



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE
AND COMMUNITY SAFETY**

(Reference: [Review of ACT emergency services responses to the 2019-20 bushfire season](#))

Members:

**MRS G JONES (Chair)
MS B CODY (Deputy Chair)
MR D GUPTA**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 28 JULY 2020

**Secretary to the committee:
Mr A Snedden (Ph: 620 50199)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

WITNESSES

ALLEN, MR TOM , member, ACT Rural Landholders Association.....	10
ANGUS, MR STEVE , Committee member, ACT Rural Landholders Association ..	10
FINLAYSON, DR DOUG , Treasurer, Ginninderra Falls Association	18
MAYO, MR GARRY , senior firefighter, Guises Creek Brigade, Rural Fire Service .	1
SAMARA, MR ANURA , volunteer firefighter, Rural Fire Service	21

Privilege statement

The Assembly has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings.

All witnesses making submissions or giving evidence to committees of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT are protected by parliamentary privilege.

“Parliamentary privilege” means the special rights and immunities which belong to the Assembly, its committees and its members. These rights and immunities enable committees to operate effectively, and enable those involved in committee processes to do so without obstruction, or fear of prosecution.

Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 3.00 pm

MAYO, MR GARRY, senior firefighter, Guises Creek Brigade, Rural Fire Service

THE CHAIR: Welcome to this online, streamed public hearing of the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety. This is the first hearing of the committee's review of the ACT's responses to the bushfire season 2019-20. On behalf of the committee and in advance of appearances, I thank all witnesses who will appear today. Our initial discussions today will be with Mr Garry Mayo, an experienced rural firefighter. Proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and are being webstreamed and broadcast live. Answers to questions taken on notice need to come back to the committee within five days of receiving the proof *Hansard*. We will go to Mr Mayo.

We have published your submission on our website, and I thank you for it. It is a very detailed submission. I know that it has been a full-on commitment for people who are already firefighting and volunteering in our community to take the time out to write something down and to put their name to it. Thank you so much for giving that information to the committee. I would like to know is there anything you would like to say to start with to draw on your submission? Are there any comments you want to make before we start barraging you with questions?

Mr Mayo: I would not mind just reading a short, five-minute dissertation which summarises some of the major issues for me.

THE CHAIR: Go ahead.

Mr Mayo: I thank the committee for the opportunity. The overall question at the heart of my submission is: did we deliver the best possible outcome for Canberra and the nearby New South Wales communities that were impacted? I did want to state at the start, in the strongest possible terms, that my submission, my comments and my questions are not about trying to attribute blame. Individually we all need to step back from defending our actions and let others independently review and evaluate the fire response so that collectively we can better be prepared when the next big fire starts. We do not know when that next big fire will be but there are some things that we can reasonably expect to occur.

The next big fire will happen sooner than the 17 years between the 2003 and 2020 fires. The impact of climate change can be expected to be much greater than it was this fire season. The fire will likely be large and catastrophic. Without an increase in resources, the ACT will struggle to fight a prolonged campaign fire. The interstate assistance that we rely on may well not be available because they will be engaged in their own fires, as they were this season.

We also need to frame our future actions around an acknowledgement that the Orroral fire was ultimately contained and extinguished by a major change in the prevailing weather. Before that event I wondered if there would be anything left unburnt by the fire and the other fires that we lit to try and contain it.

We will have all seen the heartbreaking devastation in New South Wales; and now

with areas of Namadgi opening up to the public, we will get a chance to see the devastation on our doorstep. I am sure that the community will be shocked. This should be our motivation to do better.

Some of the latest information from fire inquiries is now suggesting that most prescribed burns have little impact on wild fires beyond one or two years and even no impact when those fires are severe, extreme or catastrophic. It is vital that we review the current programs for prescribed burning. The urgency here will be obvious to everyone. While prescribed burns will always have a role, that role in the future needs to be determined and may well be different to the one that we have done routinely for years. Science has an important role here.

While acknowledging much of the great planning work outlined in the strategic bushfire management plan when it was published in November last year, we were faced with a dire fire season that was already in progress. Yet the emergency we faced was not reflected in the key planning and operational risk assessment. It also failed to include factors that increased the risks, such as the issues that we all knew were in play within the RFS.

There are also questions in my mind about how some agencies appear to have been selective in their compliance with sections of the strategic bushfire management plan, such as where it called for improved interoperability between agencies and utilising the experience and resources of volunteers. I believe that the community will rightly judge us harshly if interoperability between the parks and conservation service and RFS volunteers is allowed to play any role in how the resources are utilised and deployed at any fire.

My particular focus has been on RFS volunteers and the role that we played. The role of volunteers in the Rural Fire Service is varied and extensive. Along with the pre-eminent rural firefighting role listed in the strategic bushfire management plan, the RFS volunteers are heavily involved in community engagement and support for other agencies in a wide range of activities. For example, you probably will not know that RFS volunteers, along with SES volunteers, are currently assisting with the monitoring of COVID-isolated people. Additionally, RFS and SES volunteers were out last night to help with fallen trees and storm damage.

Most of the community will not be aware of the thousands of hours given generously without financial recompense; yet volunteers will suffer physical and mental injury. They will forgo many precious hours with their families and incur many out-of-pocket expenses. It is a huge commitment by volunteers and one that is valuable to the community both logistically and in the salary savings that accrue from volunteering. Yet volunteer members have, over the last few years, seen a lack of support at higher levels.

Acknowledgement is often passing and ephemeral. Volunteers' views are rarely sought and, when they are offered, largely ignored. At one stage, our previous commissioner suggested that the volunteer role should be based around a limited number of remote area firefighting teams while the majority of volunteers would work exclusively in community liaison.

A more recent example is the disrespect I have detailed in my submission, and this disrespect occurred despite the new commissioner stating that interoperability is one of the key priorities that she wants to progress. These all impact on morale, and many longstanding volunteers are wondering if there is support for the volunteers at the government level.

I urge the government to make a greater investment in rural firefighting capability and support for the volunteers who make up a large component of the RFS and to address the interoperability issues as a priority. I reiterate that my submission also refers to the many good things that happened within the emergency services diaspora, and these are the foundation on which we base our service.

I am also aware that the RFS management has had a reset under the new acting chief officer and attempts to address some of the longstanding issues. It is my hope that the committee and the government also see a future for the RFS and back the volunteers to improve retention, training and the overall capacity of the service.

I commend my submission for your consideration and state it is an accurate and truthful account of my experiences.

THE CHAIR: I state my support for the volunteer brigades. We, in the Assembly, sat and watched, wishing we could do more, and are very grateful for what was done by all personnel over the summer. One of the reasons for this inquiry is not just some kind of exercise to work out who has done what wrong but, really, to find a way to make it work really well in the future. I do not think that anybody is proposing that we send our paid firefighters into the bush every time there is a fire. We need you, and I think that is a reasonable thing to say.

I have a couple of questions on some points in your submission and I would like a little information about them. In your submission you refer to your experience. I think that there could be several reasons for this incident—and I do not want to assume the reasons for it—but can you explain a little about that experience?

Mr Mayo: I detailed in my submission the example which I was involved in, which means that, on a single day, our strike team that was headed down to the southern sector of the fire never got to that fire and was called by the incident management team and told that they were no longer to be going to the fire, that parks and services crews were going in our place. The fire—and I have been through the details—was not an outraging fire on the day. The predicted weather was not extreme, and it is a routine thing that we do.

I wrote to the commissioner about that and got a reasonable reply from her that that was because those crews were on the ground there the day before and had better local knowledge. This is something that we do routinely. At every shift we change and at every one of those shifts there is a process of briefing people through formal incident action plans, as well as a verbal briefing on what the conditions are on the ground. It is nothing new to us. Crews have been doing this interstate, with New South Wales crews and Queensland crews, through this whole fire season and we have never had that come up before.

