything has come through on that and she has always said no. So I do not know if there is a system there but I think there is a need. One should not have to go to the Ombudsman to solve relatively simple questions like the one that was put to you last week. I think, arguably, if it cannot be resolved easily within the system and because of this system vis-a-vis local government, then possibly it is better to find some outside unit or source that could do dispute resolution.

(The witnesses withdrew)

BRETT STEPHEN CONDIE, Fire Control Officer, Nymboida Shire Council and Grafton City Council, Through Street, South Grafton, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity do you appear before the Committee?

Mr CONDIE: I appear before the Committee as an officer of the Rural Fire Service and the Fire Control Officer of the Nymboida and Grafton Rural Fire Districts.

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr CONDIE: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr CONDIE: I am.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage during your evidence that in the public interest certain evidence or documents you may wish to present should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee would be willing to accede to your request and resolve into confidential session, but I should warn you that the Parliament may override that decision at any time and may make your evidence public.

Do you have a statement that you wish to make?

Mr CONDIE: I would like to take the opportunity to briefly address the Committee, mainly in terms of the issue of my motivation in having made a submission to this inquiry.

It is my experience over some 17 years that the Rural Fire Service is an extremely dynamic and evolving organisation. As you would expect with the sort of growth that has occurred, the change does not come without some growing pains and an occasional stumble along the way.

The last 10 years have seen an enormous amount of change for the Rural Fire Service and the rural communities that it serves. I think that everyone can identify with at some time struggling to cope with the current changing environment that we live in. The Rural Fire Service and its volunteers are in no way different in this regard.

The challenge for the service as I see it now is how well it identifies and implements the need for change. The challenge for us as individuals is how we cope and, where possible, assist with the change process for the betterment of the community.

Whilst it has been said that there are some aspects of this inquiry that are no doubt welcomed, I think it is also fair to say that the inquiry also brings with it some anxiety within the service.

I have found during my career that processes such as this will often have no problem motivating those people with complaints or grievances, but that same process often has difficulty in determining the measure of level of support or acceptance for any particular issue.

I might be so bold as to generalise that unless there is an obvious downside or direct negative impact, a large percentage of the stakeholders will not make their position known. It was, therefore, my intent through the submission to provide the Committee with an insight to the district that I work in and to provide an idea of how that operates.

It is my belief that that district operates effectively, for the most part, but obviously it is at times not without its problems. I qualify this statement by saying that the success of operations is largely, if not entirely, due to the professionalism and the goodwill of all stakeholders, from the white helmet volunteer, to the salaried officers of the service, the council, right through to the council and the mayor.

Generally speaking, it is my experience that when problems have occurred the cause can be very largely attributed to a breakdown in the professional focus of the individual or group or a breakdown in the lack of goodwill between stakeholders. Obviously, like any organisation, we have our share of problems, and I think it is only fair that during the course of any discussion I should be happy to expand on any of those problems. At this point I would be happy to entertain questions. Thank you.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: You said in your statement, Mr Condie, that the inclusion of the consultant process with bushfire management committees prior to the appointment of incident controllers should help to resolve some of the local conflicts and concerns. Is this a proposal that has been put up or is it something that is in the planning?

Mr CONDIE: No, that is a current policy in relation to the operation of bushfire management committees under the co-ordinated planning arrangements for each district's operations plans. It, in fact, composes a list of preferred section 44 appointees and class 2 incident controllers. In that respect, that is something that is in place now and it is currently being operated within our district.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: You have been employed by council for 17 years, I understand?

Mr CONDIE: That is correct.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Is it all that time in the fire area or have you had previous experience in other areas within the council?

Mr CONDIE: My current position is one that has evolved. I worked within the council structure initially as a town planning and engineering draftsman. At that time the council had a part-time fire control officer who was also an officer of the council. Very early in my employment I became the part-time deputy fire control officer and the position and structure that is now in the district has evolved over that period of time.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Given that experience, what is your view then on the dual accountability role, and there are a number of options. One is the proposal we have heard that you be under the operation and administrative control of the Rural Fire Service and the other one is that you remain under council command and control until a fire reaches a section 44-type position. What are your views on the most appropriate form of employment?

Mr CONDIE: If I could perhaps just qualify one point in terms of my current perception of the existing arrangement and that is that the existing arrangement is that I am accountable to council in terms of the administrative functions of the service. On all matters operational I have an accountability and there is a clear chain of command that goes through to the Commissioner for the Rural Fire Service and it is important that I guess we have an understanding of what that operational function is. It by no means is restricted to section 44 declarations.

In terms of the initial thrust of your question, I am at times probably out of step with some of my colleagues in that I find that the current dual accountability within our local district in fact works

quite harmoniously and that there are no current problems. Notwithstanding that, I am fully aware that there are many districts that do have quite major problems with the dual accountability issue.

I think it is fair to say that in the long term the dual accountability issue has to be resolved because even in my current situation the fragility of the good working relationship remains there. The whole environment we work in is very dynamic. If for argument's sake that current level of goodwill were to in any way diminish, then that could lead to the sorts of problems that are occurring in other districts.

I think in the long term the service is going to continue to move towards resolving that issue and I think ultimately it will probably resolve it with the fire control officers becoming more accountable to the service, but I think part of that process is that we have to recognise the important contribution that exists in many districts above and beyond just a financial contribution and we have to ensure that those relationships, where they can be, are preserved so that those things that we cannot put a dollar and cent value on are certainly maintained.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Do you see regionalisation as being a sort of a solution to this?

Mr CONDIE: I believe regionalisation will play a part in that process. I can speak again from my own experience, that the local government structure around Grafton is probably fairly well known to a lot of people and the future of council amalgamations and the like is one that has been talked about there for quite some considerable time.

The current situation is that the five councils within the Clarence valley are in fact embarking upon the exploration of the zoning concept as we speak. We are currently arranging for the consultation process to occur through the brigade structures and the like and we are going to undertake a full assessment of that as a management option with the view that councils will ultimately make a decision as to whether they move in that direction or not. So I do believe that will play a major role.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: How many FCOs are there in the five shires?

Mr CONDIE: I have the Grafton district and the Nymboida district. There is a fire control officer at Maclean, one at Copmanhurst and one at Ulmarra.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Your situation is probably typical of the other side of the Blue Mountains where the fire control officer has come up through the system and gravitated to the position and in some cases might be a yes, yes, officer as well, so your comments are interesting on the dual accountability, in particular because I think you are probably the only one who has three masters, two general managers to answer to. Does that make it any more difficult?

Mr CONDIE: I might qualify that if I may. The arrangement with Grafton is not unlike the current proposal or one of the models that is put up for zoning, I think it is the first model where basically one council delegates its fire control functions to the other councils, so realistically I remain accountable to Nymboida council and it is accountable then to Grafton in terms of the provision of services and the service levels provided. So that is the way that works.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You might be able to explain to the Committee the standards of fire cover, what is involved in that, how it came about, who actually puts it together and what it is used for.

Mr CONDIE: The standards of fire cover is an assessment tool basically is the simplest way I can put it. It is a means and I cannot help but note that you earlier read from a list of criteria that were looked at and I do not have those criteria with me but basically those sorts of criteria are looked at on a district basis.

Now that criteria will basically help to steer the service in the direction of the extent of resourcing and the level of service that might be required for each area. As we know, rural areas are very diverse in their nature and each brigade, you could have two adjoining brigades that might have totally different needs and operations and therefore have different resource requirements.

So effectively the standards of fire cover seeks to quantify a lot of those different criteria and then by virtue of the collecting of that data, there is then a means of making an assessment as to resource requirements. Another very important part of that process I believe is then the ability to make an assessment on a district-by-district or region-by-region basis. In fact, in my district and throughout the northern region at this present time, there is a major review of the standards of fire cover occurring.

That information is being collected and will to some extent help to identify where our major resource needs are. It is not a dissimilar process to what we undertake locally in terms of our longer-term resource planning. It is a longer-term resource planning tool that the service uses and will ultimately give a guide right across the State as to where resources are going to be most needed.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: It could put some pressure on some of the councils who do not adequately fund their fire services and it could shaft some who are over expending, perhaps.

