



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL  
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AFFAIRS**

**(Reference: Inquiry into fire and emergency services)**

**Members:**

**MR B STEFANIAK (The Chair)  
MS K MacDONALD (The Deputy Chair)  
DR D FOSKEY**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**FRIDAY, 14 MARCH 2008**

**Secretary to the committee:  
Ms R Jaffray (Ph: 6205 0199)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

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**The committee met at 10.01 am.**

**MANSELL, MR BRIAN**, Managing Director, Australian Technology Information Pty Ltd

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome, Mr Mansell. You have had a chance to read the yellow statement, so you understand that and appreciate all the comments therein; that all evidence given here is privileged and that gives you certain responsibilities and certain privileges. You are well aware of that. You have read the yellow sheet and you understand that?

**Mr Mansell:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Good. Mr Mansell, will you please state the capacity in which you appear?

**Mr Mansell:** I am the Managing Director of Australian Technology Information.

**THE CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Mansell. Firstly, thank you for appearing to assist us in our inquiry. What would you like to tell the committee?

**Mr Mansell:** Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity. I suppose first and foremost I should state that I am not here as a disgruntled contractor based on the history of our system being removed from the ACT emergency services. What I am here for is to make quite clear, I suppose, my professional opinion of the situation and what this territory is now faced with.

We firstly became involved with ACT emergency services as a result of the 2003 bushfires. We were called in on the Friday, as the fires were then out of control and they could not locate or track the fire. My company was called in in its capacity with resources and technology to be able to find that fire front and track it.

What came out of the 2003 bushfires, as like any disaster, whether it be natural or made with intent, is—and it has been documented every time, repeatedly—that communications suffer; either they suffer from overload or they suffer from damage. The consequence of that is that the situation compounds and you have to have other abilities to deal with the emergency. So the ACT put capability in place. We were fortunate. That is about as much as I would like to say on the matter of where MAC2 and FireLink were used.

What concerns me now—in my professional opinion as a person that has been involved in command and control, in everything from war fighting to emergency services—is that the ability to combat an emergency requires not just manpower; it requires good management; it requires capability. If you withdraw any of those at any time, you increase the risk. It has been my observation and a professional opinion that we were able to deal with emergencies as far south as the southern regions in Namadgi, to combine rural with urban through technology. That was proven and it worked, and worked very well.

Since the decision has been made, we have now gone back. The evidence that I will

show—there is just one screen shot of 2004 and another one in 2006—is the coverage that was provided in the ACT. That network ran independently. As a consequence, since the decision has been made, you now have the urban fringement covered—that is it. Should there be a disaster, whether it be man made or natural, the problem is that you do not have the capacity. Emergency services do not have the capacity and the command and control capability to handle that emergency.

Whether we get caught again like in 2003 or 2004, or we just sit and observe things like Cyclone Larry, the bushfires that occurred in South Australia, Cyclone Katrina, 9/11 or the London bombings, communications always suffer. So what I want to state on the record here as a professional and also as a resident of this town is that this town is neither covered nor safe from another 2003 situation.

**THE CHAIR:** Fundamentally, could you just state the reasons why it is not?

**Mr Mansell:** We are not capable. If anything outside the urban fringement—and, based on infrastructure, meaning towers—is taken out, the communications, you have none. You rely on normal nap-of-the-earth radios, which, demonstrated during the 2003 fires, get saturated. People talk over each other. Anxiety levels increase. That is human nature. The capability to track assets without any voice communication takes a workload off voice communication straightaway. You do not have that anymore. So, whether it be my system or anyone’s system, that is a capability that is now wanting in this territory.

**THE CHAIR:** For the record, to get it straight, you are not talking about, for example, the number of tankers, bumpers and vehicles. You are saying that we do not have the capacity because basically the comms are only reliable up to the urban fringe and not past there?

**Mr Mansell:** You have them outside the urban fringe, but they are only voice. They utilise infrastructure. If the infrastructure is damaged, which has been demonstrated time and time again, not necessarily in the ACT, if that has gone, you have no communications. So, if Fred is down at Mount Clear and you have not heard from Fred in six or eight hours, you do not know where he is. If a helicopter doing fire bombing suddenly has not popped up after two or three hours or half an hour or 10 minutes, where is he? You do not know.

So, hand on heart, and from what I have witnessed—and now the current commissioner is saying that he is very happy and went on record as saying this—you take and use the tried and true method for the last 30 years, which is a map and a radio. What I have witnessed since the time of the 2003 fires is that we have gone back to a worse situation.

**THE CHAIR:** With a map and a radio, are you saying people do have a tendency, despite the very best RATEL procedure, to talk over each other in an emergency, when there is a lot of adrenalin going and things happening? Are there also problems with radios just in terms of the terrain? My experience with the old AN 25 set in the military is that you can, if you are in difficult terrain, often not have radio comms. With what we have now, is that a situation that faces—

**Mr Mansell:** You have normal what are called nap-of-the-earth radios—what you are experiencing, yes. You cannot, still, in this day and age, get through concrete. You still cannot get around a mountain. The only ability is to use relay. We are not just necessarily talking solely on rural. If this town suffered a terrorist attack or mass evacuation or severe storm damage which has been recorded and the system collapses, what is the backup? Prior to our system being removed, it was the backup, and demonstrated quite well. Again, use ours or use anyone else's, but you need redundancy for what does collapse. When it does collapse, that compounds the situation. I am talking from a command and control capability.

**THE CHAIR:** When was your system removed?

**Mr Mansell:** June last year.

**THE CHAIR:** I recall—I do not know if it was the government or someone else or both—an indication that the system was not foolproof; 100 per cent coverage simply was not there and there were gaps in it. Would you like to comment on that? I recall that being one of the reasons for the government ditching the system in the end.

**Mr Mansell:** You have got in front of you there an illustration of the coverage of the ACT.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Mansell:** We also tracked the vehicles when they did the fire in Tumut, outside the boundaries of the ACT. That had never been done before. When you deal in radio frequency capability, you are bound by the laws of physics. You have a mountain in your road or you have distance and, using that spectrum, which is the VHF spectrum, you will have limitations. The only alternative is to go to satellite to give you a proper footprint over the area. During the 2004 Namadgi, which that is a picture of, satellite failed, purely because it was a low orbit; with the coverage and the shadow of the mountain range where we were using it down in the area, the satellite did not work.

**THE CHAIR:** In case anyone is not aware, your system is a satellite-based system?

**Mr Mansell:** No. It is an independent radio; each asset acts as a relay. So the ability: the more in the network, the higher the integrity. The only reason it was ever put into a tower was to be utilised if only one vehicle was going out into a remote location. Should that tower be taken out, the network does not collapse.

**THE CHAIR:** So basically it is a radio relay system, so you relay through other radios. In using your system were there ever any situations where that radio link was broken because certain radios could not link with other radios and therefore there was a gap?

**Mr Mansell:** Purely by distance, and that did happen.

**THE CHAIR:** How often? Could you put a percentage on it?

**Mr Mansell:** Not that often. In fairness, we never got any reports back. The best that

we could derive, the system worked under load. There was one time that it did not, and it was found, which never got brought to light; it was the network within ESA, the backbone communications network, that collapsed. It was not our system.

But the system requires, which has still not been done, communications planning. If you are going to put assets into a certain region, you plan where you put them. You do not let Fred go out on his own and hope on a wing and a prayer that the communications will work. There is a relaying capability, so, if you are in remote areas, put someone on a hill, utilise a helicopter. That was never done. So of course the system would show deficiency. You are working with a five-watt VHF radio; it has limitations.

**THE CHAIR:** So basically what you are saying is that any system will always have some limitations.

**Mr Mansell:** Most definitely. Nothing is foolproof—everything from military through to civil.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, it is a matter of getting the best possible system that works virtually all the time—

**Mr Mansell:** Correct. What it did—

**THE CHAIR:** and having, effectively, I suppose, a backup system. What should be the backup system and what should be the main system?

**Mr Mansell:** You have a very good CAD system—computer-aided dispatch—and that is the main system that operates here in the ACT. For the first time in the world, we united ourselves with the CAD system, so you had the ability to provide dispatching to rural and SES. Should the CAD system collapse, which it does, you have redundancy, so you are still able to dispatch crews.

In the 2005 or 2006 hail damage, when CAD went down on New Year's Eve—it was reported in the newspaper that it was our system but it was not; it was CAD—our system provided the command and control for that night. That is on record by Tony Graham, head of SES.

**THE CHAIR:** Are there any other systems such as yours? Are you aware of the government doing anything in relation to putting in backup systems, systems such as yours, some other system other than just basically what we have now?

**Mr Mansell:** I am not sure. I would suspect—there are numerous products—they would be infrastructure based, which requires a tower, power and they are fixed.

**THE CHAIR:** I know there was a lot of talk about the cost of your system. The first question may be more for the minister, but answer it if you can. How much was actually spent on your system by the ACT until such time as the government ceased to use it? My second question is: what sort of costs are we talking about in terms of putting in a system such as yours, which you say is about as good as you can get in this modern day in terms of ensuring comms?

**Mr Mansell:** I am not sure I understand the question, but the cost of putting any system in is not always just in the hardware or the software; it comes with the training, it comes with any form of development, because, no matter what, you will have to integrate our system into an operating environment. Nothing is plug and play. The unique nature of ours was to be able to form relaying, so there was no intrinsic, complex way of operating the system. You turned a switch on—that was it.

**THE CHAIR:** I appreciate it is a couple of years old in terms of costings, but surely you would have told the ACT government, “This is approximately how much it will cost to put this system in place.” Surely they would have asked you that?

**Mr Mansell:** Yes. Whilst it was boasted in the newspaper at \$4.2 million, it was not that dear. The overall cost of hardware would have been in the side, I think, of about \$1.2 million. The rest went into training, modifications and upgrades to integrate it into the CAD system.

**THE CHAIR:** The rest—would that make up the \$4.2 million that has been quoted?

**Mr Mansell:** No, I think it came in just in the high \$3 millions.

**THE CHAIR:** What would it cost now? Is any of the system still there with the money that has been spent—and I understand money has been spent—that could be reactivated to get a similar system up?

**Mr Mansell:** You can take that system and turn it on now. The problem that we had with the ACT government was that it costs nothing to run. Anything with infrastructure, like your mobile phone, you pay per call, you pay per data. The system is independent. There are no operating costs. The only thing that we were moving into was maintenance, and, if you did not want us to maintain it, terminate the maintenance. There are no operating costs with it. You can take those boxes now and turn them back on, with no cost at all to either the taxpayer or to the labour of the people who operate it.

**THE CHAIR:** So the ACT government has all the equipment in there now, which you supplied to it.

**Mr Mansell:** I should imagine.

**THE CHAIR:** You would hope so, unless they have got rid of it.

**Mr Mansell:** I do not know.

**THE CHAIR:** As far as you know, all that equipment is there now; it simply could be turned on and there are just simply the operating costs, whatever they may be.

**Mr Mansell:** There are no operating costs. That is the bit I still say: you do not cost to go through air. The operating parameters you can extend. As I said, we have demonstrated all the way out to Tumut; the first time the trucks operated outside the ACT, we were able to track them. You can go anywhere. You could pick up one

vehicle and 10 other vehicles and transit to anywhere in Australia and turn it on and operate, and operate a small field of firefighters or emergency services.