THE CHAIR: Hospitals do it at every shift change.

Mr Mayo: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: It is a process that has to be got right but it is not a process that cannot occur. That is something for us to go into, potentially, with the minister. I go to the matter of training. I know that some of the other submitters have made the point that training in the RFS has been quite scattergun and that the ability for people to plan their training and their advancement through the system is quite ad hoc. Can you give us some of your views on that situation based on, perhaps, years earlier and how things have maybe changed?

Mr Mayo: Basically, the responsibility for training seems to have been shifted from centrally back down to the brigades. The brigades have always had a role in assisting with the training and we want to do that. That is not a problem. But we are also being asked to organise the training and those sorts of things. You are talking to people who often have jobs to do, full-time jobs, families, and the workload that was coming back towards the individual brigades just was impossible for people to meet. The training tended to fall apart.

We had issues with the fact that they might only run one particular course for a year and if you missed that, you missed that competency and you could not progress up the chain. One of the key issues that we have got is people being there long enough to actually get the formal qualifications to meet the core group qualification that we all hang off, which is called the crew leader status. Technically, you can achieve that in about five years but, realistically, it will take 10. You only have to miss one occasion and they decide not to run that course again for another year and you are caught.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that any of these courses can have, maybe, the academic component delivered online so that that bit can be done and when you are going out you are doing the practical part together and some of that work can be done in a more timely fashion?

Mr Mayo: Absolutely. What it needs is an injection of funds and skill sets to bring that about because it is just impossible to keep pushing this down the line to individual brigades.

THE CHAIR: I have been a bit surprised by how decentralised that training has become. I think that the thing that brought it to everybody's attention during the summer was the lights and sirens issue, where we had people trying to get to the Beard fire unable to alert other cars on the road to the fact that they were on the way to a fire. I know that there was an exception made in that case eventually, but it highlights the issue in that we got to the start of the fire season without those things having been completed. I guess that your practical suggestion is an injection at the ESA level in organising that training and making sure that the units of competency are offered several times per year. I presume that you are talking about weekends and after hours?

Mr Mayo: That as well because there have been occasions where courses have been scheduled for a particular day and then somebody has decided that they do not have

enough people attending and those courses get cancelled, which, of course, is a bit of a disaster for those people. I think that there is capability. I know that the new acting CO of the Rural Fire Service has identified training as a one of the major issues that needs attention.

THE CHAIR: I think that everybody understands that we had a relatively new commissioner when we got to the point of this fire and there is plenty of work to do.

Mr Mayo: Right.

MS CODY: Thanks for taking the time to have a chat with us today. Can I ask a quick follow-up on Giulia's line of questioning about training. Let us talk about some of this year, just for completeness of the conversation. It was up to the individual brigades to run their own training. It was not a centralised thing anymore. Is that what you were saying?

Mr Mayo: Some courses were centralised and some were not. We did try and share the work between brigades as much as we could, but, again, it is the time. It is the preparation time and the additional time and, with our fire season extending by months either side, these are times when people normally had a bit of a break and you could fit in some training; but now being a volunteer firefighter is mostly a 12-month occupation.

MS CODY: That almost perfectly leads into my substantive question: this bushfire season was probably one of the toughest that we have seen in this region. Would I be fair in saying that?

Mr Mayo: I think that it was very different, and certainly because the fires essentially started and continued through the winter. We were attending fires in the middle of the winter; so we did not get that break. People came out of the winter into the spring and that was when the Queensland fires started. We had people deployed in Queensland, then deployed in New South Wales and then they were withdrawn back into Canberra when the Canberra fires took off. It has been a monumental season, absolutely.

MS CODY: I think, too, we had fires burning, as well as prescribed burns happening at the same time. Did we not, from memory?

Mr Mayo: Those burns were designed as part of the exercise in controlling the fire.

MS CODY: But there were not any prescribed burns happening maybe in New South Wales when there were bushfires burning in Queensland?

Mr Mayo: I would have to go back and look at the schedule on those things. People sometimes get prescribed burning mixed up with back-burning operations.

MS CODY: My father is a firefighter. I actually understand the difference.

Mr Mayo: You understand. There certainly was prescribed burning going on; but the question that now arises is—and it was pointed out in the commission, it was Shane Fitzsimmons pointing out—that the prescribed burning, in many cases, made very

little difference. We need to look at that as a functional thing and see if the burning we are doing actually works.

MS CODY: We have to look at it from a cautious approach, in that prescribed burns help, hopefully, but, as you just said, we have to discover whether that is the ongoing answer to the fire.

Mr Mayo: There is no doubt that burning will play a role; it is just how targeted and strategic it might be. Some people in the political arena are saying that we just need to burn more. I think that would be a tragedy because we may well be doing burning that has no function. It remains a very difficult question.

The other one that came up specifically in the ACT was that under the drought conditions it was impossible to burn safely. There was talk that if we get back into those weather patterns, there may not be a safe time to actually run any burns and what do we do in those circumstances? It becomes problematic.

MS CODY: We do see that. Often our winters are quite dry, we do not get a lot of rain. As you said, we have got to look at how that plays into the coming bushfire seasons.

Mr Mayo: Yes.

MR GUPTA: One of the questions that I want to ask is: when was the trigger point when you realised that we needed extra help? We had people flying in from Queensland and other parts of Australia. Considering that we do not have a full complement of people, when did you realise that we had to do it and who made that decision?

Mr Mayo: Those decisions would all be done through the incident management team; but there is a cooperative approach and there is a memorandum in that agreement between the states and the ACT about assisting. In the past this has worked well because our fire seasons generally do not overlap in a major way, but that is now changing; and that is a real challenge for us because it means that we cannot guarantee resources coming to us and we cannot guarantee to help other people with our resources because we are all potentially fighting our same fires.

It is one of the major issues that Greg Mullins has brought up consistently, and it also goes to the use of large aeroplanes, because those things come out of America mostly, and they have the difficulty now that their fire seasons are extended as well. They have the same problem in releasing those planes to come to Australia. It is agreed—I guess that it is probably more a federal thing—we have to start planning for these things at a federal level and deciding whether we need to boost our own resources.

MR GUPTA: As part of the lessons learned, have you put out any list matrix to make sure that this does not happen and we foresee this one for future emergencies or bushfire seasons?

Mr Mayo: That will happen through the existing management processes. I am just an ordinary volunteer firefighter but I am aware of those issues. I have a science

background but I am not involved in that specific planning. There are resources within the RFS to do that sort of planning. They did some specific planning for this year's fire season but I guess it comes down to the resources, availability and how they are best used.

MR GUPTA: Are there any town hall meetings conducted before the fire season for the volunteers?

Mr Mayo: They will be planning now, I am sure. We usually get a season briefing before the season starts. This year looks like we might have a bit of a reprieve with the rain that we have had, but in previous seasons that briefing has often happened while the fires were already underway.

THE CHAIR: We have got a few minutes, so I just want to ask you about the competencies that are required for, as far as you know, involvement in incident management teams at the ESA headquarters. I am quite keen to understand if the RFS has opportunities to practise those skills over the years. I think that there is a course that people can do in the AIIMS system, but are there practical experience options and how often, in your recollection, has the AIIMS course been available?

Mr Mayo: The AIIMS course is offered each year. It is a framework that is universally recognised of how you split, and you can build your response, your capacity, depending on whether it is a level 1, 2 or 3 fire. Level 3 is the sort of fire that the Orroral fire was. They had a pre-formed incident management team who did practise before the fire season and I think that that team was operational pretty much from the word go. There is one issue that did worry me about the incident management team and that was that I do not understand that there was a direct involvement of RFS or volunteers under that umbrella. I think that it would have been very useful to have their input.