Mr CONDIE: I believe ultimately that information will be able to be gleaned from the results of that process, yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: In your submission you do make mention of the need for flexibility and local input in the construction of tankers. Could you elaborate on that briefly for the benefit of the Committee?

Mr CONDIE: Yes, it is my belief and, I think the belief of others in my position, that the design of fire appliances for rural fire brigades is something that needs to be looked at in a slightly different way, perhaps, from the New South Wales Fire Brigades. One of the things that I think as a service that we struggle with is that the New South Wales Fire Brigades have been able to adopt a degree of standardisation with their appliances.

Generally speaking, the environment that they work in is often static. It is often very similar and, therefore, that standardisation has been readily achieved. I think to some extent there may be a philosophy, albeit not official, that we need to achieve maybe not the same degree of standardisation but achieve some standardisation and I would accept that that is achievable. At the same time, each region, each district and even down to brigade level can have different needs and the flexibility is there and we have made progress in that area and we are achieving that.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Can I ask you whether you are satisfied with the current design of tankers in all categories?

Mr CONDIE: I think it would only be fair to say that I have some concerns with some of the tanker designs, albeit that, again, from a district perspective we have been able to satisfy our own needs. We are similar to Lismore, having undertaken local builds through the same body builder and the design that has been largely adopted there has certainly fulfilled our needs and satisfied some of the

concerns that I have, albeit the concerns are more operational, not necessarily safety or design issues. I think I need to qualify that. But there have been some problems in that area and the service is in fact initiating a new process at the moment which I believe will help to alleviate some of those problems.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Do you think the current proposal to use local body builds for the construction of category 1 tankers will alleviate the delays you mentioned in your submission?

Mr CONDIE: I certainly hope so, and the indicators I have at the moment suggest that it should. I think it is fair to say that it probably has been one of my major criticisms that the service in terms of its tanker builds and supply of tankers, there has been a significant delay and a lot of that is tied up in contractual arrangements and those sorts of things, so I am not saying it is not without cause.

But it has been a real issue for districts in the timing, from the time they request the vehicle to the time it is approved and then to the time that it is actually put out for construction and then delivered. So it has been a real issue and it is one that obviously is now attempting to be addressed.

CHAIR: If you come up with design improvements do you let other fire officers know about the improvements throughout the State?

Mr CONDIE: I believe that design improvements are probably outside our area. Perhaps some operational improvements, those sorts of things, would generally be referred back through one of the committees, perhaps the technical committee. If we find that there is an improvement on a tanker or something that can be done better, we would certainly flag that as an issue and have it taken back through that committee so that it could be evaluated and perhaps if appropriate apply it on a wider basis.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: What are your views on the level of the quality of protective clothing provided to volunteers?

Mr CONDIE: I believe that currently the protective clothing that is being provided to volunteers is at a very high level. I think it is one of the areas that the service can really take pride in, that over particularly the last five to 10 years there has been a lot of research and development gone into protective clothing. I think that the standard that our volunteers are turning out at the moment in terms of the protection offered and the gear that they have is something that the service has certainly done very well in.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Having in mind your report to us and your length of service, what do you think has been the most significant changes made in the Rural Fire Service over the last few years?

Mr CONDIE: I think that the most significant changes that have occurred in my view in the service over, say, the last 10 years have probably been, and again I speak purely from my experience in my district, the achievements in terms of the improvement in training, the standard of training, the standard of the actual trainers who are providing the training, and the supporting resources for training have certainly, I think, been very significant.

It is very clear that there is a far greater availability of major equipment resources, particularly appliances, in the areas outside what we refer to as the NSW area, so that has certainly been a major and significant achievement.

Clearly, there has been a government commitment to make available additional resources, and that has probably, to some extent, resulted in those couple of changes.

The other thing that I think has happened at a district level is that over a period of time we have, in fact, seen a change in attitude. I am the first to say that it does not apply right across the district, but we have gone from a period of time where volunteers used to turn out to a fire sort of hanging off the back of a ute or a truck and thinking that it was a bit of an outing to a time when they have taken on board training. Not only have they taken it on board, but they have got more training. They see the professionalism of the service and, generally speaking, it has just been an overall attitude thing. I probably cannot really explain it beyond that.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: You have just said what a lot of other witnesses have said. There have been significant improvements in trucks or appliances, training, professionalism and uniforms over the last 10 years?

Mr CONDIE: That is correct.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: This might be a bit difficult for you to answer on the spot. We have made a quantum leap forward. What would you like to see happen in the next 10 years? Take it on notice if you want to.

Mr CONDIE: I probably would like to take it on notice, but I guess I would want to see some consolidation of where we are and, to some extent, from my district perspective, that evolution has occurred. I think that other districts are probably going through the same processes, but some of us are at different stages. So I guess I would like to see some consolidation to allow a bit of a catch-up in those areas where they perhaps have not progressed quite as far.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Are you finding it difficult to get recruits?

Mr CONDIE: We are finding it difficult at various times. Particularly during the working day crews can be difficult to muster. I guess I could amplify that to say that the major change that I think has occurred is that over a period of time there are fewer people now working either at home or perhaps on the land.

We have more people now who commute to the towns and that sort of thing to find work, so we are seeing a change. I guess it is a shift in terms of where people are earning their income from, and there are a number of issues that relate to that.

I do not believe that we are having any problems in the area with our level of membership. It is more an issue about what people are doing and when they are doing it.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Do they answer the bugle when it goes?

Mr CONDIE: When the balloon goes up we get them.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: And generally co-operation from their employers?

Mr CONDIE: We are fortunate in that most employers in the area are more than co-operative, more than understanding in terms of the commitment that is provided by volunteers, and, to that extent, we are fortunate, albeit, I will say, in this day and age with job security where it is I think it is better to say that volunteers are probably also a little bit more aware and a bit more astute in terms of when they take time off.

So, in other words, if it is not a major incident, then perhaps see if you can get a crew from somewhere else. But if it is a major problem their hands go up and they respond.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Have all of your volunteers got the appropriate uniforms and boots?

Mr CONDIE: I would say that not all of our volunteers have but all of our firefighters have.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: What's the difference?

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Active firefighters?

Mr CONDIE: Yes, active firefighters. We probably have a number of people in the service who have perhaps only just joined the service and are currently in the process of undertaking their basic training, or there may be people who have indicated that they wish to perform only in a support function. If that support function does not require protective clothing, they would not, but anybody who is in an active role would.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So anybody who is going to be at a fire scene would be properly dressed?

Mr CONDIE: Yes.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Does that equipment remain with the vehicles or in the brigade members' homes?

Mr CONDIE: All the personal protective equipment for our bush fire fighters is personal issue, so it is issued to the volunteers and they become responsible for their protective clothing.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: If a fellow living on a property came into town, his gear is at home. If he answers the bugle call from his workplace, he would not go home to get his gear?

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Not if it is raining.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: I was just going to expand a bit more on this zonal recommendation filed by the association that you mentioned earlier when Mr Lynn asked you a question. Has that got pretty widespread support amongst your brigade members and other authorities?

Mr CONDIE: In terms of the overall perspective. We are continuing to test the level of support for that as part of the overall zoning package because I see the zoning with the RFSA proposal that they are very close, but my knowledge is that within the normal region where the meeting was held and there was an assessment of those proposals it gained reasonable support from that meeting.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: And just one final question. The submission from the previous witnesses raised some concerns about the changes to the Act which they believe will lead to empire building and so on. Would you like to comment on that? Is that something that has been reflected in the Grafton area?

Mr CONDIE: Forgive me if I do not answer your question, but I would comment and say this: that I cannot help but see that the issue of control seems to float to the top and, again, from a personal point of view, the issue of control at our district does not seem to be the issue. The issue is who is doing the job and is the job being done.

I tend to suggest that some people may be a little paranoid about the bureaucracy of it all and I cannot help but feel, having read some of the previous transcript, that some of the concerns and problems that have perhaps been aired are local issues. I do not see that the Rural Fire Service as an organisation is part of the problem.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: It could be sorted out at a local level?