**THE CHAIR:** So, unless the ACT for some reason got rid of the equipment, it could start it tomorrow?

**Mr Mansell:** Correct.

**THE CHAIR:** If there was a political decision made, “Right, we are going to do this now,” you could start it tomorrow. It is there.

**Mr Mansell:** Yes. There is no reason why not—and then the coverage; you have independence.

**THE CHAIR:** You have given us a map. I will just ask you a few questions and then my colleagues would like to. Let me say that you have supplied a map, which is exhibited, and for the transcript I will describe it.

Going from north to south, we have One Tree Hill, which has an X on it. We then have a series of black dots going north to south. The first one is PORT 6, then we have PORT 3, then we go further south and we have PORT 4. I am not too sure where PORT 2 is, but not to worry. Then we have a series of blue dots. Some have letters; some have other things in them. Going north to south again, we have GUN 10, we have what looks like PAR 12, what looks like PAR 26, Isaacs Ridge, PAR 20, PAR 23 and PAR 18 together, what looks like SOUCOM 1, SOU 22, SOU 20, HQ 010, by the look of it, then there is a PAR 10 and a PAR 21.

Then you have a series of other descriptions which do not appear to have dots to them, such as Mount Clear staging, RIV 61, PIA 41, a little red circle right down in the south with something underneath it and an FCU written down there as well. You have also got a few other points marked on the map, such as Bulls Head, Mount Ginini and Mount Jerrabomberra. I have just read out basically what is on the map.

Could you explain for the transcript what all that means and how that system sort of works?

**Mr Mansell:** What that screen shot there depicts is 5,000 square kilometres of urban and rural environment. To the southernmost tip down in Namadgi, we were able to observe activity, in semi-real time, of all assets operating within the ACT. The white lines are showing the respective communications path between each asset and who is relaying through whom. Those lines continually change as vehicles move around, and the best path is then found for the system. What that shows is that from ESA they have the capacity to operate and know where all their vehicles are within the ACT.

Whilst it is just a box diagram, that illustration shows the current computer-aided dispatching through our system and out to rural, SES, helicopters, graders—anything that wishes to utilise the system. Now, you have this.

**THE CHAIR:** Right. Could you please write “A” on the first document, *Canberra Emergency Services Authority Architecture with MAC2 Integration with Fixed*



*Infrastructure*, and “B” on the second document, *Canberra Emergency Services Authority Architecture*, and we will call the big map “1”. If you could table those, Mr Mansell, that would be very handy. So A is a document showing how your system would work and B is a document showing the current situation, which looks somewhat sparse, from what I saw.

**Mr Mansell:** From what you have in front of you there.

**THE CHAIR:** That is document 1, which you are also explaining with the white lines. I take it the blue dots are the assets, which will move around—

**Mr Mansell:** That is right.

**THE CHAIR:** and the white lines will obviously move around, too, depending on where those assets are currently. A is a fairly detailed document and B is not. That illustrates your description of the urban area as opposed to the rural area. I will just pass to my colleagues, who will ask you a few more questions.

**Mr Mansell:** Can I say just at this point about those illustrations: if you do an exercise and you have something like 30 assets that have been deployed throughout the ACT, you are able to visualise them. In one second, you are able to see where those assets are now, if you can capture that in your mind. Turn that over. Now you have got 30 assets. Ask 30 questions: where are you? What is your status? Then depict the currency of the data, by the time you got to the 30th person, as to how valid the first one would be? And what if the first one did not respond? Where is No 1? Where is No 2? So it goes. You have got an emergency to deal with—not do housekeeping on finding out where your assets are.

**THE CHAIR:** With 30 assets, that all takes time, if you are talking to each individual asset. I would imagine the quickest you could probably do that would have to be at least 60 seconds-plus.

**Mr Mansell:** That is if communications were effective on the day.

**THE CHAIR:** Quite conceivably, with a few people not answering the first time on the radio net, five minutes would not be unreasonable just to—

**Mr Mansell:** Correct. Sometimes not all people are in the vehicle.

**THE CHAIR:** Indeed. So that extends your time.

**Mr Mansell:** So around you go again, and again and again. It removes the first question. If nothing else, you are able to locate where your assets are. Everything on top of that is a bonus. If you want to ask questions, if you want to know a status or you wish to map a fire, the system had the ability to do it. So with the exercise I just gave you there, in a state of emergency where you have everyone, anxiety levels, questions: how are you going to deal with it? Let us go to B now, and ask what is going on south of Mount Tennant.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes. I know you stated earlier that you did not come here as a failed

contractor who is no longer doing work for the ACT government to have a whinge; you have come here to say there are other systems or similar contractors who could do the same. But, just in terms of your contract, that expired, was cancelled and did not proceed from June last year, you have indicated that the ACT government has all the assets supplied, and hopefully still has them. If the ACT government tomorrow decided, "Right, let us reactivate that," would your firm still be involved? Would there be any necessity for that?

**Mr Mansell:** It would, because the intellectual property that surrounds that system remains with ATI.

**THE CHAIR:** And that would be the same, whoever they actually went with?

**Mr Mansell:** Pretty much. If you engaged Motorola or if you engaged any company, it is their pride; it is their crown jewels.

**THE CHAIR:** So would that mean they would pay you an annual fee simply because they are using your property?

**Mr Mansell:** We need to bring it up to current status. I wrote to the minister early last year to say that, due to the deterioration of the system, you are not providing the upgrades that are available, that you have paid for, we will not be able to support an emergency in this town. That letter was ignored.

**THE CHAIR:** With whatever ongoing role you or any other company would have, would that involve also repair of any equipment or any of the assets?

**Mr Mansell:** Probably, depending on the status of them.

**DR FOSKEY:** Has ATI yet been paid the \$320,000 that you claimed that the government owed you last year?

**Mr Mansell:** We have reached settlement.

**DR FOSKEY:** You have reached settlement? End of conversation?

**Mr Mansell:** Pretty much. Under the terms of the agreement that is all I am at liberty to say.

**DR FOSKEY:** You have said about the Auditor-General's report that all documents were not considered. I think that you actually asked the Auditor-General to rerun or revisit the process and consider those documents.

**Mr Mansell:** Yes.

**DR FOSKEY:** Would you like to please indicate what those documents were and what their exclusion meant in terms of her recommendations?

**Mr Mansell:** At the time when we did the interview with the inspector-general it was to take into account all the documentation, the monthly reports, the technical design.

When we approached that, they were not aware. So what I requested was that time be taken; instead of working to a fierce deadline, to stop, go back and do a proper review of those monthly reports.

There was a review done by an independent bunch of contractors. I stated to the inspector-general that, when the contractors came out to view the system and to gain a briefing on it, at length we tried to explain how the system worked, and they could not comprehend it. I questioned the validity of how someone could report back to an independent inquiry on the technology when they could not comprehend the thing. So it needed a proper and thorough investigation. I believe it has not been done.

**DR FOSKEY:** Just finally for this round of questions, would you mind—it could be a long answer—describing the process of your interactions with the government from the inception of the idea, coming to a contractual agreement with ATI, to the end when that agreement was terminated?

**Mr Mansell:** You are right: it could be and probably will be a long answer.

**DR FOSKEY:** I think it will be a useful one.

**Mr Mansell:** Okay. The product was born out of an incentive, an R&D initiative by the then current government out of Business ACT. We were awarded \$100,000—

**MS MacDONALD:** Can you just say what year that was, please, Mr Mansell?

**Mr Mansell:** That would be mid-2002. So the product was definitely in its inception. It was an idea. We were given a \$100,000 grant to pursue the development of a capability, primarily for use in an emergency services capacity, not a military one. Our heritage is military, in command and control, but this system was born with an emergency services intent. We went through early development. We developed four, five, six boxes, then January 2003 occurred, to where our semitrailer command and control vehicle and those boxes were employed.

As I stated from the outset, the reason why we were brought in was that they could not find or track the fire. The system was deployed. It gained capability and an element of respect, but it never went anywhere. The system was reviewed; it was not deemed favourably. But during the 2003 fires we were given a responsibility of looking after military and civil aircraft—again the background my professional skills are in. During that time, you have seen footage of the urban fire truck that went up in Kambah. When that truck called out for assistance, I had a Squirrel helicopter with a bucket that was full. I said, “Right, I need you to go to the corner of ...” The helicopter pilot returned and said, “Sorry, mate, I am from Queensland; I do not know where that street is,” and, of course, it was dark. Fine.

So, when we did a re-enactment for then Commissioner Dunn, we brought the services of a Squirrel helicopter in, we fitted it with our system and we then put a car out at Coppins Crossing. We told the pilot he would operate but no voice. We would dispatch him from Curtin oval to a point then task him to pick up water from a point and then return. We went into the hover at Curtin oval, we then deployed him to Coppins Crossing, he took a photo and sent it back via our system. We then

dispatched him up north to Belconnen, he picked up a bucket of water, returned, splashed the car, took another picture and then returned on deck at Curtin. From there, Commissioner Dunn saw the merit.

What we were able to do was to take an asset, deploy it and do a task, and without putting human life at risk. So, effectively, we could have provided assistance to that fire truck. I am not saying we could have saved it—the fire could have been well out of control—but we could provide assistance in an area that was unfamiliar to the operator and also bring assistance. If it was relying on its normal infrastructure capability, as in a voice radio, you would not have got another vehicle there. So they saw merit in it.

They did an investigation of the relevant capability anywhere else in the world. There was none at that time, and, with regards to particular aspects of our system, there still is not. I use that with some backup, because the Australian military have recently purchased in earnest and we are now under serious consideration by the United States government, for the same reasons.

We went into contract to provide the capability, but it was a development contract. This was not off the shelf; the system had to be integrated into CAD. The system had to be brought into service with input from rural fire and SES. There was a reluctance for that. The rest is evident: reluctance by certain members within the ACT that have been quite vocal about how difficult it is to operate it, although I would like to put on record that that person never attended any training. From there the system was used repeatedly—the illustration I have just given you.

**THE CHAIR:** You can say who the person was, if you need to. I do not know if it is relevant.

**Mr Mansell:** The relevance of it is that, no matter what technology you use, you need change management. What we had experienced in 2003 was a map, a radio and total disarray. To now bring in automation of any sort meant having a culture change. That does not happen overnight. So I expect there to be some reluctance by operators to just take it at face value—because someone said it was a good idea. But it was not fielded correctly. It was not utilised. Communications planning was not carried out. So even in the best situation which we have witnessed, with the reluctance of some RFS personnel, the system was not employed. We would ask: why aren't they using special points? Why aren't they mapping the fire? "Oh, we'll get back to that." The system was never, ever employed to its full extent because of the reluctance of operators.

With respect to the illustrations I have given you there, and communications to cover the ACT, you had the ability to be able to track and communicate with assets without the dependency on infrastructure. The rest is somewhat history. There was reluctance, combined with whatever the argument was for removing the system—which I still cannot understand. In my attempts to talk to Commissioner Manson and say, "It doesn't cost anything to operate, so surely it can't be a financial one," the answer was, "No, I want it removed." "Are you having trouble with the contract?" "No, I want it removed." "Is there something we can do to make it better—perhaps implement the changes that we recommended?" "No, I want it removed." That was it.