THE CHAIR: The thing that occurs to me, reading through all the submissions, is that the decisions that were being made did not make as much sense to an RFS person as to perhaps some of the other people on the ground. Then I asked myself the question: was the RFS properly represented in the IMT and, if not, why not? That was why I was wondering if there had been opportunities for people to do the AIIMS course or not and whether people have taken up that opportunity, to the best of your knowledge, or not or whether it was just offered at a strange time. Basically, were there enough RFS-type people with experience and the qualifications to be in the IMT, or is this another training issue?

Mr Mayo: Not specifically, because I have done the AIIMS course. Essentially, if you want to be part of the IMT, you have to commit to the IMT, which means that you give up your role of firefighting. That is a bit of a challenge for people, and I guess that for some of the older members—and I am getting to that point now, my active life is getting to an end—that may be a route that they pursue.

THE CHAIR: I guess that it would be something for the RFS, yourselves, to assess and to communicate to the ESA as well or for the ESA to assess back in your direction as well. How many people are ready and able to give up that role to be in the IMT, because if communications are not great and there is no-one that you have

worked with and have a relationship with and who understands the work you do intimately in the IMT then, possibly, that viewpoint is not being represented as it probably should be under the AIIMS system?

Mr Mayo: That could be true, but I would have to say that, in my role, I did not get to see or hear the information that the IMT had on which they based their decisions. I would say that, from what I heard, there was an extraordinary delay in response to requests from people.

THE CHAIR: I have heard that as well. I do not know if that is the same or a different problem about how the IMT was functioning.

Mr Mayo: It is hard for me to say. I do not know and it is probably wrong to comment. From my perspective in the field, the communication should have been a lot better.

THE CHAIR: The delay in decisions is one important area for us to look into and also IMT presence of RFS.

Mr Mayo: Yes. The other one was—and it was raised at one of the after-action reviews—that the IMT now has real, live information coming in through their SID, which is their beautiful new helicopter. There was a feeling that some people expressed—and it was not me because I was in that role—that the tactical decisions were being made more centrally when they really should have been making the strategic decisions, and that the role of the tactical decision-making is left to the section leader or the divisional commander on the ground.

THE CHAIR: From the concerns that have been raised, it seems very obvious that there was a lot of centralised decision-making; therefore, I would not assume that there was not a reason for it, but it certainly was being made a lot centrally. Yet, when you think about the way our legislation is written, my understanding is that the RFS has a right to feel that they have a very large role to play in the decision-making. I guess that part of what I would like certainly for us to get to the bottom of is: was it an issue in the IMT or was it an issue in communication with the people on the ground or was it a combination of those things? More than what the actual problem was, what is the solution? We have got a little bit of work ahead of us to unpack all that.

Mr Mayo: I wish you luck with it.

THE CHAIR: The only other thing that I want to let you know before we let you go is that some of your recommendations in your submission go to a level of investigation and, let us say, scientific advice which we will not be able to get on this committee in the time frame that we have and the resources that we have. However, your recommendations will not be forgotten. We can put them in as something that the government needs to do but we do not have access to much in the way of technical experts. The conversation across the country is certainly going on about what the future could look like for firefighting in Australia and whether we need some federal capability, as you mentioned.

Certainly, it worried me when the government suggested that the army might be

needed every summer. I have got family members in the army and I think that they have their own training schedules that they have to keep to in order to be ready to go overseas.

There are some very exciting possibilities, in fact, for the future after this year's season, and we only hope that our review, the federal review and the New South Wales review can put a few of those ideas on the table. I thank you very much.

MS CODY: I have one very quick question. How long have you been a volunteer firefighter for?

Mr Mayo: It is coming up to 13 years.

MS CODY: You were not a volunteer during 2003?

Mr Mayo: No. I was here but I missed it. The 2003 fires were one of the motivations for joining the Rural Fire Service.

THE CHAIR: We will come back to you in writing if we have any further questions for you. In the meantime, I thank you so much for your attendance today. We will be looking into all your recommendations. Those that we do not have the capacity to investigate in detail, we will do the best we can to include them in the report so that they form part of the future planning for the ACT.

Mr Mayo: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Short suspension.

ANGUS, MR STEVE, Committee member, ACT Rural Landholders Association
ALLEN, MR TOM, member, ACT Rural Landholders Association

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I welcome as a witness Mr Steve Angus of the ACT Rural Landholders Association. Before we begin, I just want to remind you of the protections and obligations entailed by parliamentary privilege on the form emailed to you. Please confirm that you understand those protections, privileges and obligations?

Mr Angus: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. We have some questions for you, but is there anything you would like to say in your opening remarks to set the scene for the conversation? I know that there has been some attention to the submission that you have made, and we would love to learn from you what can be done better.

Mr Angus: One of the main points is that the whole of the farm is an asset; it is just not the house or the buildings. As landholders in the ACT, we all do a land management agreement which partly involves Farm FireWise. I know that you prioritise the assets you want protected, but, at the end of the day, our fences—our boundary fences with national parks or with the neighbours and our internal fences—our pasture and everything are assets, and it all needs to be protected. That did not happen this year.

THE CHAIR: That is a good point that you make, because I guess it is easy for the average person—me or Joe in the suburbs—to think that we are talking about the sheds and the livestock and the crops, but it is not as simple as that, is it? My understanding is that, often, fences are not even able to be insured, is that correct?

Mr Angus: They can be insured. It gets fairly pricey, and if the fence is more than 10 years old, depreciation is taken into account and sometimes it is just not worth it.

THE CHAIR: Right.

Mr Angus: I live in the Naas valley and I have eight or nine kilometres of boundary fence with Namadgi, which the government is replacing now. They are in the process. They have started on our place; there is a lot more to go. It is not easy country to put a fence up in, as people well know. For our eight or 8½ kilometres of boundary fence, the quotes we got after the fire ranged between \$20 and \$37 a metre. That is \$30,000-odd a kilometre, which is a lot of money at the end of the day. Yes, we can insure it, but we do not make a lot of money at the best of times. Last year, my family alone spent \$40,000-plus on feed. We only run a hundred cows; we are not making a fortune out of it.

So we are seeking some sort of buffer. I mean, you have the BAPZ in town—the built asset protection zone. Why do we not have that on the park? I mean, the park is there. The park itself is a great asset for the people of Canberra and the people of the nation; but also the park needs to look after its neighbours.

THE CHAIR: That is right. I guess that the park is the government's responsibility,

so maybe some work can be done there. If there were a buffer around the park, in your experience, what sort of width would that need to be to be useful? I know that it would depend on the terrain that you are coming up against, but tell me.

Mr Angus: It certainly would. A lot of the damage to our fences and the neighbours' fences—I have been around, and we have had a look—was caused by trees falling over, so the 15 or 20 metres of clear. I realise that that is not possible in a lot of the terrain; but, where it is, it gives us access to manage our assets and protect the park from noxious weeds and vice versa.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Angus: They put a lot of management trails around reserves in town.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Angus: But there is a problem. The vegetation is sacrosanct and you cannot damage it, but, at the end of the day, a lot of the fences on our place, because they were so overgrown, were totally destroyed by the fire.

THE CHAIR: I guess if you had a buffer of some kind—whether it be a combination of private land and government land or whether it be government land—you would have more of a chance to have an arrangement about how that was managed et cetera and give yourself a bit of a better chance of saving fences. So that is certainly something that we can look at for our recommendations.