Mr CONDIE: Well, I think it should be.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Mr Condie, I have a series of questions for you all interlinked that I understand you may not have an exact answer for but I would expect you to have some understanding. Firstly, what is the general remuneration for a fire control officer? How much variation is there from council to council? What are the criteria by which a council determines the level of remuneration? And, finally, do you see any likely move towards a standardisation of remuneration?

Mr CONDIE: There is no standard remuneration for a fire control officer, to my knowledge. There is wide variation right across the State as to what fire control officers are paid. There is also wide variation across the State as to what fire control officers are expected to do. Where did we go from there?

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: That was pretty much three of them. Well, really, I did not ask if there was a standard, because I understand there is none. That part of the question was whether there is a likely move or is there any move towards standardisation. The other part of the question was: can you give us a general understanding of the range in which fire control officers are paid? Are vehicles supplied?

Mr CONDIE: I am not able at this point to provide that information. However, that information, I am sure, would be available if the Committee required it. In terms of the move towards standardisation, I can only advise the Committee at this point that the Municipal Employees Union is currently pursuing a fire control officers award and it is in some state of deliberation and I think it is being negotiated with the LGSA. It may even be before a tribunal.

CHAIR: I think we will ask the commissioner that question, anyway.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: And also the Local Government and Shires Association when you get to it. I would think it may be more appropriate.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Would it not be a downside for FCOs to come under the auspices of the Rural Fire Service, which I would think inevitably would lead to a standardisation, rather than the current situation, where you do have a great range of different remuneration?

Mr CONDIE: Look, I will be honest. It is possible that there may be a downside to that. From my knowledge, I would think that there would be more positives than there would be negatives in that area. That would be my overall gut feeling on that

(The witness withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

THOMAS LAWRENCE ADAMS, Business Manager, Firefighter and Member of Copmanhurst Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, 1616 Clarence Way, Copmanhurst, sworn and examined:

JUDITH KERRY GIBSON, Secretary, Copmanhurst Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, 2952 Clarence Way, Copmanhurst, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Mr Adams, did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr ADAMS: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr ADAMS: I am.

CHAIR: Ms Gibson, did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Ms GIBSON: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Ms GIBSON: I am.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage during your evidence that in the public interest certain evidence or documents you may wish to present should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee would be willing to accede to your request and resolve into confidential session. But I should warn you that the Parliament may override that decision at any time and may make your evidence public. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr ADAMS: On behalf of members of Copmanhurst Bush Fire Brigade, we thank you for the opportunity to make a submission for your consideration and for your invitation to be here to address you today. In preparing our submission to the inquiry, brigade members were mindful of the tremendous strides that have been made in the business of rural firefighting in recent years in New South Wales, and we, as well as our entire community, are grateful for this.

When considering what contribution we may be able to make to the discussion, we took the view that what is being undertaken with this inquiry is basically a review of some aspects of the present Rural Fires Act and the regime of management that it constitutes in New South Wales. This review is timely and, indeed, is logical in the same way all management regimes should be periodically revisited. We make our contribution in the spirit of open discussion and honesty in order that we may all move on to a better, more cohesive and efficient service.

As can be gleaned from our submission, there are two major areas that our membership is concerned about. Firstly, there is the matter of who owns the brigade and, secondly, there is the matter of communication and consultation. They are related. In fact, the second is a consequence of the first.

In small rural communities such as ours, the thing that binds the community together is the willingness to get together and share each others problems and get them resolved. We do this by just getting on with it and not waiting around for a local or State authority to come and fix it. This has always been the way we do it.

It was from this spirit that local Copmanhurst people got together in 1968 to form our brigade. For the last 32 years they have continued as a local community group performing a vital task, with the assistance of the shire and State Government. More recently in particular, levels of assistance have tremendously enhanced the brigade's operational capacity. It is most likely, though, that they would have continued as a brigade whatever the level of assistance may have been.

The brigade exists because the Copmanhurst community wants it to, not because the shire or the State Government wants it to. It exists because of a spirit of helping your neighbour when he needs help and because he will do the same for you. This same spirit is applied whether our neighbour is next door, in the Pilliga, the Hunter Valley, the Blue Mountains or suburban Sydney. The commissioner touched on this spirit in his address to the Committee last week.

Copmanhurst Bush Fire Brigade is a group of people in our community who are very, very proud of what we are and what we do. We are the Rural Fire Service. Members fully understand that part of the business of bush fire management on a statewide scale requires that a management structure is important. In fact, it is absolutely necessary. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service to some degree achieves its goals in this respect.

The sad consequence, however, of the growth of the bureaucratic structure that has occurred has been a change in the understanding of what the service means to members on the ground. Rightly or wrongly, there is an overwhelming belief that the brigades are perceived to be units in a vast army and the volunteers are its foot soldiers. The general tone of business is that of operating procedures, commissioner's regulations and instructions from above.

We know that this is not the intent of the Act. We would prefer to see an approach that recognised that our bush fire brigade is just that, our brigade, and a "how can we help you do your job" attitude be more obvious. At times it seems that we are the servants and the RFS is the master rather than the reverse. We are volunteers, not employees. This would not be helped by the removal of bush fire management from local government.

The evolution of RFS in recent years has created a regime in which there is communication, mostly mono-directional and not a lot of consultation. My colleague will address this further. Members of our brigade believe strongly that the management of rural fire services at a local level should be completely the responsibility of the shire council.

The present system has inherent shortcomings, and to pass full control to the RFS would further reduce the participation of volunteers at a local level. This does not mean that the relationship to the Rural Fire Service would change. It would simply mean that they would be dealing with a council officer. The council would have a defined role in fire management and the brigades would, through their local councillors, have a direct say in management at a local level.

At present we, who are the brigade, must accept whatever decision is made and need not be consulted. For example, each year our brigade submits an equipment requisition. This is collated with those from other brigades and a shire list is then submitted to the RFS. What is finally approved by the RFS is obviously subject to budget constraints and we accept this. What we have difficulty with and is likely to promote comments of wasted money is when we receive equipment that we have not requested or believe inappropriate for our brigade's purposes.

Consultation with the brigade prior to a final list being submitted would overcome this. If the office of fire control officer was totally the responsibility of council we would see that this was done by representation to the council. The important issue here, though, is what level of involvement

should brigades have in decisions that affect them directly in the day-to-day operation of their brigade. It is simply not sufficient to say we can make suggestions via the RFSA, et cetera that must negotiate several levels of representation to be heard at State level and then possibly be rejected.

The decisions that we want to be involved in are the ones that affect us every day. The present system works to exclude this. Full council control should provide a mechanism that could ensure that this happened. If the role of FCO is removed totally from council, brigades will have no direct link with local decision-making processes and their role as a local community group will be further diminished.

If the local progress association wants improvements in the park, they go to the council, not The Department of Works and Services. If the sports ground Committee has a problem with access roads they approach the council, not the Department of Main Roads. In the day-to-day business of the brigade we, the volunteers, are affected as much by local decision making as we are by decisions made at Rosehill and we are entitled to a voice in this process. Without this voice it is difficult for the brigade to be seen as a community group and the consequences of this has serious ramifications for future viability.

Membership of a local voluntary group can only be attractive if it is seen to be just that. We often hear it stated that there are 70,000 volunteers and what a great job they do. Whilst we recognise this unnecessary accolade, we would also like to see recognition of the fact that not only are we volunteers in a major State organisation, we are the organisation. Copmanhurst community owns our brigade, not Copmanhurst shire and not the New South Wales Government and we are very, very proud of it.

In addition to that, I want to refer if I may to a paragraph that was in our submission on page 3 to do with personal protective equipment. If I might just read that paragraph. Secondly, a very professional approach into researching the design of personal protective equipment has been taken by the RFS. Equipment that is available, though, is dependent upon a shire RFS budget's capacity to afford it.

Our brigade, the village protection brigade, presently possesses only four of the required structure helmets and required structure jackets. These required four helmets and jackets must be shared by all members. They are to be used at both structure fires and motor vehicle accidents and are insufficient for the brigade, as each type of incident could have two or more times those four members in attendance. Such limitations are a consequence of the shire's inability to fund the needed gear.