You can fight as much as you like to do change management or bring technology to bear, but if the customer does not want it, they do not want it. If, for whatever reason, it is not wanted, that is the bit that I am here for. This town is lacking and is now extremely vulnerable because you do not have any redundancy and you are solely reliant on infrastructure. So should you have a disaster, whether it be like 2003 or whether it be the extreme of a terrorist attack, storm damage or mass evacuation, you are not prepared.

**MR PRATT:** Could you clarify the last statement that you made?

**Mr Mansell:** Yes.

**MR PRATT:** You were saying that this town is now wholly and solely reliant on communications infrastructure—for example, TRN?

**Mr Mansell:** TRN, yes.

**MR PRATT:** Towers, the base stations; and there is no redundancy built in to back that up. Is that what you are saying?

**Mr Mansell:** I am saying that the redundancy within that technology probably exists, but if you take the tower out, how does it operate?

**MR PRATT:** Correct. So you are saying that we are reliant on line-of-sight communication from tower to tower, repeat-relay communications. We do not have that back-up which you say FireLink was able to provide from satellite—

**Mr Mansell:** No, not satellite. I do not know why it keeps being brought up that we are a satellite-based system. We utilise GPS. We use nap-of-the-earth VHF communications.

**MR PRATT:** Sorry about that.

**Mr Mansell:** It is just a clarification that is required because satellite is also deemed as infrastructure.

**MR PRATT:** So the GPS capability provided that redundancy in the event that the infrastructure, as we now see it, went down; is that what you are saying?

**Mr Mansell:** No. The GPS purely provides positional information for the asset. That is it. With respect to the communications backbone, the VHF radios within each asset provide the communications network. Each asset acts as a relay station. So GPS is purely to be able to provide, in those illustrations, where an asset is located on the earth. If communications are affected via our system, you relocate your assets to get a communications network effective again. Anything else is using voice, and voice, at the moment, is dependent upon infrastructure. Infrastructure is towers.

With respect to the redundancy within the technology, I am not questioning that. There is very sound capability out there. But you are talking about two different

approaches to command and control. There is voice. Voice will never, ever be replaced. As a former military operator, you determine a lot by the anxiety in someone's voice. You are able to determine lots of things. But it is like that picture that I just illustrated to Bill: 30 assets, 30 questions. You may get 30 answers, but over a period of time what is the accuracy of it?

**THE CHAIR:** In answering a couple of other questions, you indicated that there were real problems in January 2003. Are we any more advanced?

**Mr Mansell:** No, not from a command-and-control perspective.

**THE CHAIR:** So, basically, that is what we have now?

**Mr Mansell:** That is what you have from a communications capability.

**THE CHAIR:** Fine for the urban fringe, nothing out there in the rural fringe?

**Mr Mansell:** That is what you have.

**THE CHAIR:** That is basically your system?

**Mr Mansell:** Underlying that is redundancy. During the 2003 bushfires, when the ACT headquarters came under threat, our truck was looking like being deployed down to Bredbo.

**MS MacDONALD:** Did you say before that you think we are worse off now than we were?

**Mr Mansell:** If we have gone back to a map and a voice radio, we are in the same position, if not worse. When I say "if not worse", we have gained capability through experience, but we have not exercised it. That is arrogance and ignorance. What compounds the situation is that, if we have another 2003 fire, personalities start to get in the way. You do not have a disciplined approach from command and control to be able to effectively utilise assets. You have gone back to an old standard operating procedure which was demonstrated during 2003 to be ineffective. Communications will not resolve that.

**MR PRATT:** Commissioner Manson is on record as saying, in effect, "Well, the digital data and vehicle locating system which has just been sacked is not a major issue because we will quite happily operate with a whiteboard and markers." You are referring to that sort of statement, aren't you?

**Mr Mansell:** Yes.

**DR FOSKEY:** A fair bit of time has now passed since the Auditor-General reported. Do you still feel it is so pressing that the documents that were not considered should be considered?

**Mr Mansell:** With the passage of time, will it make it any better? I would suggest to you that the people that are in the positions now would ignore it no matter what the

outcome of a thorough inquiry is. We are in this situation today because of the people that asked for that inquiry. We are in this position because of attitude and, again, I say, because of ignorance.

**THE CHAIR:** Are you aware of any systems—your system or anything like your system—that operates anywhere else in Australia or, indeed, anywhere else?

**Mr Mansell:** Not in Australia. The next level up from the capability that we have developed is getting into the military field, and it would be 10 times the price, if you were allowed to buy it. Our competitors that we have looked at come from the United States and the UK. They have tried. You do not de-scope a bit of technology to apply it to emergency services. They have tried it ever since 9/11. For military companies, it is very difficult. With respect to referring to our system as military based, it is not. We have taken this technology and applied it to the military, and the military have picked it up very, very quickly. Again, there needs to be an understanding of what command and control is about.

What we experienced during 2003 was the closest thing that this town will experience to what a war is like. So we utilised the military during 2003. The word “interoperability” still remains, and it is still a requirement. With respect to the ability of that system that we employed, you need to be able to demonstrate that you would have interoperability, and we have done that in Sydney, with New South Wales Police, and with the Australian Navy.

**THE CHAIR:** I think the principles of defence would apply equally to fighting fires.

**Mr Mansell:** Correct. Again, the main reason why I wanted to have the opportunity to appear before this committee is not to talk about the technology. That is an opinion. People can come and go with that. My professional opinion is that the command and control is wanting. Should we experience another event like 2003, you are not going to do it with a whiteboard, no matter how good a radio system is. The capability is not there, nor the professionalism of some people, from what I have experienced.

**DR FOSKEY:** The Auditor-General says that there are numerous mobile data systems available in the marketplace potentially offering value for money. Can you indicate what other systems there are that offer the same capacity? Do you have any notion that these are actually being explored and that we are going to move on to something that provides us with adequate coverage?

**Mr Mansell:** There is a multitude of systems on the market, and 99.9 per cent of them are infrastructure based, web based. So you would go to a computer, it goes to a bit of copper wire, it goes to a tower. When your computer goes down, I do not know what it is like in your house but the first thing my teenage daughters cry is, “The web’s gone down.” I can count numerous times in a week when that occurs. You are relying on a third party. That is why they are economical. It is like buying a mobile phone. It is like getting a web application which downloads for free. There are lots of them. But in every coronial inquiry, every bushfire inquiry and every disaster inquiry, history shows that what suffers is communications, every time. It either gets saturated or it gets damaged, and you are back to square one.

**DR FOSKEY:** On the other hand, Val Jeffery, who was here yesterday, said they used to fight fires without mobile phones or anything, which is the other end, isn't it, of the—

**Mr Mansell:** That is fine, but in satisfying that, what was the success rate?

**DR FOSKEY:** Apparently it was very good.

**Mr Mansell:** I would like to look at the statistics, because what is occurring now is that it is on the increase. If we tried to attack a 2003 event again with that attitude—not the technology but the attitude—that is the bit I am saying: this town is wanting.

**THE CHAIR:** Getting back to applying military principles, he did say there was an agreement with New South Wales where they would go out many kilometres to the west and put out fires in the whole Brindabella range. It was a very different set-up from what we actually have now.

**MR PRATT:** Mr Mansell, the 30-vehicle exercise that you ran through on paper with Mr Stefaniak earlier: I have actually seen that, thanks to your invitation, at ATI. Did you say earlier that during the inception process in 2002 the capability was already in train elsewhere and it was merely a case of adapting the FireLink system to be able to work here?

**Mr Mansell:** No, the technology was brand new. The expertise in command and control and tactical data links is what my company does.

**MR PRATT:** With respect to the \$1.5 million that I think you referred to earlier, which was the material cost of the project—and which was essentially your end of the project, I assume you mean by that—you are saying that it was then incumbent on the ESA to take that concept and lock it into the command and control system, link it to CAD et cetera. Are you saying that that end of the project failed?

**Mr Mansell:** No, it worked. The system worked, and the illustrations demonstrate that. But it was not a matter of finishing on a given date: “There we are, it's done.” A lot of the development work was to encompass the agreements that would come between the four services on who would dispatch whom, how it would be dispatched and the status of vehicles. An urban fire truck has a different status from a rural fire truck. When you have different statuses for an urban fire, you do not apply them to a rural fire. So there were modifications that needed to be changed. With respect to getting agreement on that—and that is what the monthly reports will reflect—agreement could never be sought. That is not a technical issue. The committees would go around and around and around, with request after request: “Can we agree on something?” “No.”

**MR PRATT:** That is exactly where I am getting to. Are you saying that, technically speaking, the project was competent? I know you have said that before and, to back you up, a lot of other people have made those same sorts of observations. But are you saying that the implementation of the concept to get agreement and to get the command and control locked in was simply not coming to the fore?



**Mr Mansell:** I agree, yes.

**MR PRATT:** When the ESA looked at this matter in late 2006 and the commissioner made that decision to kibosh FireLink, can you confirm that you said that, for want of a little bit of effort and the upgrading of computer programs, FireLink could have been sorted out pretty quickly and put into the field?

**Mr Mansell:** Very quickly.

**MR PRATT:** Can you tell us something about that?

**Mr Mansell:** Let us talk about the relationship of the contract. It was a development contract. As things got agreed, integrated with CAD and operational experience would come back through review, modifications were made. The maintenance of the system would provide periodic upgrades, as paid for. There was nothing additional. Those changes were determined by ESA. They were not changes that ATI woke up one morning and thought: "I think we'll change it for any reason." So those changes were taken on, developed and were ready for implementation. At the time leading up to termination of the contract, they were never implemented. I wrote to Minister Corbell, and maybe I had an opportunity to meet with him, and said: "Look, this system is in a state of deterioration. We are not in step with CAD." I formally wrote to the minister and said: "You are not going to be in a position to sustain an emergency based on the current status. I strongly urge you to incorporate the changes." That was ignored.

As a consequence of that, it appeared that everyone was saying these changes were at a cost and so on. They were not. They were already part of the contract. We were purely doing what the ESA wanted. They just decided not to incorporate the changes. "You wanted them, you paid for them, why won't you do it?" As a resident here, I am startling to feel slightly nervous that we have got a system that is useless. When we were told, "Right, we're going to terminate it," and I asked, "Why?" I was told, "I just want it removed." "The system is not functioning?" "No, I just want it removed." In two meetings I had with Commissioner Manson, I could not get an answer out of him. It was just a matter of saying, "I want it out." In a letter that he sent to me, he tried to backdate the termination, twice. When you write to a person in July and try to backdate it to 30 June, what is going on? That was done twice. I said, "You can't do that." "Oh, it was a typo." No, it was not.

**MR PRATT:** Are you able to table evidence to illustrate that?

**Mr Mansell:** I am happy to. I have not got it with me.

**MR PRATT:** Chair, Mr Mansell is prepared to table some evidence to reinforce the claim he has just made about the attempt to backdate documents—

**THE CHAIR:** I think that would be appropriate.

**MR PRATT:** on the part of Commissioner Manson, apparently.

**THE CHAIR:** Could you provide those documents to the committee?

**Mr Mansell:** Yes, there are two letters.

**MR PRATT:** What reasons did you get from Minister Corbell as to why they had decided to scrap FireLink?

**Mr Mansell:** The only reason that was ever given to us was the one that was made public—that it was a very capable system but it was military based and was too sophisticated for the ACT. That is nonsense.