The other thing that is being discussed today about your submission is communication with the Emergency Services Agency. We got lots of questions, which we will be asking them, about how the incident management team was being run and how information was flowing. I certainly want to be able to recommend that more rather than less information is shared with stakeholders and people whose properties and lives are going to be affected. I know that sometimes things are really busy when there is a fire on, but can you paint a picture of what a good system for you would look like as far as communication goes? Is it mostly about the lead-up to the season or is it really during the heat of the fire, or is it some kind of a combination?

Mr Angus: It is a combination of both. I hold a position of rural liaison officer in our Southern Districts brigade. When we saw the way that the season was shaping up—the conditions—we started talking to all the locals out our way. That ramped up a bit more after the Dunns Road fire and the Adaminaby complex and those fires kicked off. We had a briefing, a community meeting, and talked to people.

The RFS was involved and parks and things, and that was good. Then, when the Orroral Valley kicked off, the RFS actually had a dedicated liaison officer that was running around talking to people and did a great job. He and I worked together a lot and so the communication on the ground was good. That was not really a problem. We both responded. The person who was doing the rural liaison job for the RFS and myself both had a good understanding of what was happening on the fireground, so we were able to communicate that to people. Early in the piece we realised that the fire was not going to be as bad as 2003; it was a totally different beast.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Angus: The locals were all well prepared. The landholders out there were well and truly ready for it.

THE CHAIR: Yes. You had done your planning.

Mr Angus: It worked well. The disconnect was more between the IMT and the people on the ground actually doing the firefighting. It was a real issue that they were not listening to what was happening on the ground. They did not have a good handle on what was happening on the fireground. So, yes, I think that that is the bigger issue.

THE CHAIR: In your experience, is it about local topographical knowledge about how fire behaviour is in the region, or is it more about day-to-day information getting passed through and coming back?

Mr Angus: It is certainly about understanding the terrain where the fire is burning, having experience in those conditions and being able to look at the fire. If you are the incident controller, you need to be on the ground looking at the fire as a whole, because you can have intense fire behaviour in one section, where it is running up the back of a hill or something like that, but 500 metres or 800 metres to the left or right of it you would struggle to see flame; and that was happening.

THE CHAIR: Right.

Mr Angus: That fire was flame- and fuel-driven. With respect to the weather, we only had a couple of really bad days, and that is when it took the run down to the south and things like that. But, yes, that did not happen; the IMT were not listening to the people on the ground.

THE CHAIR: Right.

Mr Angus: They were too closeted—and have been for a long time—with technology.

THE CHAIR: That is something we can definitely go into when we have the ESA come and speak to us and incident controllers from the IMT. So thanks for that information. I will just see if Bec and Gupta have a question. Ms Cody?

MS CODY: Yes, thank you. I just wanted to follow up on a couple of things you were talking about in terms of communication. I am going to remove the IMT issue; I am talking about the rural liaison officer. I think that is what they were referred to as?

Mr Angus: Yes.

MS CODY: How did you find that? Was there really good communication, in that sense, between all of you?

Mr Angus: Yes. Chris Condon was the RFS rural liaison person. He lives out our way. He is a member of our brigade as well, and Chris and I know each other. I hold the

position in our brigade of rural liaison. We worked well. We had no problems. Chris was getting frustrated, to a degree, that he could not get information out of Fairbairn as to what was going on or what their plans were. That was probably an issue that I had as well, in that we did not know what they were proposing, what sort of tactics or where they were heading; but, yes, it worked. On the ground it worked well.

MS CODY: Okay.

Mr Angus: There was nobody in that role in 2003 and, yes, this worked a lot better. As a brigade, we started talking to the local landholders very early in the piece—Christmas Eve. Yes, it worked well.

MS CODY: That is good. I know that the ACT government made some investments in ensuring that the ACT was a strategic hub for the aerial firefighters.

Mr Angus: Yes. The helicopters do a great job. I have worked with the helicopters a lot over the years. The large air tankers—this is my own opinion and from what I saw during the fires—were not that effective.

MS CODY: Okay.

Mr Angus: Firefighters had to be pulled off the fireground, especially on the Monday night, for over an hour and a half. They were told that the large air tanker was coming in. It was delayed, but then when they went to go back onto the fire front, they had to stop and clear branches that the retardant drop had knocked down and things. By the time they got back to where they were—before they were pulled out, they were holding the fire on the north side of one of the road fire trails there—the fire had jumped the fire trail and they had lost it.

MS CODY: Right, okay.

Mr Angus: We had members of our brigade up in there. I was watching the large air tanker drops on the Tuesday afternoon. Our house is directly behind Mount Tennant and we would have seen at least seven or eight tanker drops—the retardant drops—and that whole area burnt on the Saturday.

MS CODY: Right.

Mr Angus: So, in my mind, the large air tankers are not that effective in the forest area. I mean, it is good to have them based in the ACT. The helibase and the aerial firefighting program is a great program.

MS CODY: Okay, that is good. Thank you. I have one last question because I would like to give Mr Gupta a chance. Sorry, Mr Gupta. I know that we had some events; the media were calling them unprecedented firestorms. I am going to try and pronounce the word, but let's just not say that I am very good at this stuff—pyro cumulonimbus.

Mr Angus: Pyro cumulonimbus effect.

MS CODY: You know what I am trying to talk about.

Mr Angus: Yes.

MS CODY: I know that we saw some of those in the 2003 bushfires, but apparently the firestorms were doubled over this last summer compared to 30 years' worth of records. Because of all of those things, do you think that it was a good thing that our firefighters were a little bit more on the cautious side, because the weather patterns were just being so random and changing so dramatically?

Mr Angus: Look, from what I saw of the Orroral Valley fire—I was on the ground, and getting around the whole Tharwa area; I went down as far as Gudgenby homestead at one stage and up north to the Corrin Dam Road—yes, there were days where there were areas that you would not want to be in, but any experienced firefighter could make that call. You have to let the people on the ground make that decision. They are aware of their own safety and things. On the Tuesday afternoon, we were getting phone calls at home that we were under ember attack, that it was too late to leave, to seek shelter and, “If you survive you are lucky,” when we were sitting on the veranda drinking tea. It was nothing like 2003.

If you had been up in the park, it was a different story when it was making a run up the back of what we call Dead man's hill. It was totally different. Any firefighter with basic experience would not put himself in that position anyway. This is a problem. I have been doing it officially for 36 years. They are too risk averse now. We are too cautious.

MS CODY: Yes.

Mr Angus: Yes, people have been injured and people have died firefighting, but, really, for the numbers of people who fight fires compared to what happens. If we do it properly, there were plenty of opportunities during the Orroral Valley fire to do things. As Val Jeffery and Arthur Sayer always used to say, the most effective time to fight a fire is early morning or at night.

MS CODY: Yes.

Mr Angus: There were areas where you would not want to be at night, but they were few and far between.

MS CODY: Thank you. Sorry, Mr Gupta.

THE CHAIR: That is okay. If we have to go a couple of minutes over, that is all right.

MR GUPTA: That is all right, Ms Cody. Do we have a rural landholder association—

Mr Angus: Sorry?

THE CHAIR: I think Mr Gupta is breaking up a bit.

MR GUPTA: Do you have an association where you talk about the high premium of the insurance? I know that there are some insurance companies who do insure those

fences and all. Do you have any kind of meetings or associations prior to the fire season?

Mr Angus: Sorry, I did not hear that.

THE CHAIR: So, I think, basically, Mr Gupta was asking if the landholders association meets during the offseason and if you discuss things like fence insurance? Is that correct, Mr Gupta?

MR GUPTA: That is right, yes. Do you have any meetings involving CFA and ESA personnel?