For some years now we have been watching on the nightly news brigades in the urban areas attending motor vehicle accidents and other major incidents kitted out in that sort of equipment and we have been wondering when is our turn going to come. I have to say here that our turn came this week. Ten sets of that equipment was issued to our brigade this week, and we are very grateful for that.

Ms GIBSON: Larry Adams has graciously introduced our brigade and our thesis. I will begin by saying my position in the Copmanhurst brigade is as secretary. Although I did complete a short basic training course, I have never fought a fire. In the desire to contribute and participate in my community, I joined the bush fire brigade knowing they were looking for a secretary, and I am it. We all have different skills and interests.

Incidentally, if anyone wonders about my accent or my vocabulary, I came from California to Australia in 1977 and I am now an Australian citizen.

In compiling the points our members wanted to make for our submission, it came to me that basic to most of the areas or issues we see as problematic is communication. It is like the weather; everybody talks about communication but nobody wants to do anything about it. In the US military they talk about the 10 per cent who never get the message. Sometimes in Copmanhurst we think we must be part of the 90 per cent who do not even know there is a message out there somewhere that we have missed.

Mr Koperberg spoke in his earlier presentation to this inquiry of meeting with 400 to 500 people who expressed their concerns, concerns, he suspects, which came about as a result of them not having the correct information; in fact, information which may be vital to the health, well being, education, aspirations and concerns of any of the 69,000 volunteer brigade members. This begs the question: whose responsibility is it to see that brigade members have the correct information?

I will give a small example of our problem. These are copies of *Quench*, a newsletter occasionally called a media release. All were issued by the Rural Fire Service media unit in Rosehill. From that it is hard to tell who is meant to be the ultimate recipient. Is it the media or is it us, the bush fire brigade? These particular copies, dated between 3 November and 5 January, were received by me on behalf of the brigade on 24 January, the day before our bush fire brigade's January meeting. Three months worth of *Quench* all in one fell swoop.

From their volume numbers I would say there are some missing. Were they important? We do not know. Among these papers dated 19 November is the announcement of just this Parliamentary inquiry, the one to which we made a submission which resulted in us being here today. So how did we know? Pure fluke. I read it in the newspaper. So the system works? Well, if that is the way it is supposed to work.

The local paper, *The Daily Examiner*, is not delivered to our brigade area which is 35 kilometres from the Grafton service area. It was by chance that I was in town that day, 5 January, and read the paper. Submissions were due in four weeks. On 10 January I asked in the council office if there were terms of reference and one was supplied to me with apologies, "You were supposed to have one of these".

There is another example, again thanks to the same newspaper. On January 31 one of us read that the Rural Fire Service engineer or technical officer would be speaking at a seminar on 10 February at the South Grafton Services Club showing the full range of equipment from fire trucks to boots and helmets.

One of our members made plans to go. The four attendees found the meeting informative and invaluable. They found they had received the wrong boots and that the flash helmets that they had received were the wrong type. They found that the faulty backpacks which had been received could, in fact, be returned and be replaced. They had not known this.

Is this the way it is supposed to work - management by newspaper? There are some possible proposed organisational charts which we received copies of. They were to be voted on at an RFSA meeting, but we did not know until a week after the meeting. Although they came through the RFSA, I am told that they were promulgated in Sydney. Those are the ones that you have been talking about, the A, B, C options.

Anyway, I was told that they were promulgated in Sydney by the Rural Fire Service. I do not plan to speak about any of them. I do not have an opinion. The point is that of the five different ways to organise a rural fire fighting system they all, without exception, have rural fire brigades on the

bottom of the chart with a one-way arrow pointing out. There is no arrow from the brigades going anywhere.

Mr Koberberg in his remarks spoke of material being censored by a local government council. I would be highly surprised if this happened to us. Maybe a fire control officer without sufficient clerical assistance is unable to get material out in a timely manner. Perhaps material from Sydney is sent on a need-to-know basis.

At any point along the way, information can be lost, withheld, diverted, misinterpreted, reinterpreted. Even training information yearned for by some members is announced after the fact or the week before and has been cancelled because not enough people have signed up. From our vantage point it is impossible to tell. All we know is our experience.

A fire service should have a sure-fire method of getting information out. Vital information may be received late or not at all. It is sometimes unclear or contradictory, at least by the time we get it. Is it any wonder rumours abound? The lines of communication should be a two-way street. That one-way line can be a heavy burden. Thank you for the opportunity of speaking.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: You also referred in your submission, Ms Gibson, to a perception of elitiness that exists within the Rural Fire Service and, as you have just summarised, communication but not consultation, and you have given some very good examples. What system do you believe they could incorporate to be more inclusive and to take away that perception of elitiness?

Ms GIBSON: Well, the elitiness - I am not sure if it is the same thing - has to do with some of the older members believing that their training is not good enough any more, the fact that they fought fires for years is not good enough, and that they have to start at the beginning and undertake training and do it all over again, so clearly, prior experience is not worth anything. I do not believe that is the case. I have heard today that it is not. But that is their belief. I do not know how we get around that. So they just simply do not come. They are still on the books as members but they simply do not come to the meetings.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: One of the conclusions you reach in this submission is that the Rural Fire Service should consider creating a position of one or more training co-ordinators, perhaps by region, who can work with fire control officers and, as well, individual brigades in identifying training needs and finding the resources and the personnel to meet these needs. Could you outline for the Committee why you feel such a position needs to be created and what its functions would be?

Ms GIBSON: We have had hardly any training at all offered to us this year. In fact, we have had it offered and members sign up for it and they wait and set aside their time for a weekend and then the night before a phone call comes saying, "Sorry, we are not going to have the training after all. It has been cancelled." And hardly any training has taken place for our members in this past year?

Mr ADAMS: One of the difficulties with it, we understand, is the lack of instructors in our area and, similarly, the lack of assessors and, further down the track, the lack of people to train instructors to be assessors. There are simply not the resources to provide the training. We have seen the training programs, and they are good, but it is like having a school without teachers. It is not being delivered in our area.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: That is interesting because previous witnesses, or a couple of them, tended to suggest that perhaps the service overemphasises training.

Ms GIBSON: We listened to that with amazement, actually.

Mr ADAMS: We can only speak for our area. Certainly that may be the case in other areas, in other districts or shires where they have those resources to deliver the training courses, but it simply does not happen in our area. Now, what the reason for that is goes beyond our experience. It is outside of our jurisdiction.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You are only a small brigade. I assume there is just one brigade within the shire?

Mr ADAMS: No, there are nine brigades in the shire.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: In the Copmanhurst shire?

Mr ADAMS: No, the Copmanhurst village, which is part of Copmanhurst shire. Our brigade has 70 people on the membership register and about 12 active firefighters.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: And you have an FCO based in the shire?

Mr ADAMS: In the shire, yes.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You seem to be having difficulty with your equipment requisitions. You indicated that you received equipment that you had not asked for or required. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Mr ADAMS: I guess the particular items are not of tremendous consequence, but, purely as an example, recently we were given a 65-millimetre triple-purpose director, which we do not have the capacity to pump water through in our brigade, or so I am told.

When those sorts of things occur, that promotes dissension and those sorts of feelings about wasted money and that sort of thing. But, really, the point we are trying to make there is that the business of consultation would overcome the result of that.

Recently, and I guess it is to do with standards of fire cover - I do not profess to be an expert on that system - we were issued with a bag of absorption material. I do not know whether there is anyone in our brigade, or certainly most members of our brigade are not competent in handling hazardous materials or anything like that. The concern that I would have there is that the fact that it may mean that someone may use it in a situation where it is not appropriate or it is dangerous for them.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: In your submission you talk about dual accountability, which you said almost amounts to non-accountability. It complicates more than budget matters. The first loyalty of FCOs has to be to those dependent upon them for access to information. Then you go on to say that the members of the Copmanhurst brigade believe strongly that control of local rural fire services should remain firmly with the shire council.

In one sense you are saying that you are opposed to the dual accountability and you want the control to remain with the shire council. Are you saying that there should not be any link with rural fire services?

Mr ADAMS: I guess the experts would be able to say at what point the Rural Fire Service would have input into decision-making. What we are referring to, I guess, is the business that affects us

in our day-to-day running of the brigade, not only in large-scale fire emergencies but in our day-to-day management of the brigade. That is what we are referring to.