**MR PRATT:** But no private advice to you?

**Mr Mansell:** No response to my letter, and no real justification. It was just a matter of saying, “We’re turning it off.”

**MR PRATT:** What is your comment about that, in terms of this claim that the system was a military system; therefore it was too complicated to be adapted here?

**Mr Mansell:** If the minister had taken the time to come and have a look, as he was requested to do, he might have seen first hand. But the system is not a military-based system. We have adapted it now to military, most definitely. The system is very capable. But the system that was born out of R&D was built specifically for emergency services. The reason was that there was none anywhere else in the world at the time. In some respects, there still is not. So it was just cast aside. As I said, whether it be my system or anyone else’s system, the reason that I wanted a seat at this table is that we do not have a system, either mine or anybody else’s. The system that was in there was extremely capable.

**MR PRATT:** Are you saying that if the former ESB, or then the ESA, had simply adapted the Technesys system then present in fire brigade and, I think, ambulance vehicles, to the RFS and SES vehicles, linked to CAD, that would have only been useful in what they call the bushfire abatement zone and no further out?

**Mr Mansell:** The Technesys system can operate as far as you want it to operate, but you are dependent upon infrastructure. So you would utilise Mount Tennant, Bulls Head and Mount Clear. Very good: it would operate for 95 per cent of the time. It is the five per cent, when disaster hits, when the tower goes out and the power goes—that is the whole purpose that I am talking about. It does not matter what product is involved.

The only thing other than our system is satellite, and that is infrastructure based. You are still relying on a third party. It comes from the satellite to a ground station and in. You are still dependent on someone else somewhere to provide you with the data. Independence is one of the key assets. What we observed during 2003 and 2004 was the ability to dispatch into remote areas and to be able to see where assets were. That was the best that it has ever been used. That took the first 30 questions out of setting up for any emergency.

**MR PRATT:** The FireLink program increased in expenditure from roughly \$3.6 million—I am talking about the overall government program cost—to \$4.2 million in 2006. With respect to the material content of that program, your end of

the program, did your requirements increase in cost or do you believe that those cost increases were simply in the government support side of the program?

**Mr Mansell:** With respect to those costs, as I said, it was a development project. As they determined that they wanted more capability than there were tasks. But it was not a style of contract where it was just a fixed price and you could say, "There's all the money, it's all yours." There was money set aside.

**MR PRATT:** So it was progressive?

**Mr Mansell:** And we were tasked from time to time, and those tasking orders determined what they wanted the system to do.

**MR PRATT:** As the tasks changed, clearly—

**Mr Mansell:** The system would be modified to accommodate that. And that is where we were tasked. We did the changes, and the last couple of changes were never incorporated. As a consequence, the reason why they wanted the changes was because the system required it. That is why we were at a loss: "You paid for it. You wanted it. You determined that you wanted it. Why not incorporate it?"

**MR PRATT:** What are your comments about the criticisms that FireLink, which was identified to be fast-tracking the system in 2004 and to be in service by no later than bushfire season 2004-05, was delayed, delayed, delayed? What are your comments about those claims?

**Mr Mansell:** Determined by being in service, we were operational. Acceptance in the service was taking a long time because they could never reach agreement.

**MR PRATT:** Acceptance in the service, and perhaps the tasks: was it perhaps this task changing that you referred to?

**Mr Mansell:** I must be clear that the system, from the day the boxes were positioned in the vehicles and the headquarters was turned on, was operational.

**MR PRATT:** When was that?

**Mr Mansell:** I cannot recall, but it was well within—

**MR PRATT:** Well within the contract requirement?

**Mr Mansell:** Most definitely. Acceptance in the service is a different matter, because they could never get agreement at the time between all the services. But we did get acceptance, and we have signature blocks on different bits of paper which said: "Yes, we agree. We want this done and we want that done." By the dates, the system was operational. As a consequence, I referred to the Namadgi fire in May 2004, where the system was employed ahead of the delivery schedule. That was where satellite failed and also the normal UHF communications were not working. We were the only communications with Mount Clear.

**MR PRATT:** Tell us a bit more about this disagreement between the services which delayed the acceptance into service. What sorts of examples can you give?

**Mr Mansell:** The main example, which everyone else could appreciate, is the tasking with regard to status of vehicles. You have four different emergency services. What applies for ambulance does not apply for SES. Rural does not apply for urban.

**DR FOSKEY:** Could you comment on an article that appeared in the *Sunday Times* on 2 September last year. Paul Malone concluded by saying:

But in the case of FireLink, it seems the government has been spooked by opposition sniping and, as a result, \$4.5 million of taxpayers' money has been burnt.

Would you care to comment on whether you think that really is the reason that the government pulled the money?

**Mr Mansell:** If that is the case then this town is in a worse state. If the government of the day is spooked just by hearsay then we are in more trouble than what I am outlining. I do not think it helps when both sides of the Assembly are in dispute over the safety of this town and cannot reach agreement.

If that system was utilised fully and put to the test and the cards fall then so be it. It was never done. There was every opportunity for it to be demonstrated. Even with Emergency Services, I offered to put the truck and capability out and do a promotion and PR so that it could be utilised and the public could become aware of it. It was denied, denied, denied. There would have been no cost, but it was a matter of getting confidence back into this town. Because we were involved in the 2003 fires, every time there is a puff of smoke, I get a phone call at home. That does not bring much confidence. So the idea was to get an ability out into the streets so that the public could get some awareness. That was declined at every opportunity.

**DR FOSKEY:** Did you feel you were unsupported by the opposition until perhaps the government made the decision to pull the plug on the system?

**Mr Mansell:** I am surprised that Mr Pratt and Bill have been out—everyone has witnessed it apart from Mr Corbell.

**THE CHAIR:** He has not been?

**Mr Mansell:** He has never been to ATI, after numerous invitations.

**THE CHAIR:** The department has cancelled the system without going out and looking at it.

**Mr Mansell:** Everyone who has observed it has said it is a very good, very capable system. I think that is a fair comment around the table.

**DR FOSKEY:** But did they look at it before the contract was concluded?

**Mr Mansell:** Yes.

**DR FOSKEY:** So you had the support of the opposition.

**Mr Mansell:** I do not know. I can only comment on what I see in the newspaper.

**THE CHAIR:** If anyone has any further questions, I am sure Mr Mansell will be happy to answer them on notice. So if members want to put questions on notice, would that be all right?

**Mr Mansell:** Sure.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Mansell. Thank you very much for your attendance and for your assistance to the committee.

**Meeting adjourned from 11.01 am to 11.19 am.**

**ROSS, MR MICHAEL HUNTER**, private citizen

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Ross, you have read the privilege statement on the yellow pad?

**Mr Ross** I have.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you understand that.

**Mr Ross:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Would you please tell the committee your full name and the capacity in which you appear before us.

**Mr Ross:** My full name is Michael Hunter Ross. I appear as a private citizen. I no longer work with the Rural Fire Service, but I previously was the chief officer for the ACT Rural Fire Service.

**THE CHAIR:** If you could tell us for the record: when did you join the Rural Fire Service, when were you appointed chief officer and when did you leave that service?

**Mr Ross:** I joined the Rural Fire Service in June 2004 and I was appointed chief officer of that service three months later. So September 2004 I was appointed the chief officer of that service.

**MR SMYTH:** As a supplementary to that, what qualifications do you have for that position and how many years experience had you in bushfire fighting before you took up the job?

**Mr Ross:** My background is in forestry and forest management and a significant part of the 20-odd years of experience that I had in forestry before coming to the Rural Fire Service was spent in bushfire management and bushfire control and preparation for large bushfire events. So that was the experience I brought into the ACT, particularly in remote areas and particularly over large-scale areas.

**THE CHAIR:** You have a 12-page submission here. Do you want to make a brief statement or are you happy if we ask you questions?

**Mr Ross:** I am quite happy to answer questions. I think, in the context of the questions that were asked in this submission document, I was able to get across most of the issues that I had; so I am very happy to take questions.

**THE CHAIR:** I will start off then and cut to the quick. We are looking at a number of things. You actually address in your document all the questions relevant for the committee. Perhaps if I go to page 9, though, of your document, do the current structures and policies reflect the lessons learnt from the 2003 bushfires? You state that in some respects we are better prepared. You then, however, go into some detail on page 9, in terms of an adequate structure, and state in your response to the question on page 9:

My professional opinion is that the new structure places far too much pressure on

particular individuals at key points in the structure (for example a Deputy Commissioner of Fire Brigade, RFS and SES as one position is untenable), so much so that if another 2003 type event occurred it would likely collapse again.

You go on to say:

My concern is that for Canberra's next large scale emergency, the structure will fail the first test of pressure because the operational inefficiency of the structure will be exposed just as it was in 2003. Ironically, the failings of this restructure may not be evident for many years to come (because they will only be apparent under the severe pressure of a major incident).

This proposed new structure may and probably will serve Canberra for 95 % of all emergencies, but that is not the point here. It is the 5 %, indeed (in the case of major bushfires such as 2003) it is the less than 1 % (Mega fires) of events that such a structure is tested and fails, and the community is left to pick up the pieces.

I am concerned to read there that you think that another event like 2003, another significant large-scale emergency, would cause so much pressure that the current structure would fail. How would you recommend that the territory does all it can to ensure that the structure is in place to make sure it does not fail, that we knock out that five per cent or even one per cent chance? What is the best way of doing that?

**Mr Ross:** Historically across Australia, indeed across the world, organisations have not prepared well for major events. They prepare well and they can prepare well for a lot of events but not that one per cent of events that actually cause major problems.

The main thing that Canberra has never come to grips with, not just with this government but indeed with previous governments—and I allude to it in other parts of my submission—is: what does it expect from its emergency services? In other words, what level of protection do we want to give the people of Canberra? Do we want to give them protection for just 90 per cent or 95 per cent of all major emergencies and then rely on some other process, be it help from other authorities such as New South Wales, interstate authorities for the mega events? It is a discussion and a good intellectual discussion that has never actually been had in this city, almost from the time that the city was established. I might add that it is a discussion that is not had in other parts of the world.

Having said that, to answer your question now, the problem that we had with the structure in 2003 is apparent from both the McLeod and the coronial findings. What we have, in going back to a structure where you have in this case now one person looking after three of the major services, is, to me, fraught with all the same sorts of dangers that you might have had by having a structure where you had almost no understanding of command and control.

The question you ask is a very simple question but I have to say that the answer is quite complex; so if you will bear with me on this. When you look at how you approach a major emergency, you have to have a good understanding across all the agencies, not just the agency involved in the firefighting itself, in the case of a bushfire, because the support for that firefighting comes from the rest of the service.

If the rest of the service is not on song with how command and control operations work across the structure—and that is why the ACT and indeed all parts of Australia now have adopted the AIIMS approach to firefighting, which is a command and control structure—if the services are not aware of how that structure works you can never expect the interoperability to occur as it should. It failed badly in 2003 because it was not even very much a part of the psyche. There were AIIMS per se.