Mr Angus: No, there is no communications between the ESA about fences and things like that. The ACT is unique in that the landholder actually owns all the fences, boundary fences and everything else. We initially made a claim on our insurance company and they were quite happy to pay half the amount for the boundary fencing. I said, "Well, we own the whole fence," and they said, "No, your neighbour will pay the other half." I said, "No, that's not going to work." They were quite surprised at that. That has been the case since 2003. I have a letter signed by Jon Stanhope telling me in no uncertain terms that we own all the fences and we are responsible for them.

THE CHAIR: Right.

Mr Angus: I think that you should want to have a good relationship with your neighbour, and it is one thing that is lacking in the ACT at the moment. With the parks—not only Namadgi but also the Murrumbidgee corridor, some of the reserves around town and things—the relationship is not the best as far as—

MR GUPTA: Do you think it is something that you can put on the table to have some kind of association so that there is good communication and transparency, or what kind of assistance the government can do or any—

Mr Angus: I am certainly putting it on the table. I have just done it.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Angus: One of the issues that upsets a lot of people out our way is that there has been no acknowledgement that people actually lost assets, had damage done. I mean, it has been a one-way street about the damage to the Namadgi National Park but there has been no acknowledgement that we have lost fencing, there has been damage to buildings—things like that. That is a kick in the guts, really, for the landholders. If I had to go and replace all our fences, I am looking at a \$350,000 bill. By the government's own admission there are 50 kilometres of boundary fence. At \$20 to \$30 a metre, you do the maths. For them to stand up and say that no private assets were damaged, that hurts.

THE CHAIR: You have definitely put it on the record for us, Mr Angus, and that is a good thing. That is the whole point of these hearings—to make sure that these concerns are aired.

Mr Angus: Sorry, but that is another thing. Tom has just pointed out that our knowledge and capability is not acknowledged by the government. I think that there are only two or three people, landholders in the Tharwa area, that were not there in 2003. We survived fires.

THE CHAIR: Yes, so you have been there, done that, a couple of times at least.

Mr Angus: Yes. There is talk of farmers fixing up the Farm FireWise. Farmers do not need to be told how to look after their own places and whatnot. If I were you guys, I would be asking the question about the amount of money that the government spends on the BOP, the bushfire operations plan, and whether we are getting value for money when you lose 80 per cent of the park.

THE CHAIR: This is a very good question, and it goes also to the prescribed burns which we have talked about and— [*Interruption in sound recording*]

Mr Angus: Prescribed burns have worked. We have got an example up behind us where they burned four years ago, and the intensity of the fire was a lot lower than on the other side of the road. One of the reasons put forward for prescribed burning and fuel reduction is to give you a strategic firefighting advantage to fight that fire.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Angus: That was not done during the Orroral Valley fire. They did not take advantage of those areas, and that is one of the things. I think that the prescribed burning, as Garry Mayo has said, probably needs to be a bit more targeted. In my case, I think that it should be targeted on the eastern side of the park, which is the greatest threat to Canberra anyway. On the eastern flank of Namadgi the fires come from the north-north-west. I think that you need to look at whether, as a population, we are getting value for money with the large, broadscale hazard reduction burns and do we need to rethink it.

THE CHAIR: Yes. In some years we have not got through half of them, anyway. So this is the other question: what is a realistic target and if you can only do a few, where do you do them so that you get the best outcome for the effort and the risk that you are taking?

Mr Angus: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: So a possible recommendation that could come out of that could be that the bushfire operations plan, when it is being developed, is not just developed by professionals but also includes on-the-ground feedback about what has happened in the past and what could work and where that burning should be targeted. Because if we are going to talk about longer and more intense bushfire seasons, then we will have to be very targeted if we are not getting 100 per cent of the prescribed burns done, to make sure it is in the right places.

Mr Allen: The rain put the fire out.

Mr Angus: Tom is right; rain put the fire out. My personal view—and I think that it is

shared by a lot of farmers around the area—is that the prescribed burning program is too narrow. In years gone by, farmers burnt when they thought that it was appropriate. We burnt an area at home in September last year that did quite well, and it did stop the fire in that area.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Angus: You know, you can burn all year. I burnt stubble crops up at Wee Waa in the middle of January on a 40-degree day, but hazard reduction burns do not have to happen. We have created the window. People and professionals have created this window. Years ago, the farmers used to ride through in late winter, and they would drop matches to burn the old dry grass off. That was the [*Interruption in sound recording*]

THE CHAIR: Steve and Tom, we are going to have to let you go. I am sorry that we got to you a little bit late, but we have to move on to the Ginninderra Falls Association and Mr Finlayson. I want to thank you for coming on. If something occurs to you after our conversation that you wish you had included, then make sure you let us know. Send an email through. The committee really values the knowledge that you have, and we would like to make sure that the report that we produce is worthwhile and produces some improved outcomes for you, on the ground. No-one is saying that there was not a huge amount of effort that went into this season, but if it can be better, it should be better in the future.

Mr Angus: Thank you for the opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Yes, thanks so much. We will let you go, but we will have another chat soon, I am sure.

FINLAYSON, DR DOUG, Treasurer, Ginninderra Falls Association

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome Dr Doug Finlayson of the Ginninderra Falls Association. I remind you of the protections and obligations entailed by parliamentary privilege, as set out in the statement sent to you by email. Could you confirm for the record that you have read the privilege statement?

Dr Finlayson: Yes, I have.

THE CHAIR: Great. And you accept that?

Dr Finlayson: Yes, I accept that.

THE CHAIR: Great. Would you like to make some opening remarks?

Dr Finlayson: Okay. I have prepared one or two things that will take about five minutes or so, and then I can answer questions, if you wish.

THE CHAIR: Yes, please.

Dr Finlayson: Okay. I am assuming that you have the statement written by the Ginninderra Falls Association?

THE CHAIR: Indeed.

Dr Finlayson: As indicated in our statement, the association was formed to encourage the creation of a national park around the gorges of the Murrumbidgee River and Ginninderra Creek, part of which is near the area designated for the township of Ginninderry. Within the creek and the river corridors, because the steepness of the slopes has discouraged stock grazing in the past, the natural environment has been protected and has retained several species that are rare in the region. This, along with the dramatic scenery, qualifies it, in our opinion, for national park status.

There are six dot points that I wish to address this afternoon. Firstly, the Ginninderra Falls Association wishes to address the third dot point on this committee's matter of importance—namely, lessons learned for the next season and the following years. Research has already been done to demonstrate that steep slopes generate catastrophic firestorms and that adequate buffer zones must be designed into any urban plans.

Thirdly, the ACT government should make decisions on strategic land-use planning to ensure that houses are not built in areas of extremely turbulent fire hazard near deep gorges. Fourthly, poor land-use planning leaves a dangerous legacy for future generations. Fifthly, predictable dynamic fire behaviour will make many houses uninsurable. And, sixthly, turbulent fire hazards and house insurance will be a serious issue in urban areas and the borders of the new township of Ginninderry.

Summing up, the association believes that there is sufficient research available to identify the necessary best-practice distance on steep slopes to ensure that residents are not subject to the worst effects of catastrophic bushfires. The ACT government

should make decisions based on strategic land-use planning that ensures houses are not built in areas of extreme fire hazard. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Finlayson. My question to you is: how wide does an adequate buffer zone have to be?

Dr Finlayson: The current standards at the moment is about 100 metres between it and the urban development, but we believe that this is too narrow. We consider something like 300 metres would be a far better buffer zone. This would enable better firefighting and also protect the parkland, the conservation area, from urban development.

THE CHAIR: Yes, very good. In regard to steep slopes, a wider buffer zone or the same?