I think the compromise that was brought about that has caused that dual accountability is inevitably going to have some sorts of problems. People have talked about that all day today. I suppose what we are saying is that that needs to be fine-tuned.

Our brigade's preference is for any decision-making that relates to day-to-day management of brigades, what equipment they have and training and all those sorts of things, to be wholly and solely in the court of the local government authority. Brigades in our situation, for example, if they were dissatisfied with something that was occurring, would be able to go to their local councillors, which would give them a more direct route to resolving issues.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: Ms Gibson, you have criticised the manner in which information and equipment are being provided to your brigade. Are you aware that it is your local fire control officer who works at the council who is responsible for providing this equipment, this material, to your brigade? You say that control of the local Rural Fire Service should remain firmly with the council, but there is an inconsistency between that and your submission.

Ms GIBSON: We are having great difficulty understanding the two responsibilities that the fire control officer has to the council and to the Rural Fire Service. We have talked to a number of different people, who tell us different stories.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: I am sure you would find him co-operative, would you not?

Ms GIBSON: I am sure he means to be.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Ms Gibson, do I understand that you have said in your submission or in your appearance here today that the only communication you actually get from the Rural Fire Service is these occasional newsletter-cum-press releases? Is that it?

Ms GIBSON: We get the bulletin that comes out quarterly.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So you get a quarterly bulletin?

Ms GIBSON: Yes.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: And about every quarter as well you get a bundle of news releases?

Ms GIBSON: That is what happens.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Is that normal or is that just in the last few months?

Ms GIBSON: I have not had any since then.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: What did you get before that, though? What was the general rule of what took place? What would you expect to happen based on the past record?

Ms GIBSON: I have had hardly any this year.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: This year is only March though. What about last year, 1999?

Ms GIBSON: Sorry, I meant in the last 12 months.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So the same as this: about every three months you get a bundle of press releases, or less frequently?

Ms GIBSON: They come spasmodically. I do not know when to expect them. I am trying to arrange something.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So there is no set correspondence, expectation of reports or information?

Ms GIBSON: Not from me.

CHAIR: Can you tell me whether as a result of these people who have simply walked away, as you have said in your submission, you will be less able to cope with bushfires in the next season?

Mr ADAMS: I guess it depends on the extent of the bushfires. It looks like, if the weather patterns continue, we may be looking at a serious season next year, due to the lack of rain that we have had. At the moment, as I said earlier, we have probably about 12 active members of our brigade that are there at our regular monthly training days and our regular monthly meetings and are taking part in hazard reductions and that sort of thing.

CHAIR: Is that fewer than before?

Mr ADAMS: My experience goes back five years with the brigade when I moved into the district, so I cannot really say. Certainly if there was a major emergency we would be able to draw on other people from around the district. But I think the point that Judith was making is that some of the older hands have walked away, perhaps on the basis of misinformation, but they have walked away. It is a pity that that has occurred, and we do not see that we can get them back.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Mr Adams, do you possess a category one tanker for village protection?

Mr ADAMS: We do, yes.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Are you aware that the 65-millimetre triple-purpose director and hose that you made mention of is for the use of town water for village protection?

Mr ADAMS: There is a town water supply with hydrants around the town and certainly that would be used in those circumstances, but with the major sorts of callouts or with most of the most callouts we get, that would not be an appropriate piece of equipment to have. I suppose the point is that maybe that could have been a lesser priority in terms of spending

(The witnesses withdrew)

NOEL DAVID BLIZZARD, Fire Control Officer, Byron Shire Council, 515 Broken Head Road, Broken Head, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity do you appear before the Committee?

Mr BLIZZARD: As a representative of the Rural Fire Service as a fire control officer.

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, sir, I did.

CHAIR: Are you familiar with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, sir.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage during your evidence that in the public interest certain evidence or documents you may wish to present should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee would be willing to accede to your request and resolve into confidential session, but I should warn you that the Parliament may override that decision at any time and may make your evidence public. Do you wish to make a submission?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes. In the submission that I made to the standing committee, which was only brief, I mentioned that the compatibility of the dual accountability is not always in the best interests of the service or the volunteers. Basically this statement is what happened to me within the council, and I believe that it relates also to other councils.

Currently the local council employs fire control officers, yet the responsibility for their position is governed by the Rural Fire Service as laid out in the Rural Fire Service Act and the standard operating procedures.

Byron Shire Council has always supported our brigades with the upgrading of vehicles and equipment, making our fleet one of the most up-to-date in the area. However, my experience has been that with the local councils the fire control officers of the Rural Fire Service appear to fit like a square peg in a round hole.

During the past three years or so, since being relocated from a run-down fire control centre to the new council chambers, we have had five different managers, three of whom have had no idea of the operational requirements of the service. We have been shuffled from department to department, including engineering, special projects, health and environment, and at one stage we were even under the manager of information technology.

I have had to physically shift my office, including all the radios and special equipment such as weather stations, et cetera, a total of three times, and even now we are not in a particularly suitable situation as we are now located on the first floor with no easy access.

We have noticed a considerable reduction in the number of volunteers who originally had regular access to our senior officers.

Unfortunately this issue has been highlighted a number of times at captains meetings but the situation has not been able to be resolved. Both the councils and the head office of the Rural Fire Service do not seem to understand workload and the time that is spent by the fire control officers

working after hours in this area. As well as being on 24-hour call for emergencies, we also attend senior management meetings, captains meetings, brigade meetings, training, public meetings, local emergency management committee meetings, et cetera.

I would estimate that I would spend at least 20 hours a week working outside the normal rostered working week. During the bushfire danger season when fire permits are issued, we can normally expect three or four phone calls per night and up to 20 per day on weekends. The Byron shire has upwards of 700 permits issued per season and all of these require at least one phone call every time a fire is lit.

Most of my senior brigade members are self-employed and so they tend to call off an evening with matters relating to brigade activities. The council and the Rural Fire Service do not tend to recognise the after-hours workload that is required and hence very little recompense is made by the way of overtime or time in lieu. Unlike our city counterparts, we get very little technical or clerical support. We have to rely heavily on volunteers to help with the workload.

An example of this is the compiling of a risk management plan. Originally the fire control officers were told they were only to oversee the project, but in reality during the past 18 months we have had to undertake 90 per cent of the work. This has meant that I have had to become proficient in producing a detailed map - the system the council uses is different from the one supplied by the Rural Fire Service - and learning from the beginning how to produce a plan of this magnitude.

Without the support of a committed volunteer who was prepared to spend at least four hours a day working with me throughout this period, I would not have finished this plan in the time allocated as we only had minimal help from the council and limited support from the Rural Fire Service. Generally it seems with the dual accountability, neither the service nor the council wants to accept the responsibility for supplying the resources and support to alleviate the enormous workload presently placed on fire control officers.

CHAIR: If option C, which presumably you are aware of, were to be introduced, how would it change your operations? How would it change your relationship to council also if you were employed by the RFS and not by the council?

Mr BLIZZARD: If I were employed by the RFS and not by the council and council had actually input into the committee, I believe that we would be able to put the pressure on to one single or on to the RFS to give us the resources to back up our workload.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: In your submission you have raised the issue of dual accountability of fire control officers and you state in particular that this is in your view not conducive in some areas to the efficient management of brigades. You also state about this issue in your introduction. Could you expand on your feelings regarding dual accountability and how in your view the problem can possibly be resolved?

Mr BLIZZARD: I believe the problem can be resolved by either going as a separate identity underneath the Rural Fire Service or belonging totally to the council and they have the control from there. At this stage I am not prepared to commit to a position on that because until I have spoken with my volunteers I believe they are the ones who have to make the commitment.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: In your submission you spoke about the management committee resolving this resolution which is the basis of your submission. Would you elaborate on who comprise the management committee and how wide spread is this obvious feeling you have expressed about council involvement?

Mr BLIZZARD: We have a senior management committee which consists of myself, deputy fire control officer, senior training officer, two group officers and a deputy group officer. We also have what is generally referred to as a captains meeting. We have expanded these meetings to also include the presidents of the brigades because we are finding that the information was not getting back and we hold these management meetings once every two months.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: So the management committee is only made up of the captains, yourself, the deputy and the group captains but none of the individual brigade members, volunteers?