Command and control under the AIIMS system was never really part of the ACT until 2003. The Rural Fire Service and indeed the ESA did a lot of work in trying to educate and retrain the broader ESA to understand what AIIMS command and control is all about. But it is one thing to learn it and it is one thing to study it, but it is another thing to put it into action.

In small emergencies or in small type fire events, small type emergency events, an AIIMS-type thing would go into play. But until you have significant training across the organisation and the services involved in the organisation and until you have significant emergency events, which you do not really want to have—but they are the ones that put you under test—you do not realise the failings of your structure.

I guess the point I am making about this is that from my experience—and it is significant across major bushfire events—if you rest all the responsibility with too few people in any organisation it will come unstuck. The Canberra fires went for 18 days in total. People were wasted after four. Your senior officers, your senior officials, were gone; they had been working 18-hour days. They cannot possibly go on for those long days.

I fear that there has not been significant consideration given to fighting large-scale events in the formation of this new structure. This new structure will cope with a lot of the day-to-day events, as I stated. But when you get a large fire it is too late to change your structure and it is too late to bring in the training and the facilities that you need for a large event when the event happens. You cannot prepare for a 2003 event the year before it occurs.

The way that we were heading under the previous authority was that we had short, medium and long-term visions for where the Rural Fire Service was headed. That involved significantly the training and the up-skilling of our people, a volunteer recruitment program, so that when we got to the next big event—which is a matter of when, not if—when the next big event hits Canberra we have all those things in place. It was a matter of time, and it takes time.

If you hold a structure at a certain level and do not expand it and do not train it, do not get people to fully understand the roles of the other agencies in an emergency situation, ultimately that situation will come and you will be underprepared again. That is my fear about the structure that is in place now. Not only do you rest too much responsibility with one person—and I really think that is a considerable concern—you also have the issue of the command and control not being fully understood across the entire organisation, or different interpretations of it, let us say.

**THE CHAIR:** What sort of structure do you consider is appropriate in a place like the



ACT? What is the best structure—and you have got considerable experience—that would best suit the ACT?

**Mr Ross:** Without looking to try to evade your question, the structure that you want for the ACT is the one that suits the needs of Canberra best for the emergency it is going to face. There are any number of models around Australia for emergency services in jurisdictions much larger than ours that would be equally applicable here. Those structures would work well here if we put them into place. A number of structures would.

I will probably harp on this continually through this submission. Until we get to the point in the ACT of determining what level of protection and cover we want for the range of emergencies that are going to affect the ACT public and the ACT, we cannot answer the question about structure adequately. We will only be guessing.

**THE CHAIR:** I will ask a supplementary. We have heard so far in this inquiry—for example, yesterday, from another experienced firefighter—that until effectively self-government and a few years after that, with an old structure, the Rural Fire Service was able to put out every major potential fire from 1939 and there was absolutely no problem in terms of that coming into the urban area. There was a strong push from that particular person to have an independent rural fire service and basically reactivate the old Rural Fire Service Act, the old 1936 act. So that was one suggestion of how that should operate.

You have said there are various structures interstate. What sort of structure do you think would help the ACT in terms of ensuring that, if fires started out to the west of Canberra, they are not going to come into Canberra because we have the right structures in place to protect the city? I suppose that effectively would be my first question—that very real possibility.

You allude, at various stages in your submission, to another mega event like 2003. With climate change, obviously we are going to continue to have fires and more major fires than in the past. What is the best structure for that? Is it something along the lines of what was suggested yesterday; is it something else; is it a combination? What are your views on that?

**Mr Ross:** Again, excuse me; I do not mean to be evasive. It is a structure that allows you to be able to quickly respond to that fire—to have the training, the resources and the capacity to be able to respond to that fire; for those people who are going out to that fire or flying out to that fire, understanding exactly what their role is. As soon as the smoke goes up, it is a structure that allows the people at the senior levels to understand what committees they have to form straight away, what emergency response actions they have to take, how people have to communicate, the other people across the ACT community they have to inform about that fire coming.

It is a system that allows the communication button to be hit straight away so that people are well informed about those fires. It is a system that stops panic developing in the community very quickly without knowing where the fire is. It is that sort of structure.

Again, I do not wish to avoid the question but I am saying that the structure that you put in place is one that has to be thought through to meet the needs of what you are trying to do. A structure per se might not stop the fire that starts out west and burns for a couple of days and comes into the city, but a structure well thought will know at which point your resources are overstretched and at which point you will have to call for help very quickly.

A good example is back in 2003. The call for help might have suggested—no criticism intended, just an observation. However, if you have a good, sound structure in place where people know their role and people know the command and control levels, then you can press buttons very quickly to get things into place to overcome any deficiencies that you might have.

So the structure that I am talking about is not a structure that may not necessarily cope with all emergencies, but it is a structure that knows when to act, where to go to to get help and when to get that help before it is too late to respond to any accident or any emergency that might occur in Canberra.

**THE CHAIR:** You mentioned earlier—and this will be my last question on this—there are structures around the country which may well be very applicable to the ACT. Are there any particular examples which you think slot in nicely here in terms of a structure? I hear everything else you are saying.

**Mr Ross:** If I was to point to perhaps two structures that depended on where we might want to head as an organisation or as a government way in which to head as far as command and control goes, one structure you might think about is the Queensland structure where the Rural Fire Service and the Urban Fire Service are a combined unit but the issues of command and control and particularly of handover in certain areas, on the peri urban area, do not occur because you have one command structure. It took enormous teething pains to get that into place because of the different cultural views that are held in those fire services, which would also occur here, but it is a structure that is worth looking at.

Another structure which is also worth looking at and which works very well is one that is used in South Australia where the four chief officers of each of the services form the emergency services senior group, and those four emergency services senior officers, the four chief officers, report directly to the minister on all matters relating to emergency services. It is a very simple, streamlined process that enables quick, decisive processes particularly in times of emergency, because in times of emergency you do not want to have to go through layers of people to get the main decision makers in the process—in this case, it would be the minister for emergency services—to the table to get the information across. By the time it goes through four or five sets of hands, the message is not the same as it is coming from the people who are actually running the fire.

**THE CHAIR:** Both Dr Foskey and Mr Pratt had supplementaries to my questions.

**DR FOSKEY:** Thank you very much, Mr Ross. I must say that you seem to have a really good knowledge of these issues. I am interested in whether you were in a position, when you were working for the Rural Fire Service, where you could

express and put some of these ideas into the mix and restructure. How open was the culture so that you could talk about these issues and these ideas?

**Mr Ross:** From my memory, which is not too bad, when we were looking at what is currently the revised structure now, we had several models on the table. There were, I think, five or six models that we were looking at of possible restructuring. The parameters of that structure were many, finance being one of them—not necessarily the main one but it was one of the key ones, as they say.

We, as a group, as a collective, all the chief officers, at that time put, as I said, six or seven, from memory, different structures on the table to the new commissioner and we had frank and robust discussion over several meetings on the structures. Ultimately the final structure was decided upon at the end of that discussion process.

**DR FOSKEY:** And did you feel that your frank and open discussion actually had some influence on the outcome?

**Mr Ross:** I believe that it was listened to. I am happy to go on the record as saying the structure—I have implied it anyway in what I have said—that was put up was not the one that I favoured and I know it was not favoured by other members of the committee. But ultimately, and rightly so, the commissioner of the organisation has the right to ultimately make the decision about the final structure. I respect that decision.

It was not the favoured structure, purely because of my experience with fighting large fires around the place and knowing the command and control structure that needs to be put into place to run long-campaign fires. I did—and I still do—not believe that the structure in place is able to achieve that.

**DR FOSKEY:** Was your departure from the service for any reasons related to this inquiry?

**Mr Ross:** I would hope not.

**DR FOSKEY:** Of interest to this inquiry?

**Mr Ross:** I would hope not, no. Simply, I was put on a three-year contract and the contract ran out. Just like the contract of myself and the head of the Urban Fire Service, those contracts expired at the end of June last year and they were not renewed.

**DR FOSKEY:** The third supplementary on this one is: there have been opinions expressed that there is an over-bureaucratisation of the services, whatever that means, and that the processes involved, the steps and so on, slow down the response. I am wondering whether you would comment on that in your concerns about the structure, because you have said that having one person is a problem, but are the steps that are required to go through in decision making also part of the problem?

**Mr Ross:** That is just it. The lesson learnt from the Canberra fires was that you had an operational arm, which you currently have now in the ACT, of the Rural Fire Service

and indeed the ESA. But you also have now, as you did before 2003, the overarching administrative arm, if you like, in this case JACS.

The bureaucracy that we refer to when we talk about quite colloquially about this is the chains of approval that you have to go through to have something happen at an operational level. There are two aspects to it. The first is the physical fire event, where you have got a fire going and all of a sudden you need to have some very quick decisions being made. The incident controller should, by rights, have the right to make that decision and so should the commissioner or the deputy commissioner of the organisation.

But there is a hook on that. There is a hook in respect of: can we afford to get two more helicopters up here at a couple of thousand dollars an hour, can we afford to pay for some more fire trucks to come across from interstate, all those sorts of things? When they come into it, as a person running the fire, I do not want to have someone above me go through a process to get that back to me to tell me I can do it. I want to put the fire out. So you do not want to have that—for want of a better word—clutter above you in an emergency situation.

What you need—and I go back to my previous comments about what we need for the ACT—is a clear assurance from government or any government that the person commanding that fire has full and total autonomy to make decisions related to that fire. That is one aspect of the bureaucracy.

The other aspect of the bureaucracy that concerns me is the fact that, as an authority, as we were from 2004 onwards, you were able to go through the commissioner at the time to the minister of the day or parliament of the day to argue your case about what money is needed and why you need that money. You can very clearly articulate to that minister why you need that money. Ultimately the government of the day makes the decision. That is fine.

Now, under a JAC system, as you were before 2003, you have several other layers to get through and a large department that has a whole lot of competing priorities. I might add that the people in JACS, with all due respect to the people in JACS who are well qualified, do not have experience in emergency management, do not have experience in major emergencies. They are making decisions on the funding that they give you as an organisation about what you should get in terms of your capacity to be an emergency response agency. They cannot appreciate, with all due respect, the needs of the organisation because they do not understand the business of running emergency management. So I cannot expect that they would make level decisions on that because they have other pressures on them.

**DR FOSKEY:** Can I ask about that. If a fire or a situation was declared a state of emergency, would that be a way of bypassing the bureaucracy? For instance, we could perhaps say that, if that decision was made earlier in the process, then we could bypass this bureaucratic—

**Mr Ross:** As I understand it, the laws of the ACT do allow you to do that that if you declare someone the head of the emergency, the emergency management operator—sorry, the name escapes me now—the emergency controller for the ACT; then that

does that. But you also have to be careful you do not declare every single thing that happens an emergency. It in itself brings on a whole lot of issues.

**MR PRATT:** Going back to this question of the restructure that occurred in 2006, Coroner Doogan said, “McLeod said there had to be an autonomous authority, and now this has been reversed by the ACT government.” Coroner Doogan was extremely critical of that. I notice too that Mr Val Jeffery was extremely critical of that. You are clearly critical of that reversal here today, on the basis of your concerns about bureaucracy. Mr Prince said last week to this committee:

Considering the structure and staffing arrangements of 2002 and to appreciate the capacity of the ESA today would suggest that history may repeat itself; however only time will tell. The ESB of 2002 is very similar to the ESA of today.