Dr Finlayson: Yes, we believe that a wider buffer zone should be mandatory near steep slopes. The turbulent fire behaviour generated by steep slopes creates firestorms that go many kilometres. We believe that 100 metres is completely inadequate to fight such turbulent bushfire behaviour. So in our written submission we had a little diagram to illustrate this. This research has already been done. We, a couple of years ago, commissioned a study by the University of New South Wales, Dr Jason Sharples.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Dr Finlayson: He generated a scenario for the boundaries between the township of Ginninderry and the steep gorges.

THE CHAIR: Would you be able to provide the committee with a copy of this research?

Dr Finlayson: Yes, we can do. It is now about a couple of years old, but I have a PDF of that, and I can send that to the committee, if you wish.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic.

Dr Finlayson: Yes. I will address it to the committee support team. Is that the best way?

THE CHAIR: Yes. The committee secretary will be in touch with you.

Dr Finlayson: Okey-doke. Yes, I can do that. I will wait for an email from them.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Gupta, do you have any questions for Dr Finlayson?

MR GUPTA: I am good, chair, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Okay. I think that I have just one additional question. As the Ginninderry development extends into and towards New South Wales, has your association got any view about how that could be best managed from a fire perspective?

Dr Finlayson: Access to the township of Ginninderry is purely through the ACT, as I understand it. Being realistic, the initial response to any fire in the New South Wales part of Ginninderry would probably have to come from the ACT firefighting services, emergency services. The government, of course, has to make these arrangements with the New South Wales government and the Yass Valley Council.

THE CHAIR: Indeed. Thank you so much, Dr Finlayson. You have certainly got your point across, and the submission that you made is quite direct. Ms Cody, do you have a question? No; okay.

In conclusion, Dr Finlayson, we look forward to getting a copy of your research, and our committee office will be in contact with you.

Dr Finlayson: Okay.

THE CHAIR: We thank you for your time. We are expecting the next guests shortly and we will go to a quick break. Thank you very much, Dr Finlayson.

Dr Finlayson: Thank you very much for allowing me to address your committee.

SAMARA, MR ANURA, volunteer firefighter, Rural Fire Service

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would now like to welcome Anura Samara as a witness. I remind you, Mr Samara, of the protections and obligations entailed by parliamentary privilege, as set out in the statement sent to you by email. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Samara: Yes, I do. I received it, and I understand.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to give us some opening remarks, to set the scene? We have certainly read your very extensive submission. I thank you very much for it and for all of the info in there that we can work with. Do you want to make any opening remarks?

Mr Samara: Yes, I would like to read something. I wrote it down, to make sure that I do not forget anything. The first thing that I want to do is openly acknowledge the absolute privilege it has been to serve the Canberra community as a volunteer firefighter. It is a role that has taken me from the tropics of Queensland to freezing nights in the mountains, from the Black Saturday fires in Victoria to floods and rains. It has given me skills and experience that I never dreamed I would have, and it has given me my closest friends. I truly believe that I have received more from the service than I have put in.

I also want to publicly thank the hundreds of colleagues, both paid and volunteers, who have trained me via mentoring and development. I need to thank my employer for allowing me the time to commit. Of course, I want to thank my wife and family, and recognise the impact on them of the many hours and days spent away from home, particularly when news of my safety was often uncertain.

My point with this submission and everything that I say to you today is aimed at one thing: I want to serve in a rural fire service that continues to be a service that I am proud to serve in, a service that will provide my children, and hopefully my grandchildren, with the same great experiences that I have been lucky enough to enjoy. My comments are not intended to reflect on any past or current individual staff in headquarters. In fact, I believe that the professional service that the Canberra community has—and we are well regarded by interstate agencies—reflects their dedication while working with limited resources.

However, I think that it is important to reflect on the season we have had. As a long-running campaign with dedicated staff, including across incident management and broader organisational roles, we have the right to expect a high level of professionalism in these roles during a major incident. While it is right that the community should measure outcomes in single terms, such as homes destroyed and lives lost—and I note that some homes have been lost, but thankfully no lives—we must look deeper to assess how well we operated and change the service in time for the next season.

I recognise that my operational and organisational experience is more at the tactical end. I recognise that I have limited knowledge of how the IMT performed. However, I

do have experience of how those strategic functions translated to our operations and their impact on our effectiveness in tackling the fires and our role as volunteers.

A common response, when we raise concerns, is that we do not understand the strategic picture, and that our views are less valuable because of our limited perspective. My view is that all organisations need to build on the dedication and experience of their most committed and senior members.

I would like to end with the final point in my submission. My experience—and this is my submission, of course—is that, by action, inaction and word, the agency has demonstrated a lack of care for its volunteers. All of us make significant sacrifices to do this role. We sacrifice work, education, holidays, time with family and community activities. If that commitment is not wanted—and I recognise that there are alternative firefighting models in place—then I believe that the ACT government should come clean with us and say so. That is the end of my statement.

THE CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Samara, for giving us your views. I have certainly stated already in today's hearing that my view—and I would love to hear from other members of the committee if they have any other views—is certainly that the RFS is a really important part of our strategic response to bushfires in the bushfire season and that there is not another option, as far as we know, for funding and managing that capability that you bring. Certainly, your submission points to a real need to overhaul and look carefully at training, so that teams are easily able to be put together, and so that the full level of competencies is achieved at the brigade level. We have already discussed with another submitter today that that is something we can make very clear and straightforward recommendations about, and hopefully that will turn that situation around. That would be the ideal.

One of the things that we have asked people about—and I know that you said that you do not have experience in the IMT—is the AIIMS course, which people have to have done to move from being operational on the ground to being able to commit to an IMT for a season. Is that something that has been offered at your brigade level, and have you or others been able to take up that opportunity?

Mr Samara: Certainly, the opportunity has been there for a number of the introductory AIIMS courses and the AIIMS level 1 course. I did that course many years ago. Those courses are fundamental to our role as an officer on the ground because when we arrive at—

THE CHAIR: You need to—

Mr Samara: Even with a level 1 incident, we are fully in charge of that incident, and we need the incident management training competency to be able to manage that incident. The minute it goes to a level 2 or level 3 fire, that is where you need the competency in AIIMS at that level, and courses are available.

However, there are a couple of things that we find. Firstly, those courses are only run on weekdays, because they are run for a whole lot of ACT government employees, and that has an impact, in my case, on my employer, in doing that. Secondly, they are offered in limited numbers. I also have to reflect on the fact that, with training, one of

the risks for us is that if we are not called in to act in that role, those skills and competencies will wither. It does not matter what you apply it to; that is just the nature of life.

THE CHAIR: Do you have to have a certain amount of deployment or something to practise that skill?

Mr Samara: That is exactly right. One of the things we find is that it is one thing to go and do the training, but we might go for several years without actually using those skills. You do have to ask yourself the question: how relevant are they? The fact that you have raised is important. The RFS introduced, what they call, a flexible membership model in the last year or so, which is supposed to reflect that there are members who do not want to be active firefighters but who could perform other roles. In my case, as I get a little bit older, and thinking about a day when maybe I am not fit and active enough to be on the fireground, what other roles would I like to perform? There are a number of those roles that I would like to perform and would like to move into but, as I said, they need to be made available and we need to be included in that role when training and practice come up.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that, in order to attract maybe more experienced firefighters to training for IMT service, employment might need to be funded outside our peak season, for example, where there are other fires, to gain the experience? Quite apart from the idea of not having an RFS, there is the other example of putting a little money into that, where it is really targeted and really gets the outcome. One of the outcomes that we clearly need to achieve is a better level of communication and understanding between the IMT and those on the ground, on the RFS front. I am trying to be really practical about how we can actually improve things. Do you think that that might encourage some people to be able to handle, perhaps, unpaid leave from their employer or something?