Mr BLIZZARD: No, this was a management submission. We did ask through the captains that if the individual members wanted to submit submissions we would be there to give them the information that they required and to offer them any help in writing up the submission.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: What are your views on the level of protective clothing provided to volunteers?

Mr BLIZZARD: Within our shire I believe we are, as I said in my statement here, one of the best equipped within the brigades, to the extent that even the brigades themselves over the past three or four years have earned upwards of \$40,000 which they have turned around and bought equipment of their own volition.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: You say particularly here that you want to concentrate your evidence on the FCO issue. The issue which has been raised here earlier today and the term was, if we did not like our FCO, I am sure that is not quite what they meant, but if the FCO was not doing the job, they could not get rid of them, that they were two attached via Sydney and that at a local level the FCO could not be disposed of. What would you say about that?

Mr BLIZZARD: No, I disagree with that. I believe that if the volunteers had a real problem with the FCO and they handled it in the correct way by going through the correct channels, the FCO would certainly be reprimanded and if it kept going would be relieved of his position.

The Hon. C. J. LYNN: You appear to me in your assessment to be fairly critical of the RFS and council. Who in council, if you had your way, do you think would be most appropriate for you to work to and have you spoken to the general manager of the council about where you would best fit into council operations?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, I have. One of the problems that I have had is since I have been there I have had three different general managers. It seems to me that particularly departments, as with most of our council, if their resources are stretched or they are under big workloads, the first thing they want to shed is the Rural Fire Service.

CHAIR: How would the volunteers feel if you were employed directly by Sydney? Would they feel you were more accountable to Rosehill and would they feel less involved, do you think?

Mr BLIZZARD: I do not think it would particularly worry them one way or the other.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Is it your view that the Rural Fire Service provides you with sufficient information and firefighting equipment and is that getting through to the individual brigades in your area?

Mr BLIZZARD: If anything, the information they are given is overloading the people especially on training. There has been a complete sort of - the whole training has been reviewed and rewritten and I do know that some of the personnel are saying, "This is getting too much for us", especially at captains meetings where they take away a pile of documents. There was a problem and I think there still is a problem and this is why I said to you that we brought in the presidents of the brigades, too, to try to alleviate the information not going back to all the brigades.

Generally, it seems like if the captains or the presidents do not like the information that I have passed on to them, that seems to be where it stops. So we have now instituted a thing that on regular occasions I go round when I know the brigades are training and I just bring all the members up to date myself.

*Turn 19

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Sorry, I want to go back to my original question. Which department, if you had your preference, would you report to at the council?

Mr BLIZZARD: Probably the engineering department because this encompasses, as a general rule within the shires, the resources like the bulldozers and the graders, which we might need to call on, and you can then build up a rapport with that particular manager and he knows more the type of equipment and support that you need.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Have you made a submission to the general manager along those lines, that you think that is where you should be?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, sir, I have. I am not sure with this last general manager, but certainly during the last three years I have made that submission.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: We seem to be getting two views regarding training. Your immediate predecessor as a witness this afternoon seemed to be indicating that there is not enough training. This morning the New South Wales Farmers Association witnesses were suggesting that perhaps there is too much. Where does the truth lie?

Mr BLIZZARD: I think that depends on your brigades. Within the Byron shire we have seven brigades, four of which are extremely active and basically help cover towns and highways and seem to be more of an active body. The three others, which are more of a rural brigade, are not so susceptible to wanting to come in and put in the amount of training, so it varies from brigade to brigade, on their location and what their commitment is.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: The training is available, though?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, we make the training available to all people.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: I was asking a question about the management, which you answered, but what I really wanted to try to obtain from you was the level amongst your volunteers of dissatisfaction with the current regime. To help you a bit, we have had people giving evidence earlier this morning about quite a strong sense of disagreement with the way things are.

Mr BLIZZARD: It seems to me that the older volunteers, or the volunteers who have been there quite a number of years, are not responsive to the new training, and, to a degree, I can understand this. It is one of those things. I believe that the training that we are giving now is certainly necessary.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: The other issue about the council relinquishing any control over your position and fire operations, is that something that has widespread support in your area?

Mr BLIZZARD: We have only just recently started down this path, and at this stage I honestly could not comment on which way the brigades would support it. I believe it would split roughly. The three brigades that are out in the rural areas would not be as supportive as the four brigades that are more active in the town areas.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: It has been raised with us that equipment cannot be purchased outside the State, that is, outside New South Wales. Is there any truth in that? Is there a rule or is there just a sort of general belief?

Mr BLIZZARD: To be quite honest, I have never had the reason to purchase equipment. I put in my equipment lists and requests every year. There is always a certain amount of bargaining as to what we finally end up with, and that is distributed around the brigades as fairly and evenly as possible, but, other than that, the tankers that we buy we normally buy direct from the department or supply points.

With the other things that the brigades have purchased, they generally submit to me what they want to purchase. If I can see the need for it and they have the finances for it, I will arrange the purchase for them and sort of pay it from their funds.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: So you are not aware of any particular locality from which purchases must be made as a rule?

Mr BLIZZARD: No. The department has laid down rules as to the vehicle specifications.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: But not the location of purchasing?

Mr BLIZZARD: No.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: The previous witness advised us, and you probably heard it, that the distribution of communications from the Rural Fire Service and *Quench* come in an envelope sometimes every three months, but irregularly, that there is irregular contact. What is your experience like that? How many times do you get communications from the service and what is the process you use for passing them on to brigades?

Mr BLIZZARD: All our information, if I can answer the last question first, is given out at the captains' meetings for the captains and presidents to take back to their brigade members. The meetings are held once every two months, and if there is, as was stated here a delivery, at least every captain would be in touch with me once a week, generally in the evening, to pick up on anything that is going or anything that needed to be clarified.

Generally, as the publications come through, we distribute them. As they come through quarterly or monthly, or if it is an important fax or something that they need to know fairly quickly, we would get it out a lot quicker than that. It just depends.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Is your experience that you get this *Quench* on a regular basis? Is it your experience that it arrives in an envelope, as was the experience of the previous witnesses, or is there a regularity of that publication?

Mr BLIZZARD: I am not quite sure how it arrives, because when it comes in the mail it is just sort of scanned in. It comes up on my computer and I disperse it from there, but certainly the publications do come through and we distribute them. It seems to be, just from recall, on a fairly regular basis but I could not sort of definitely say, yes, it is definitely three months or four months or anything like that.

CHAIR: Have you had any reactions to the uniform or any comments from anybody or volunteers, and could you also let me know why some have one stripe, some have two stripes, three stripes, some have crowns? How do you qualify for these different gongs?

Mr BLIZZARD: The whole of the Rural Fire Service depends on a structure partly for accountability and partly so that people can identify who the people are in the responsible positions.

CHAIR: You have crowns on your uniform, so you are obviously much more senior than a person with a single stripe, presumably. Is that right?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, that is correct.

CHAIR: So who is the person with a single stripe?

Mr BLIZZARD: A single stripe is a deputy captain; two stripes is a senior deputy captain; three stripes is a captain; two sort of roundels is a deputy group officer; three pips, if you like, is a group officer. And then it sort of goes from there. A single crown is a deputy fire control officer, a crown and a pip is a fire control officer.

CHAIR: Is that the highest you can get?

Mr BLIZZARD: No.

CHAIR: You can go on and on?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, you can go on to commissioner.

CHAIR: How many crowns does the commissioner have, I wonder?

Mr BLIZZARD: He seems to have more brass than I do.

CHAIR: You have not had any negative comments at all? The Committee has had a few witnesses who have said that some people have found the uniforms sort of intimidating or reminiscent of a centrally controlled organisation and so on. Obviously there has been some resistance to the wearing of these uniforms?

Mr BLIZZARD: Most of our brigade members, and this is what they have expended some of their money on, have brought their own uniforms to go along with the service, and I believe they are quite proud to wear them.