Would you agree that it would appear that there is widespread discontent amongst people of your experience, currently serving officers, if you are in touch with them, about what happened with this restructure?

**Mr Ross:** Appreciating that I have been out of the loop for just on eight months now, certainly from a personal point of view I have expressed that, and that is a concern. I am pleased that other people have also shared the same concern. Anecdotally, talking to volunteer members and members of staff that I still keep in contact with— anecdotally, I say—I think there is that concern that they have not got it right with this restructure and that there needs to be a concerted effort to really look at the structure that is best for the ACT.

**MR PRATT:** In your opinion, has this restructure severely impacted on the morale of the services?

**Mr Ross:** I do not know necessarily if it is the structure itself. Again, I can only speak anecdotally; I am not with the service anymore. I would suggest that the morale is not good in the service; I do not really think it has recovered in the last 12 months. I will digress very quickly.

One of the keys that I tried to maintain while I was the chief officer is that a rural fire service in particular lives and dies on the strength of its volunteers. Without the support of its volunteers and without the respect of its volunteers, you do not have a vibrant, active rural fire service that is able to respond to all the needs of the community.

One thing that is paramount—even though at times I can attest to the fact that I violently disagreed with a lot of volunteers—is that they have to have their say; they have to be allowed to have their say; and their views have to be respected. If you move away from that in any way, shape or form you have lost what essentially is basically the heart and soul of the rural fire service, their volunteers. When I keep hearing—and again I make the point it is anecdotally—that the morale is not good, it keeps telling me the morale is not good and that something needs to be done about it.

**MR PRATT:** I know that you are still in touch with people because there is two-way respect in terms of where you have been. Do you believe that morale has improved at

all since the unprecedented 14 March 2007 captains strike?

**Mr Ross:** Again, I find that hard to answer, being out of the loop. There are probably people who are going to speak in the not too distant future who might be able to answer that question better than I. To answer the question directly, I have seen nothing to suggest, since that time, anything that would suggest to me that morale has got any higher than it was back then.

**MR PRATT:** Mr David Prince stated in his submission that he was “not convinced that we are well prepared if we were to face another situation like January 2003”. I believe Mr Jeffery said very much the same sort of thing here yesterday. He was deeply concerned at our lack of preparedness and was actually convinced that we were not any better prepared, I think he said, since 2003. Yet you would have thought that the lessons would have been learnt.

What is your view about this preparation? Is it a case of you tailoring your budget to what you have got? How do you analyse the threat and how do you work out what it is going to cost to protect the ACT? Do you have a comment about that?

**Mr Ross:** It is what I alluded to at the start when I was trying to evade Mr Stefaniak’s questions, or seemingly trying to evade them, and that is that we need to have the robust, rigorous and intellectual discussion here in the ACT about what level of service we need to provide to the ACT community and Canberrans, and then what level of service we are prepared to provide to them. In other words, if money was no object—and it always is—what would be the premium service that we could provide, not just with rural fire, but with every aspect of the ESA? What is that? Let us find that; let us have that exercise and find that out.

What level of risk are we going to accept at the end of that? In other words, are we going to accept that we will take all the risks, except for major terrorist attack which we will give to the Federal Police or to somebody and they will build up their capacity to deal with some of that?

Until we have that rigorous discussion about what level we are prepared to go to, you would have to say that we are underprepared because we have not exercised a 2003-type event since 2003. We have already spoken about low morale. We have certainly got more equipment than we had before, but I would suggest that we still have considerable difference of opinion about handover control in certain areas in a major fire, particularly around the periphery, the peri urban area of Canberra, the grassland urban interface, and we have not exercised it enough to understand that.

The only major exercise and major planning process that I was really involved in, in the three years that I was there, was for Black Mountain. That was a good exercise. It exposed a lot of things between the urban brigade and the Rural Fire Service. It exposed a lot of differences, which was good. But it still did not go on from there. We still did not talk about “what if it did not stop at Black Mountain, what if it leapt across to Mount Ainslie and you had all the things in between Mount Ainslie and Black Mountain alight?” How would we have dealt with all of that? What were our contingencies?

Part of any emergency services preparation is major exercises. If you want a really good example of that, look at the London bombing. The reason that the London bombing was the success it was, just as Hurricane Katrina in America was the disaster that it was and the debacle that it was—

**DR FOSKEY:** I think you mean the response to it?

**Mr Ross:** The response to it, yes. I beg your pardon, yes. The reason was that the London bombing had been well and truly prepared for; it had been rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed; and they knew what they had to do when these things happen. If we do not do that in Canberra, we will have the same problem. But rehearsing takes time; it takes money; it takes preparation and it takes planning. If you have not got those things in place and you have not got the spare staff to do it—the Fire Brigade is a classic example—if they have an on and off shift and they take people off shift to do an exercise, they have to pay people overtime to come on and do that.

I was lucky with the Rural Fire Service. We had volunteers who gave gladly of their time, I might add, but you do not have the luxury often. So how do you overcome that? What level are we prepared to go to in the ACT to have those sorts of things rehearsed?

**MR PRATT:** As a senior emergency services officer, in your time did you ever participate in a macro risk analysis for the ACT to come up with what it would actually cost to protect the ACT? Did you as a senior officer ever get directions or were you instructed to participate in such an analysis?

**Mr Ross:** You are stretching my memory here now. I think, not long after I started, within about 12 months of my starting, we went through a capability modelling exercise where each of the services went through and said, “If we had to respond to a whole range of incidents and we wanted to achieve a whole range of things to respond to those incidents, what sort of things would we have to have in place?” In other words, just for the sake of the discussion, for a mega fire like we had in 2003 we would need so many people on the ground, so many appliances, so much in the way of skilled personnel. And to get there we would need to, over the years, recruit this many volunteers, we would need to train this many people. You go back and say, “Therefore to budget for something like that, you need this.”

In other words, you got back to square one, which said, “With this much money we could train this many people, get this many vehicles and then when we had this sort of an event”—be it 2003 or whatever—“we would be able to have this response.” Yes, we went through that exercise; we went through that exercise for each of the services, from memory.

**MR PRATT:** Did you work out a cost?

**Mr Ross:** We did have a cost. It was quite a high cost. To be honest, I cannot remember exactly now because it was such a high cost you do not think about it. But it was certainly well in excess of any budget we might be receiving at the moment.

**MR PRATT:** So it is true, is it not, that rather than determining exactly what that bill was and then talking about that bill publicly, in effect, we are tailoring our emergency management response to the bloody budget that we have got?

**Mr Ross:** That could be your opinion, yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Tailoring a threat to meet a budget?

**Mr Ross:** A budget has to be part of the equation. But in putting that budget down, the assessment has to be made on what level of risk you are going to accept. If it is driven by the desire to have the best possible service and then take these risks along the way—and there is nothing wrong with taking risks, I might add; many people do it; many organisations do it—you need to know what that risk is and how you are going to respond if it happens.

That is okay, but I do feel there is an element and has been an element, certainly in the time I was there, of a fiscal override to the planning and preparation for major events. It is a dangerous way of doing it; it is not the right way of doing it.

**MR SMYTH:** A supplementary: in the time that you were there, was the budget framed in the context of the information that had been provided in the capability modelling study or were you simply given a number and told to cut your services to fit that cloth?

**Mr Ross:** They were discussions at an even higher level than ours, but essentially we did a zero-based budget attached to that capability model so that we knew how much it was. We took that budget model—I think it was taken by the executive at the time, the commissioner at the time—to the Treasury and the Treasury came back with a figure that we would have to work with.

**MR SMYTH:** Did the Treasury justify where they got that figure from?

**Mr Ross:** Not to my knowledge, they did not, but you would have to ask Treasury. I cannot be sure. I would be reasonably sure that the discussion that I have talked about and the rigour of discussion across government would not have been had.

**MR PRATT:** On these capability studies, in your time as chief officer, did the RFS ever exercise in any other emergency contingencies, for example, providing backup services to the fire brigade or in an urban attack, for example, a building collapse issue?

**Mr Ross:** Not to any great extent, no. The urban brigade did do an assimilation evacuation on a building collapse in Civic and we were peripheral to that in that, once the urban pumpers are taken out of action, the Rural Fire Service stands up as the replacement for those pumpers if they are out of action for a while. We did not have many fully integrated exercises.

**MR PRATT:** Did you ever receive instructions or plans from the ESA or the government around what roles, missions or tasks that you would have in the event of a very serious level terrorist attack?



**Mr Ross:** No. We went through a couple of terrorist exercises, but it was never made clear to the RFS, again, what their role would be, only because it was seen that the RFS would be peripheral in taking up the slack that the other services would have been falling into. That is not unreasonable because the RFS did not have the training or equipment or the facilities to be able to help with something like that, only from a role of perhaps logistics or a role of, as I said, filling in where the urban pumpers were not able to service the community at that stage.

**MR PRATT:** I appreciate that the RFS's time would have been entirely taken up in training to prepare for a bushfire risk but, in your opinion, as a major agency within the emergency services, perhaps more training and planning should have been undertaken with those other events in mind?

**Mr Ross:** If you are going to be fair dinkum about running an emergency service to meet the stated needs of your community and the agreed needs of the community, training and preparation are two integral components. Regrettably, in budget situations, training in particular is always the first thing that gets the knock because discretionary funding is something like, in a lot of the services, probably less than 10 per cent. So you have to go into simulated training.

**MR SMYTH:** Training and decisions get back to leadership. We have heard comments over the last couple of days about the current leadership and the lack of it. Does the ESA lack leadership that will deliver the safety that the people of Canberra deserve?

**Mr Ross:** I really could not answer that question. As I said, I have been out of it for eight months now. Leadership in any organisation is crucial. As people would know, there is an immense difference between management and leadership. Where leadership comes to the fore in emergency services of course is when you are put under emergency situations and you need good leadership, leadership with the respect of the community and the volunteers to actually take them through an emergency situation.

I cannot necessarily speak for the people who are currently still in the Rural Fire Service. The people who were there and who remain there, as far as I understand, are very capable people, very well-trained people and would be providing an excellent leadership role. As far as other areas of the ESA are concerned, I cannot comment. I can only say that, unless you consistently have a program of maintaining and training leadership roles in emergency services, eventually you run out of leaders. In the current context of litigation around the world, let alone Australia, getting good leaders in emergency situations is becoming increasingly difficult.

**MR SMYTH:** You said in the introduction to your submission:

I strongly believe that with adequate and strategic long-term vision and planning ...

Are we receiving and do we have in place adequate and strategic long-term vision to secure the emergency services' future for the ACT?

**Mr Ross:** It has been a thread through what I have been saying for the last while. I do not believe we—and we are probably not alone in this—in the ACT have come anywhere close to a long-term vision and planning for dealing with all the emergencies that might occur. The strategic bushfire management plan, which I mentioned in my submission, was probably the first real crack that the ACT had at a long-term plan. In that case, that was very much about land management.