Mr Samara: I think that it would help. Of course, I cannot comment because everyone is different. Yes, you are right; a bit of shared knowledge and understanding do help. I am more of the view, however, that potentially we need a more dedicated role in the IMT which looks after the interests of volunteers. As I have alluded to elsewhere—and I do not want to divert from your topic—volunteers are a different cohort of your workforce, with different needs.

I will give you a quick example. One of our members was operating as an air base operator and a time came when they could be stood down or extended. The call was made to extend. The call was made, “All you guys are getting paid, so it’s no big deal.” All of them were getting paid apart from one person. That is why I believe that a formal role which represents the needs of volunteers and can call people out—I do not say it is bad behaviour; it is probably a slip of the tongue—and say, “Hang on a minute, this plan, this request for crewing or whatever, needs to take into account the volunteers’ perspective.”

THE CHAIR: I think that is right. It is hard for one or two or three key people to see everybody’s point of view. So any suggestions about how to improve that would be great. My natural response is to make sure that there are RFS experienced people in the IMT at all times. There are other ways, no doubt, as well.

MS CODY: Can you remind me of the very last sentence or maybe the very last paragraph of your opening statement?

Mr Samara: What I was reflecting on is that many volunteers have felt undervalued by the agency, by actions—in some cases inactions—and by the way people speak. What I am reflecting on is: is there a wholehearted commitment to maintaining a volunteer-based rural firefighting service in the ACT? When I say wholehearted commitment, I mean a wholehearted commitment that is backed by action around training, around resources and other things. If there is not, I accept that. It is difficult to think about other models, but maybe there are other models of firefighting. At the moment, it feels like there is not a wholehearted commitment to the volunteer cohort. I am speaking specifically as a volunteer here. That was the last paragraph of my statement.

MS CODY: It was a bit vaguer, maybe, when you said it the first time, and I just wanted to pick up on that. Excellent. In your submission you mentioned that you have been a rural firefighter since 2001—is that correct?

Mr Samara: Correct.

MS CODY: You also said in there that you fought in the 2001 and 2003 fires and you have also been to other fires. How did the fires we have just been through compare to others in the past?

Mr Samara: There are a number of contrasts here. First, I have to acknowledge that in terms of equipment, in terms of radio communication and networks, we are much better prepared. Some of that is probably just time—things modernise and get better—but obviously people in the agency and people in the service have committed to improve those things, and it is incredibly good. On the training front, training tends to go through periods where it is quite good and then drops away again. My submission is very clear about the lack of a considered, planned approach to training, which means that we cannot guarantee capability. I would say that that is roughly the same. To some extent, the centralised control that was exercised in these fires was completely different to what we experienced in 2001 and 2003. I think that the headquarters was much smaller back in those days, so maybe it is a function of that. My reflection on those times is that the local officers on the ground were far more involved in the decision-making that happened.

MS CODY: Is that an advantage, or a disadvantage?

Mr Samara: As I mentioned in my submission, one of the attributes of AIIMS is that it is supposed to be flexible and it involves delegation. So I would say that it is a disadvantage. I compare and contrast that to working across the border. When I went to Grafton, I was a divisional commander up there on the fire—

MS CODY: In Grafton when?

Mr Samara: In New South Wales, in September last year, right at the beginning of the season. The incident controller there and the incident management team were in

Glen Innes, so I never met them. I had a phone call in the morning with the incident controller and a phone call at night, and that was it. That was the total extent of his management of the fire. Clearly, they had the aerial assets to map the fire and stuff, and they knew what was going on. Reflecting on the structure of flexibility versus inflexibility and of delegation versus centralisation, I think that the AIIMS model does support the more flexible model.

MR GUPTA: Mr Samara, you mentioned that training facilities are only available on weekdays. Do you have any program, something like train the trainer, where someone who is trained can provide training to people on the weekends as well?

Mr Samara: Our training takes many forms. At a brigade level, we do regular fortnightly training. That is where we talk about embedded skills. One thing that militates against what you are suggesting is the fact that our core competencies are based around national competencies. As a registered training organisation, the ESA has to ensure that they are delivered and assessed according to the national competency framework. So that really militates against train the trainer. We do train to embed, but when you are assessed for core skills, you must be trained according to the competency and you must be assessed by a qualified assessor before you can be considered to gain that competency.

MR GUPTA: Yes, usually with train the trainer they get that competency from the RTO. They have done their training under an RTO—they have certification that they can perform that.

Another thing that you mentioned in your opening comments is that the way some of the volunteers have been treated is not fair. What is the gender balance there? Are we talking to people from different backgrounds, CALD maybe, or is it in general that the behaviour is not acceptable?

Mr Samara: When I talk about behaviour, I am not really talking about interpersonal behaviour, but the answer to your question is that we certainly do not have a gender balance in our brigade. Unfortunately, I probably do not have the statistics to support it, but maybe about 12 per cent of our active members are female. My daughter has just passed the basic firefighter course, so she will be increasing that number, hopefully. Talking about diversity—we are not a greatly diverse community in that sense. In my 20 years I have seen that change remarkably and get better. I think—*Interruption in sound recording*—being valued.

MR GUPTA: The Canberra community is growing and we have people from diverse backgrounds and CALD communities. Do you think that there should be some kind of educational program to promote these services to the wider community?

Mr Samara: I think—and this is not a reflection on the service—that there is great value in that. I have certainly found that volunteering in any capacity, and certainly in the RFS, to be a great way to build connections across a community and a great way to get new skills. I see a lot of value in what you are promoting because my attitude is that anyone can contribute to this. You do not need a particular background, you do not need a particular form of physical ability or whatever. Everyone has a role to play and everyone can add value and, at the same time, everyone will get something out of

it. So I think that there is value in what you are talking about in promoting it.

I note that the ESA has had a program about promoting the service for women in general across all their services, not just the RFS, and I think that is good. They have done some specific things around making it easier for women to join the services.

MR GUPTA: I came across a lot of people this year from different CALD communities who do not understand how they could be involved and how they go about training. There is a bit of education that we need for those people in the community, which is a growing community, to become a part of the RFS.

Mr Samara: Certainly, I think that there is a lot of value in outreach. One of the things that we try to do at a brigade level is a lot of community engagement, a lot of work at schools, scout groups and stuff because we want to encourage the next generation to become involved. What you are suggesting would be valuable, to reach out to other communities and to grow the service. I think that there is a lot of value in that.

THE CHAIR: Perhaps if we resolve some of these training issues, your brigade members will be able to go out with confidence and invite people to join, knowing that they will be able to advance.

Mr Samara: Yes.

THE CHAIR: An experience that I think deserves some airtime is that of people on trucks driving out to particular areas and then the call being cancelled. My understanding of the legislation is that, technically, parks and conservation is a brigade of the RFS and, again, it may come back to how the incident management team was staffed and run and who had the qualifications and so on. I just would love you to reflect in this public forum on what it was like to be called to do something and then sent home or sent to do the hurry up and wait, not just once but many times over the season.

Mr Samara: This is a difficult one. I can relate my experiences and where I am relating something that someone has relayed, I will be quite clear about that. As an officer of the brigade, together with our captain, we did the work of organising crews, so we spent a lot of time on the phones coordinating this and I saw this happen. So you are right; the first issue I and many other people suffered from was a lot of time spent doing nothing.

I know that the first response of hurry up and wait is pretty standard for our service and I fully accept that hurry up and wait is a part of the deal. However, my view is that when you have a major campaign running with an IMT set-up running 24 hours a day, people should not be arriving with no tasking on your IFP. The IFP needs an action plan. It happened several times when we arrived and we were not even listed on there.

What happens then is that people try to find something for you to do and most of the time it is something fairly minor. What inevitably happened was long, long periods spent motionless. I could count easily four to five hours in a truck just motionless.