CHAIR: Of course. I should imagine so.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: On the dual accountability question again, is there a solution somewhere where the Rural Fire Service may train the councils better for them to understand their responsibilities in regard to the Rural Fire Service operator, in what department they should sit and

their methods of communication? If they did, do you think that would be of assistance to the fire control officer?

Mr BLIZZARD: I think it comes back again to the money. If the councils had the spare dollars, I believe we would be able to get that assistance. But there are many calls on the councils, and most councils that I know are fairly tight with their budgeting. That is the reason why we do not get the full --

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: I am referring to your situation. You have moved a number of times under different departments and so forth. Would it not be a solution for the Rural Fire Service to recommend that the fire control officers be part of a particular department in a certain size council?

Mr BLIZZARD: I would have no hesitation in saying yes, it would certainly alleviate a lot of the problems.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Is your duty statement, or your work statement or whatever, clear and specific, and is that agreed upon between you and the general manager and the Rural Fire Service in regard to administrative responsibilities, operational responsibilities?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, although I do not have direct access to the general manager. I am sort of two steps down the ladder. But we do have duty statements, and just recently they have accepted, basically, the statements that the Rural Fire Service has put out as to what my role and responsibilities are and what my duty statement should be.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: The council has accepted that?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: And does that help alleviate some of the angst that could develop between your operational responsibilities at a certain time and your administrative, logistic responsibilities to the council?

Mr BLIZZARD: I personally have had no real problems in that area, mainly because the people that I am responsible to do not really fully understand the role of the fire service or the fire control officers. It gets all too complicated and they just sort of back away from it.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Does that mean they have accepted your advice and so forth?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: So that is not such a bad thing?

Mr BLIZZARD: No, in that regard it is not such a bad thing. The only problem is that with so many changes on the council not fully understanding the roles and responsibilities, it makes it very hard when you are asking them to approach the rest of the council on your behalf because they tend to just want to push it to one side.

CHAIR: Are you aware, to change the subject, of the scientific evidence that shows that some areas if not burnt for a considerable time will grow fire-resistant cover, for example, rainforest gullies and so on, so it does not actually help to burn off areas which would then regrow rainforest?

Mr BLIZZARD: Yes, sir, believe you me, in Byron shire you are certainly made well aware of all the situations.

CHAIR: I thought you might be.

Mr BLIZZARD: And this has been one of the big learning curves that I have had in the risk management plan that we have done to sort of bring in all of the competing interests, should I say

(The witness withdrew)

ANTHONY DAVID BELTON, self-employed Carpenter and Deputy Captain of Nimbin Rural Fire Brigade, Tunttable Falls Co-operative, Nimbin, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mr BELTON: Yes, I have that here.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr BELTON: I am.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage during your evidence that in the public interest certain evidence or documents you may wish to present should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee would be willing to accede to your request and resolve into confidential session. But I should warn you that the Parliament may override that decision at any time and may make your evidence public. Would you care to make an oral submission?

Mr BELTON: I am happy to go pretty much into the questioning.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Mr Belton, you mention in your submission that some of the big issues facing the service are environmental. Could you expand on that remark?

Mr BELTON: Actually, it is interesting you should mention that because yesterday I received an invite to an ecological bush fire conference 2000 in Sydney.

CHAIR: Is that the NCC one?

Mr BELTON: That is right, addressed by Mr Debus and one of the key note speakers is Mr Koperberg and there is a raft of other speakers. I think firefighting is certainly going to be impacted far more with environmental issues, how we deal with fires, et cetera, and as you mentioned, Mr Jones, rainforest fires. It is an issue that comes up often where I live at Nimbin. People think they are living in a rainforest and they will not be impacted by fire.

Unfortunately in a lot of South-East Asia at the moment rainforests are burning and I believe in Borneo right now substantial fires are burning. They are the difficulties I have in convincing people that even though we live in a wet climate, seasonally if we get a bad year rainforests make up a lot of fuel so there is still great fire risk.

CHAIR: If you burn rainforests what do you end up with?

Mr BELTON: That is certainly another issue. I am not proposing burn-offs. There are a lot of issues to be addressed so far as frequency of burning, et cetera.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: I think you would probably be accurately described as a grass roots firefighter and someone who has been involved in fire brigades for some time, so I think your views are going to be quite important to the Committee. We have had a lot of evidence today from fire control officers who are at a different level to the level you can contribute. I wonder if you could candidly express your views on some of the issues we have been discussing. Two very important issues the Committee needs to address are the on-going relationship with councils, and whether you feel from your perception that the status quo should remain or whether we should be making some changes.

Mr BELTON: Actually the morale in our shire seems to be pretty high. I cannot speak for other shires. The relationship that we seem to have is pretty good, I think. I do not actually deal directly with any council issues. The fire control officer does. He seems to have a fairly good rapport with them, so I cannot really comment on that relationship that councils have. It seems to work at the moment. There is talk of zoning that has been bandied around. I was not here earlier today to hear other submissions.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You are not familiar with the proposal to create zones which would localise the decision-making process somewhat and the equipment requisition programs would be on a social basis? You are not familiar with that?

Mr BELTON: Not really. I have heard it talked at another level up from me. It is an administrative area.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You do not have a view on that?

Mr BELTON: Well, as I see it, it seems to work okay. Perhaps if the Rural Fire Service had more input, as you say, on equipment purchases, et cetera, it might be beneficial.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Just on equipment requisitions, are you happy with the current regime? Obviously there is more money for equipment but are you getting your share of it? Are there any problems?

Mr BELTON: I do not really see any problems there. I have got to say from what I can see of the organisation, it depends on how your fire control officer performs, the interface with the administrative side of things. Certainly in the five or so years that our fire control officer has been there, he has made substantial changes, and certainly a lot more equipment has come in.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: How often would you meet with the FCO as a brigade?

Mr BELTON: As a brigade? I am one of the instructors and a community education co-ordinator for Lismore, so I do come in a fair bit. On an average once a week, once a fortnight I see him in passing or occasionally have a chat with him.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: As a brigade?

Mr BELTON: As a brigade he gets to every annual general meeting and we have our captains meetings monthly where he will relate any information to the captains which gets sent down to the brigades.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: That is captains and deputies?

Mr BELTON: Senior deputies are welcome to the meetings but generally captains are obliged or encouraged to attend the monthly captains meeting. We have a monthly brigade meeting where the captain disseminates the information to the members.

The Hon. J. R. JOHNSON: In your submission I noted that you made reference to the improvement in firefighting equipment that is continually replacing older equipment. I am sure that you are aware that in the last five years there has been something like a 147 per cent to 150 per cent increase in the funding to this northern area. Are you satisfied with the way in which the equipment is being provided to your brigade?

Mr BELTON: Yes, I am satisfied at my brigade level. As you know, we are on the east coast of New South Wales. It is a village-type area, so we primarily are involved in village firefighting, structurals, motor vehicle accidents and the like. In fact, a good number of our call-outs are motor vehicle accidents. We used to have a Bedford truck, petrol driven. It was a heavy water tanker, possibly about 4,000 litres but it was very slow on the road, and now we have a five-speed Isuzu category 1 tanker, with a similar water capacity but a lot faster and good for response time.

So certainly I am happy with the improvements in the trucks, particularly to our brigade. I cannot actually speak for other shires, but certainly a lot of our brigade members and brigades are certainly happy with the newer trucks coming along.

CHAIR: Would you like to expand on your comment in your submission that rural Australia will have to deal with hazard reduction in other ways other than burning?

Mr BELTON: Certainly it is a contentious issue and I come from the Nimbin area and I live in a community that borders on a national park. I think burning will still be involved because there is a natural sort of ignition, lightening, et cetera, but I was at a fire a number of years ago on Roads Road near Nimbin. It is a very steep mountainside and the farmer below used to pretty much annually put a fire through it; put the red steer in the back paddock sort of thing. It was too steep to slash or graze. Maybe he would send the steers up there when the green grass grew back.

But since then a lot of houses have been built on top. Nimbin is a very changing community. It is not completely rural any more and where once there were no houses right along the top of that mountain there would be a dozen houses taking advantage of the spectacular views. So those sorts of things you just cannot do any more and it was quite a serious fire and the residents up there were very relieved that the brigades worked hard. There were about a six-brigade response, six trucks and lots of personnel, two or three days to get it out.