But if you read through the plan, it was about long-term land management to mitigate bushfires if they occur. But it was also about training; it was also about building up capacity. So that was the first real crack that we had at that. But again, once you come out with the findings of a long-term plan, you have to run that plan through to its conclusion and you have to do the work; you have to have the money to do the mitigation work; you have to have the money to do the training; you have to have the money to buy the equipment. If you cannot back up the plan that you have produced with a financial aspect, then you have lost that long-term vision.

I keep making the point that if you have a holding pattern for a year or two or three or four years, then that is more than one, two or three or four years lost; you have lost a lot of momentum in that time. To build up again from that point takes a lot longer than it would have done if you had started from year one.

**MR SMYTH:** In terms of the long-term vision and the strategic plan, you also then need the personnel and the equipment to run the plan should it be required?

**Mr Ross:** Correct.

**MR SMYTH:** In terms of equipment, are we properly equipped? Are we replacing our vehicles in an adequate way and time frame? Have items that have been budgeted for been delivered, to the best of your knowledge?

**Mr Ross:** Until the time I left in June last year, there was certainly a far more strategic approach to vehicles. In relation to the Rural Fire Service, there was some discussion about the way we were getting them in. In other words, did we need to tether it—in other words, not get all your vehicles at once—because if you get all your vehicles at once, in another five years you have to get all your vehicles at once again; it is a budget spike.

I think that the approach to vehicle acquisition is better than it was and the long-term planning for that has been good. I still would be reluctant to say that we have all the vehicles that we need. But again, without wishing to repeat myself, until we answer the question about what level of cover we require and what level of service we want to give to the ACT, have we got enough vehicles, I cannot tell you until we actually decide what level of cover we want for the ACT in respect of that.

**MR SMYTH:** You then need a headquarters. We were told yesterday that a separate communications centre for the RFS was desirable. Has the move to Fairbairn been successful? Are taxpayers getting value for money for what is being spent out there and is it fulfilling the job of allowing the RFS to deliver the sort of service they should?

**Mr Ross:** There are a lot of questions in that. I will try to answer them. The move to Fairbairn for the RFS, in short, was probably quite a good move because the RFS does not necessarily have to dispatch and certainly does not dispatch vehicles from Fairbairn because you would not want to dispatch vehicles anywhere between eight and nine or between four and five in the afternoon.

**MR SMYTH:** That is true.

**Mr Ross:** Certainly because we had an air base there and a helicopter base there, it actually suited the RFS quite well. I think the downside of moving to Fairbairn for the RFS is that it has become fractured from the rest of the ESA. The game plan was that the RFS would go out there initially and then within 12 months the rest of the ESA would move out there. The fact that that has not happened, I think, has been to the detriment of the RFS because the RFS in some respects is out of the loop. From that point of view, yes, it has been a good move for the RFS.

The question about communications is a very interesting one. If you look back at the coroner's findings and particularly McLeod's findings, McLeod particularly was quite concerned about the communications setup at Curtin. If I can help you understand that a bit better, the Curtin communications centre, Comcen as it is called, is essentially a call and dispatch. People call in on 000; they dispatch people to the incident.

As has been the case and is still the case at Comcen in Curtin, for incidents such as a car accident, for incidents such as a house fire, one of the operators who has dispatched or the person in charge in Comcen can then run that incident from Comcen. Again, in most of the cases, for something like a car accident, for a house fire, that works quite well.

Where it starts to fall apart is where you try to run a bushfire from Comcen because a bushfire generally can go for quite some time; it can go for days. There is a lot of clutter on the radio, a lot of chatter going across the radio; so Comcen very quickly becomes very cluttered. As you can appreciate, on a bad fire day or on a series of bad fire days—you may have quite a few outbreaks across Canberra—you still have your car accidents; you still have your house fires; you still have your ambulance emergencies; you still have other emergencies happening. So all of a sudden what was quite a nice quiet Comcen where things were being handled well becomes quite cluttered.

Where we made the decision to move the communications centre to Fairbairn was not about taking 000 calls, it was about taking that clutter away from Comcen in Curtin. In other words, once a fire was registered and once a fire started and was going to be a going concern, we took that bushfire away and we fought that fire with all the same radio communications at Fairbairn. Comcen in Curtin was again free to take calls and dispatch people.

**MR PRATT:** Right now the RFS's firecom is integrated with Comcen?

**Mr Ross:** I am not sure of the arrangements now. You would need to ask people who are closer to that than I am.

**MR PRATT:** But you are saying it must be separate?

**Mr Ross:** I would be disappointed if it is all back to where it was before because that is just back to where it was before 2003. There was talk at one stage while I was there of actually having a separate operations centre within the Curtin building. You would have an operations cell that would look after the fire or fires separately from Comcen. There was talk about using the old school basketball stadium—and it was set up for that.

When we had the opportunity to move out to Fairbairn and have our own out there, because that was where our helicopter fleet was kept and because where all our officers were, because of the tyranny of distance, rather than have them travel back and forth, it was very efficient to have it all out there. How it is set up in Curtin now, I do not know, but it would have to be out of Comcen, otherwise you are going to have the same cluster of problems if you have a busy day.

**MR SMYTH:** I understand that the monthly rent on Fairbairn is something like \$220,000. Are all the buildings being utilised and are we getting value for money for that facility?

**Mr Ross:** I was not privy to all the discussions that were had with the airport authority. What I can tell you is that we did go into an arrangement with the airport authority for several buildings, one of which was the current Rural Fire Service. I know that we were paying whatever the market rate was for those buildings. I believe we have been paying rent for a period of time on those buildings. As to the actual figure, I do not know.

Just as I left in July last year, I believe that the issue was being handed over to a properties group in the ACT government and they were from that point in time dealing with the airport authority, I think, as to what the future of those buildings would be and the future rental arrangements.

**MR PRATT:** How many of those five buildings were being utilised at that time?

**Mr Ross:** The only building that was being utilised in the six months that I was over at Fairbairn with the crew was the actual RFS, what they call the Aesop, the flight centre.

**MR PRATT:** From other sources we get the impression that \$220,000 has been the monthly rent. On the basis that you were only able to use one of five buildings at that time, when you were serving, was that good value?

**Mr Ross:** I think the answer to that is fairly obvious, but you would need to probably talk to people who are closer to that at the moment than I am because I would only be guessing if I was giving actual figures. I think the answer, as I said, is quite obvious.

**DR FOSKEY:** I was wondering whether you were ever involved in any of the trials of FireLink, the communication service, or whether you have got any comments to make about its value in terms of communication during the fighting of fires and under

emergencies.

**Mr Ross:** The short answer to your question is yes, I was. We did that. But I will start with a spiel about FireLink and my observation of it. One of the great tragedies was the misunderstanding that FireLink was a communications system. FireLink never was meant to be a communications system per se. FireLink was a vehicle tracking/locating system. And the great advantage of a vehicle tracking/locating system in a major fire event is that you can see where your vehicles are and you can see where your people are. The two complaints you will get on any fire are two things that both start with 'c'—communications and catering.

The communications are not always good in a fire; so the idea of bringing the FireLink system in was twofold. It was to provide a vehicle tracking system and it was to provide, outside the urban area, a means of being able to track vehicles which you could not track on the current CAD system in the ACT. So it actually gave the RFS a capacity to track those vehicles.

Where it started to go pear shaped was that people kept, for reasons I cannot quite understand, confusing it with a communications system, which it was not. Even though it has a texting capacity, it was not the communications system. It was never, in the eyes of the Rural Fire Service, going to be used as the major source of communication in a fire. That would always be radio communication, as it always should be. It just gave you the capacity to track. That is what FireLink was about.

Some trials worked well, but we consistently had problems with an overload capacity. In other words, when the system was loaded up the FireLink system consistently failed to work. That was a problem for us on very bad fire days because, with something like 120-odd vehicles—I think 125 was the maximum the system could hold—if you tried to get that many on, the system simply failed and you lost the picture that you had on the ground.

That is not to say that the system was a failure; it simply just says that we had technical problems. There has not been a system that I have worked with in my experience that does not have teething problems and does not have system problems that ultimately cannot be overcome.

I guess FireLink was a problem to us and FireLink did have some working issues, but in my opinion they were not necessarily issues that ultimately, at the end of the day, could not be worked through, provided you were prepared to spend the money on it. I guess when the government made a decision about pulling the pin on FireLink it was made from a pragmatic decision about whether they wanted to keep going the way they were going, and they would have gone on advice from people at the time.

**DR FOSKEY:** In terms of value for money then, would you say that there was probably no other way of providing that service at the cost that it was to the government?

**Mr Ross:** As far as value for money is concerned, I would be surprised if there were not other systems in place we could use. Whether they are as good as FireLink, I do not know. My understanding of systems technology would not be sufficient for me to

provide an answer on that, I do not think. I would have to bow to people with more experience than I on that.

**MR PRATT:** I understand that Mr Stuart Ellis carried out a comparative analysis of the emergency services, a \$40,000 study conducted over a four-week period a couple of years back. I understand that all senior officers were interviewed by him to contribute to that report. Do you recall being involved in that? Do you know much about that inquiry or that review?

**Mr Ross:** I recall that Mr Ellis's visit was towards the end of 2006. Mr Ellis interviewed me several times, and other chief officers, in relation to what was to be a comparative analysis, as you said, I think, across all areas of the ACT emergency services. The comparative analysis was with, from memory, value for money and efficiency with other services across Australia. That was undertaken. I did not see the final report.

**MR PRATT:** Do you know what other contributions were made? Are you aware of any feedback at all on how that report was progressing, where it was heading to and what it was actually determining?

**Mr Ross:** The short answer is no. I know that all other chief officers, as far as I am aware, made verbal contributions to that report. All the contributions were verbal. I know that the report was handed down, but I also know that none of the chief officers, me included, were privy to the findings of that report.

**MR PRATT:** Did you actually see the report in its final or even draft form before it was handed down?

**Mr Ross:** Personally, I did not see any form of that report. No, I did not even see a draft.

**MR PRATT:** Were you aware of any implementations, steps taken or recommendations identified and put in place as a consequence of the Ellis report?

**Mr Ross:** Not to my knowledge directly. It was mentioned in passing in reference to the changes that occurred latterly in the ESA.

**MR PRATT:** Who in fact was the sole custodian of that report once it was handed down?

**Mr Ross:** I cannot be sure. I know it was actually commissioned by JACS rather than the ESA at the time because it was just after the change to the new structure. I can only imagine it would have been the senior people in JACS at the time who would have seen that report.

**MR PRATT:** Can you think of any reason why that report had not been made public or at least widely circulated, at that time when you were serving, amongst the senior emergency services officers?

**Mr Ross:** I see no reason why it would not have been, but it is not up to me to decide.

The report was obviously handed down. As to why it was not seen and shown to other members of the emergency services, I cannot really answer that. You will need to ask the people who chose not to hand it down.

**MR PRATT:** More fairly to you then, was it your impression at that time that this analysis, given the cost of it, was a very, very, very important analysis?

**Mr Ross:** I think it was a timely analysis at a time when the ESA was looking to change. Because of all the changes that had occurred it was looking for a new direction. I think it was a timely analysis. I think it would have been good to have seen the findings of the report, but I guess ultimately, as I say, the people who commissioned the report are entitled to do with that report as they wish.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Ross, thank you very much. If members of the committee or if any MLAs have any other questions, would you be able to answer them in writing if need be?