Now if that happens once, I accept hurry up and wait, but when that happens across multiple shifts, you start to question what was the real plan for us. That is the first thing.

The second thing you mentioned is about training the IFP. So the other thing that we found is that even if the IFP was quite clear about roles and responsibilities, we would suddenly find that someone on the ground would change it, often to our detriment.

You have heard of the case—this did not involve me but I have heard it, too—where the IFP said volunteers were going to be doing some back-burning and the parks people on the ground made the decision that that was going to change. Why is it then that when we are across the border we are fully entrusted by the New South Wales RFS to put in major back-burns, major containment lines with plant and equipment, and yet, in the ACT, for some reason there is a perspective that that needs someone else with a different set of skills and we will just be put on basic patrolling where you might find two smoking hot spots in an hour. I emphasise that point and it is potentially a thing about over resourcing.

You mentioned also the incident where tasking changed, and that happened frequently. In one case, I remember where we had a request for crews and we actually assembled crews and gave the names. We had been told that those people were accepted and people made arrangements only to find out much later on that, no, they were not going on that shift after all. After already making arrangements that is very frustrating. The minute you hear that you are going to a fire, you have to ring your employer, you have to check with your family and do all that sort of stuff. What you do not want is to be told that you are not going when you have already done that.

The other thing that I want to emphasise is some poor tasking arrangements, which meant delays. For example, I went with a strike team to Glendale that was due to go to the Shannons Flat area at Adaminaby. We get to Glendale and were told to wait for a paramedic, who took two hours to turn up. I am not criticising that paramedic because I do not know what they were told. My view is if someone told us to be there at a certain time, why was the whole thing not coordinated? What else could I have been doing in that two hours at home or at work? We were just sitting for two hours.

I fully accept hurry up and wait. I fully accept that things do not work as well as they might in the first couple of days of a major incident; but once you have an embedded operating practice, that is when I start to question how well are we being used. As I said, I take the view that we are volunteers with specific needs and I accept that paid staff are completely different.

If you ask me to do, say, a swing shift, which goes from roughly midday to midnight, on the morning of that shift I am not going to go to work, and even if I finish at midnight I will not be home until 2.30 in the morning, so the next morning I am not going to work either. You are asking for a commitment from a family and an employer of effectively a day and a half minimum. You need to value that commitment, value the people who are doing that and say, “Thank you, this is wonderful. We accept the commitment and we’re going to use you.”

THE CHAIR: Yes. A really interesting point from the submissions that have come to

the committee is that the frustrations felt in the RFS were caused by actual actions on the ground. As you say, it is not that the RFS members are not used to things changing or tasks changing or, from time to time, something being misunderstood or miscommunicated, but, if I am correct in my reading of all of the submissions, the experience this summer was a remarkable disrespect towards the volunteers.

Mr Samara: My experience of the 2003 fires were days and weeks of continuous effort. You would come home exhausted and tired, but you knew that you had put in and committed and you knew that something good had happened. That is completely opposite to this season, where most of my active firefighting was outside the ACT. Even in the shifts inside the ACT, I hardly got out of the truck. If I do not get out of a truck, I do not really contribute massively to the effort.

THE CHAIR: I think that the people of the ACT are very grateful either way; that is my considered view from being out in the electorate. It is not a small task for this committee to make sure that the RFS volunteers know that the Assembly backs them up and that the community that elected us backs them up, but if we can recommend things to improve that relationship and to improve particularly training and how the IMT operates so that in a future fire everybody is fulfilling their best potential, that would be really good. So I really want to thank you for your submission.

MR GUPTA: Mr Samara, I would like to commend you for the great job that you are doing. I am really pleased and glad to hear you mention that you also got your daughter involved; that is a very great example. You are a very valuable person in our society, so keep up the great work.

Mr Samara: Thank you. Can I just make a comment on the training front, because you mentioned it?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Samara: One of the things that is happening right now is that we suffer attrition for all sorts of reasons. In the last year, we have lost probably two senior members.

THE CHAIR: In your brigade?

Mr Samara: Our brigade, yes. One is temporarily offline with a health issue. We have a number of other members who are talking about leaving. These are roles where we are not having the training to replace them yet. While we have just had a basic firefighter course with 24 recruits sign up—fantastic; I really welcome them and it is good to see them—the senior level roles of chainsaw operators, drivers and crew leaders are not being replaced at the same rate that we are losing them. I want to emphasise that as a particular issue right today.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I have written down in my notes on your submission that we should be recommending making a training plan for the necessary end goal and then creating the necessary opportunities for training to ensure that the end goal is achieved. In our bushfire operational plan we are very good about saying what prescribed burns we would like to have achieved and what fuel load we would like to have munched up, but maybe we are not so good at saying that we want to make sure that we have X

number of fully trained brigades and in order to achieve that by this date we have to have done such and such in the lead-up.

In reading the submissions, one of the most surprising things for me has definitely been that feeling that the training has become ad hoc. It is almost as though, for a number of years, perhaps there has not been the same pressure to get the outcomes. I think that will be something really positive for us to recommend.

Mr Samara: Definitely, yes.

THE CHAIR: I know that there has been a recommendation to have someone representing the interests of volunteers in the IMT, but I probably need to study the AIIMS process better myself in order to make the right recommendations. My understanding at this point is that we have to have people doing those courses and getting interstate and getting to other fires to be on the IMTs. Maybe at the beginning of the season those people could be identified: “Here are our four or five people who could go off and become part of an IMT and we have made sure that within those brigades we have three, four or five other people who can fulfill their roles.” I understand that the commitment to an IMT is season long, and that means you are not out on the ground.

Mr Samara: I think that there is a lot of value in that. For example, across the border in New South Wales, I have friends who are volunteers with the New South Wales RFS who fulfill functions as volunteers in the IMT running out at Queanbeyan fire control, particularly for the Braidwood fires. Those models do exist, but they need to recognise, as I said, that volunteers are a discrete cohort. When it comes to training, we have discrete needs. When it comes to calling us, we will always say that we will drop our work and drop our family to go and do a role in the IMT; but the offer needs to be there, and it needs to be managed, recognising that we are volunteers.

THE CHAIR: Absolutely; and maybe it is splitting a role in the IMT so that it is two RFS personnel fulfilling a role that maybe one paid employee fulfills so that there is more flexibility in the rostering or something like that. We need to make some recommendations from this committee that are very practical and will see a fix to this problem.

Mr Samara: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you again for this very detailed, considered and calm submission and many of the recommendations that you have made. I have let the other RFS submitters know, as we have been going through, that this committee is not going to have the time or the resourcing to establish an academic study on how things should go for the future, but that does not mean that we cannot recommend that to the government. I think that there is a great appetite in the community—across the country but in Canberra, too—to make sure that we are at the forefront of firefighting and not just doing what we have always done. If it is about prescribed burns and whether they work, if it is about suppression, if it is about earlier things that we can do, if it is about how the fire team builds from the ground up and whether the IMTs should be stood up early or not—these are all things that probably need a good academic view from a non-biased expert.

Mr Samara: Yes.

THE CHAIR: We will make sure that your views are reflected in the report. Thank you so much, Mr Samara.

Mr Samara: Thanks for your time.

THE CHAIR: Before closing the hearing, I have a number of administrative matters to mention. Any questions taken on notice need to be provided to the committee office within five business days after the receipt of the uncorrected proof *Hansard*, day one being the first business day after the *Hansard* is sent to members by the committee office.

On behalf of the committee, we thank all our witnesses who have participated today. When available, a proof transcript will go out to all witnesses so that they can check it and suggest any corrections.

Our next hearing on this reference is at 3 pm on 11 August 2020. I now close the hearing.

The committee adjourned at 4:56 pm.