So those sorts of practices have to change and adapt to the changing face of the east coast, really. There are a lot of villages in this shire and others. The further west you go it comes back to agricultural land but certainly in this area what was once primarily agricultural is getting to be small hobby farms, residential areas and villages, and the villages are getting bigger. Does that answer your question, Mr Jones?

CHAIR: Certainly part of it.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: It is clear from the summary of your submission that you are very supportive of the RFS. There seem to be two particular issues. The first one, you relate to the appropriateness of volunteers wearing clothing to protect themselves. Is there some sort of resistance to wearing the protective equipment?

Mr BELTON: I had the impression that there might have been further afield. There is no resistance in the brigades I am familiar with. They want the equipment basically. We are constantly receiving replacement equipment and the overall designs change. They have gone from one piece overalls to two piece. There are a lot of changes in the structural firefighting clothing, improvements.

Some people I guess consider them a bit of a nuisance. We were issued recently with filter masks but because we have not had any bushfires in our particular area for a couple of years we have not had the opportunity to use them. Well, these only came on line about six months ago but we have not had the opportunity to use them. But it is like anything. With our training and what not, people

just forget to wear gloves, for instance, so it is a constant battle to encourage people to put on their leather gloves and to wear their uniforms.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Where you took about consideration of other hazard reduction methods other than burning, what sort of measures are you thinking of?

Mr BELTON: Slashing and just keeping an area wet rather than dry out or mulching concepts and growing fire resistance species in and around residential areas. There are quite a few alternatives. Obviously, large-scale hazard reductions are a different story. With forested areas, perhaps doing buffer burning where you can just do it on the edges in very controlled situations.

The Hon. D. E. OLDFIELD: Does the service have a general view of the things you are describing there?

Mr BELTON: I think it is getting that way. I know one of the subjects in the firefighting TAFE OTEN courses, certificate 4, one of the subjects is called ecology. Apart from that, with the risk management plan, all the interest groups are brought in and certainly they have an impact, an effect on policies.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: Mr Belton, earlier in your preamble you said that morale in your brigade was good. Would you just be able to give us, in your view, what are the indicators of good morale in a brigade and what are the indicators of poor morale?

Mr BELTON: I think our turn-out times are good in the Nimbin brigade. The brigade station is in the village itself. We have one of the best response times in getting to an accident or getting to the station to head off to an incident. People are very committed. If they are working, they will throw their overalls on and get to the station very quickly. There is that level of commitment.

I believe that leadership is obviously important, even at a brigade level. If you do not have good leadership, then morale will obviously decline. As with all the brigades, if the fire control officer, for instance, is a good leader, then the morale is going to be better.

The Hon. C. J. S. LYNN: So the things that you can associate with the more local the authority is, and so forth. You think that is better for morale that they can associate with those sorts of leaders?

Mr BELTON: Well, I imagine it will always be local. You will always have your captains and your group officers. As the previous speaker said in describing the ranks, there is the chain of command. I imagine that will always be there. In fact, I believe one of the terms of reference is the concern that a lot of things are going to be orchestrated from the Sydney area, or whatever.

I heard that on the radio this morning as a media report. But I do not see that person as a problem because the organisation is a very big one and, by its nature, with a very big organisation, you need some sort of centralised agency where training and other concepts come from.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: Mr Belton, I want to ask you a question that relates partly to something Mr Oldfield was putting to you a while ago. You say in your submission that the issue of training and personal protective equipment is possibly the most controversial. Why are those issues controversial? Is it a matter of cultural background and attitudes, say, the oldies versus the young turks, or does it have more a basis in geographic location, shall we say, west of the divide versus east of the divide? How would you categorise attitudes to those two matters?

Mr BELTON: Probably no doubt today you have heard a lot of stuff that it is a complex issue and, as you mentioned, maybe west of the divide they have grassfires and perhaps not a lot of other fires or incidents, just population densities, where we are dealing a lot with structural fires and motor vehicle accidents and the training needs to be of a different standard, a higher standard, shall I say. There are just more variables.

Personally, as an instructor, I have not seen a lot of resistance to the training we have been offering here. It is only really hearsay. I can only presume from the terms of reference that there is that issue about too much training and too much protective clothing. So that is why I sort of addressed it in that fashion in the submission. But as far as I can see, our members pretty much have embraced the training and the issue of PPE. I have not really heard a great deal of angst about it.

The Hon. R. D. DYER: You place a great deal of emphasis here on not losing any more lives. Presumably lives can be lost in grassfires west of the divide as well as in structural or other fires east of the divide?

Mr BELTON: For sure. I would encourage anyone west of the divide who is reluctant to train to keep training, because the training is imperative. As new equipment comes out and newer practices are asked to be used, they have to stay abreast of new training.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: I wonder if you might just elaborate on an issue which may not be a problem in your area but certainly has been in the past in other areas in the State, and that is the association that your brigade would have to the National Parks and Wildlife Service and State Forests. I presume that you would have both in your area?

Mr BELTON: Yes.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Do you have any difficulty in getting co-operation from them to suppress a fire that starts? Secondly, do you have any difficulty in establishing who is in control of that fire?

Mr BELTON: The only time I have actually been at a fire where both those alternative groups have been also in attendance was at Coonabarabran. They had their role and we had ours, and we worked pretty much side by side in that situation. I did not see any, or I was not aware of any, conflict there. And as far as in this area I have not actually worked. At one stage I was assisting National Parks in a fire in the Nightcap National Park, but that was just as a volunteer assisting.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: You did not notice any difficulty in the management of that fire?

Mr BELTON: Not at all. National Parks was stretched a bit thin, but that was just a logistical problem really.

The Hon. R. T. M. BULL: Were they actually equipped to deal with the fire?

Mr BELTON: It was pretty much remote firefighting because you could not get equipment in there anyhow. It was hand tools and backburning.

CHAIR: Would you like to expand upon your concerns about occupational health and safety and workers compensation, which you mentioned in your submission?

Mr BELTON: That was really in relation to the whole submission I made. I am aware that litigation is a big issue, so I mentioned it in my submission. That is where I feel that the training and

the PPE is important. If members are adequately and appropriately trained and wearing the PPE that is required, or definitely required by the Rural Fire Service, then litigation is not such an issue.

If someone wears only part of the clothing or equipment, so far as I am concerned, they are probably breaching their requirements to be fighting a fire with the Rural Fire Service.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: Just to follow on from that workers compensation question, there have been some suggestions this morning that it is difficult to get adequate reimbursement for people who might be injured, particularly if they are self-employed. Do you have any examples of that, to do with farmers, for example? The other suggestion was a contractor who earned most of his income in three or four months and that would be the three or four months that he was off.

Mr BELTON: I have not actually had any experience at that level at all. I have not applied for workers compensation. I have not actually been injured on the fire line.

The Hon. A. B. KELLY: On the issue of training, there seems to be some reluctance by some. It is interesting because everybody seems to say, "We have not had the problem," but somebody else seems to have. Can you see any reason why a farmer who might be a bushfire brigade member would be reluctant to do, for example, chainsaw training? Even though he might have been using a chainsaw for 20 to 30 years, he could still learn something. Have you experienced any reluctance be people to do that?

Mr BELTON: We have hypothetically discussed it at various training conferences or courses we have done. In fact, those very scenarios are thrown up: you know, Joe has been a farmer all his life and has used a chainsaw nearly every other day. I think it is a matter of how you approach someone in trying to get them to have the piece of paper that says they are a qualified Rural Fire Service chainsaw operator.

Once they have got the piece of paper, if they have an accident or whatever, well, basically, if you have not got that piece of paper or that certificate, you cannot really go to a fire and start swinging the chainsaw around. The potential for litigation if you dropped a tree on a house or on someone else, for instance, is pretty enormous.

It is an issue with training. Our training is competency-based training. So, if you have been good on a chainsaw for 20 years, you would not have to sit through the whole course if you did not feel like it. You could, if you felt up to it, just come to the assessment, which might be only a few hours. Give the person the manual to read so they are aware of some of the procedures. If they feel they are up to the task, they can just do the assessment.

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 3.25 p.m.)