**Mr Ross:** Yes, if need be.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. If members have any further questions they would like to direct to Mr Ross, please give them to the secretary in writing and Mr Ross will then answer them. Thank you very much, Mr Ross, for your assistance to the committee.

**WEST, MR WAYNE CARL**

**THE CHAIR:** Mr West, you have read the yellow card and understand the contents therein. What is the capacity in which you appear before the committee?

**Mr West:** I appear before the inquiry as a victim.

**THE CHAIR:** I understand that you live in the ACT but that you have a property just over the border in New South Wales, in the Brindabellas?

**Mr West:** Yes, we have.

**THE CHAIR:** I also understand that you have had that property for some time and you have suffered bushfires there?

**Mr West:** Yes. The lightning strike on McIntyres Hut started just across the river from our place.

**THE CHAIR:** How long have you had the property there?

**Mr West:** I think we bought it in about 1986 or 1987.

**THE CHAIR:** So you have been involved in firefighting at various times over the years and I take it you are aware of necessary protections that you normally take for your property et cetera?

**Mr West:** I go back to the bushfires in 1965 when we got burnt out, when my father was on the land out at Marulen.

**THE CHAIR:** So you have had a bit of experience in fighting fires yourself?

**Mr West:** Only a little bit.

**THE CHAIR:** This committee is inquiring into a number of things specifically in relation to emergency services. We have been dealing a lot with threats from bushfires, looking at various reports for the 2003 fires, current structures, as you have heard—I have seen you sitting in the back of the room—and ways of not repeating the mistakes of the past and ways of doing things better. If you would like to make a statement to the committee, you can say anything you need to put on the record that would assist the committee in its deliberations, including any problems that the government and this Assembly should take steps to ensure will never occur again.

**Mr West:** In 1939 we had a large fire and after that fire the Stretton report was done, and it clearly stated that fuel management was the critical factor in management and control of bushfires. Even today, we still ignore that report. In the management of fires, particularly bushfires, the old saying was “no fuel, no fire”.

Recently, governments have declared national parks randomly. In declaring those national parks, they have given no attention or priority to the bushfire management of those parks. The resources required to carry out bushfire management plans and the



control and assessment of those fires have not been provided. For instance, the Brindabella national park was declared in 1996. Until recently, no bushfire management plan had ever been carried out for that park and no assessment was made in the area of that park. After being harassed to provide a bushfire management plan draft, it was finally tabled and we have now got one.

That draft is out for public comment until 21 March. It is glaringly obvious that it misses the point about controlling bushfires. That management plan—the same thing can be said for the ACT plan—has a lot of nice words and a lot of nice statements, but when you read the management plans you do not read about the fuel loads, the desired fuel loads and the method of containing the fuel loads or the priority in controlling bushfires.

With respect to what happened in 2003, without doubt there were two reasons for those fires. One was the green group that cried out about hazard reduction burns over the years and which has stopped the hazard reduction burns being carried out in the Brindabella mountain ranges, starting in the 1980s. The use of bulldozers in the park has been—

**DR FOSKEY:** That was one.

**THE CHAIR:** You said there were two reasons.

**Mr West:** One was the non-use of hazard reduction burns; the other one is the response time to bushfires. All of these fires in 2003 could have been wrapped up very quickly with the use of bulldozers and fixed wing aircraft. All the dozers were available, ready and willing to go to the fire, as were the fixed wing aircraft. Something like 13 bulldozers were in the immediate area of Canberra and were not contacted. From memory—I would have to look at the details—about 11 fixed wing aircraft were ready, willing and able to be dispatched on 8 January.

These resources were not dispatched. The fact is that the priority of the management of these parks is to preserve flora and fauna and not to extinguish fires in the park. We have seen a fire start in the Kosciuszko national park, at Broken Cart, and that fire was not contained due to the fact that Forestry were not allowed to put bulldozers across the creeks because they might hurt the corroboree frogs and endanger them. By failing to extinguish the fire, they wrote off the rest of the countryside.

**DR FOSKEY:** When was that fire?

**Mr West:** In 2003, at Broken Cart. In 2003 I watched a lack of resources being dispatched to the fires. Pussyfooting around at the fires was the reason these fires grew. If they had been attacked on 8 January with available resources, we believe there is no doubt that the fires could have been put out or extinguished within the first four or five days.

The danger that the ACT is presented with relates to New South Wales. The major damage done in 2003 was caused by the McIntyres Hut fire which originated in New South Wales. I do not see any joint bushfire management plan involving the ACT and the surrounding areas of New South Wales.

With respect to the events of the 2003 fires, we have to remember that the fires also came out of the Brindabella Ranges in 1908, 1921, 1939—and so it goes on. So 2003 was not the first time that the fires have come into Canberra. We need to look at having a joint bushfire management plan to extinguish these fires when they start.

I believe—I tried to find this out yesterday but my solicitor is away—that the ACT environment act overrides the Emergencies Act. If you are worried about saving a wallaby or a corroboree frog, you are being very successful when you devastate the whole country, and that is what happened in 2003.

**THE CHAIR:** Including the frog. To summarise your evidence, there were two main reasons: the complete lack of hazard reduction, starting in the 1980s, and a complete inability to put out fires even though the assets were there—in other words, attacking the fire as soon as it starts. You are saying the danger the ACT is faced with actually comes from New South Wales. There is no joint bushfire management plan at all and you feel that if that continues it will happen again.

You were not here yesterday when we heard from another very experienced local resident who has been involved in fighting fires. Mr Jeffery indicated that under the old Bushfire Act, and going back well before self-government—several decades—the ACT was responsible for and actually leased, for fire control purposes, areas right through the Brindabellas. The ACT fire service would go out there and put fires out and be responsible for that area. He stated that when that occurred there was not one major fire that reached the extent of the one we saw in 2003. In other words, all the fires were put out and there was not a huge amount of damage.

As an experienced person and a landholder immediately over the border, are you aware of that system that used to exist whereby the ACT Rural Fire Service would exert that control in New South Wales? Is that a workable and good system in your view that could be used currently?

**Mr West:** The ACT had a bushfire lease going back to the Goodradigbee River. It ran right along the length of the Goodradigbee to the ACT border. I do not know whether it is critical that it be managed by the ACT or New South Wales, except that the mentality has to change and it must be accepted that fires will be a potential hazard to the ACT. If you are going to try and prevent bushfires, you have to reduce the fuel load and carry out hazard reduction burns.

That area used to have hazard reduction burns. I can remember going back there in the late seventies when they used to do burns up there. State Forestry used to drop incendiaries. Most of the state forest now is national park. National parks, wherever they might be, have a very low rate of hazard reduction burns. In New South Wales it is nearly zero in actual acreage burnt. They may say they have done hazard reduction burning in an area, which could be 10,000 acres, but in actual fact they have only burnt probably 30 or 40 acres in the area by incendiaries. The days that they choose to drop the incendiaries are very low fire danger index days, so the fire has very little risk of escaping.

If the ACT took over the Brindabella national park and if we maintained the same

philosophy that we have in the ACT—and remember that the fires that came into the ACT and Canberra did not do as much damage—that is not going to help us unless we change the management philosophy regarding what to expect when you have high fuel loads and a lack of hazard reduction burns.

**THE CHAIR:** What are the fuel loads like now, just over the border in New South Wales?

**Mr West:** New South Wales National Parks concede that fire fuel loads are higher now than they were in 2003.

**THE CHAIR:** Is anything being done by the New South Wales authority or anyone else—the ACT authorities—to have hazard reduction burns or anything else that might reduce the fuel loads immediately over the border?

**Mr West:** Not that I am aware of. That is the reason we have been so outspoken publicly about the bushfire management plan. That should be out and the public should be able to respond to it. If they had had a bushfire management plan in 2003 and it had been exposed to the public for comment, the possibility of what happened in 2003 with the McIntyres Hut fire could have been avoided.

**MR PRATT:** Do you think there is the same standard of management in the ACT, from your observation?

**Mr West:** When you look at the parks side of it, the substance has not really changed. The priority is to extinguish the fire. The body is there to manage the flora and fauna and heritage of the park; their prime objective is not to extinguish bushfires. I can talk about New South Wales and McIntyres Hut in detail. When we got all the documents out, we saw they were looking at protecting animals, the corroboree frog et cetera, and not attacking and extinguishing fires in a small area. If you have a fire that is in two hectares and you have to wipe out another two hectares to extinguish the fire, you have lost four hectares. In 2003 we lost 95 per cent of the Brindabella national park. Very smart thinking!

**MR PRATT:** Yes, I can see the point you are making. The McBeth report of 1994 identified this massive problem with little hazard reduction being undertaken in New South Wales parks. He talked about something in the order of 10 metric tonnes of fire fuel loads per hectare. Do you recall the report? Did he identify one or two metric tonnes maximum per hectare as being the benchmark for preventative planning?

**Mr West:** Don't quote me on this but the benchmark is a relatively low figure. We do not have a problem with the benchmark. If it is under 10 tonnes fuel load per hectare, that is not really a problem in bushfire fighting. But if you are going up to what we have got up there, and on their own evidence it is in excess of 27 tonnes or larger, that is where the problem is coming from.

The environmental people will say that we need some areas of high fuel load. That is fine in certain habitats and areas, but not when you look across the landscape as a whole, and that is what your fuel loads are across the landscape. The Brindabella

national park have said they are going to do ridge-top burning, but at the same time they have a report from CSIRO that says they cannot carry out ridge-top burning. So in the bushfire management plan for the Brindabella national park ridge-top burning will not be carried out because another report happened to say that they can't carry this out.

We put in place a bushfire management plan that looks good, but when you go back and try and do something with it, there are always anomalies regarding trying to do the hazard reduction burns. At one stage the Brindabella area was stopped from doing hazard reduction burns because of outcries from the people of Canberra about the smoke going over the city. That is one of the reasons that hazard reduction burns were stopped.

**MR PRATT:** So you are saying that residents such as yourself and those in the ACT are very vulnerable because the bushfire management plan of New South Wales authorities is inadequate to manage the Brindabella park?

**Mr West:** I am a resident of the ACT as well; I vote in the ACT. Until about six weeks ago, when the Brindabella draft management plan came out, they had no strategy for bushfire management west of Canberra.

**MR PRATT:** What is your knowledge of the ACT's strategic bushfire management plan?

**Mr West:** Very little, if anything at all.

**MR PRATT:** Coroner Doogan made this point that the bushfire management plan—and she was talking fundamentally about the SBMP for the ACT:

The plan must provide a basis for a bushfire hazard assessment and risk analysis and bushfire prevention—including hazard reduction ... It must also include a statement of strategic objectives, a risk assessment of factors ... lists of vulnerable public assets, and strategies for prevention ...

She had expert opinion feeding into it; there may have been a few other opinions feeding into that as well. She said that there was a lack of detail about objectives and how they would be implemented in the then SBMP. What is your comment on that? Is she right or wrong?

**Mr West:** In New South Wales she is 100 per cent correct because that is the problem I was alluding to a minute ago. The bushfire management plans do not have any substance in actually attending to the issue of bushfires.

**MR PRATT:** But in your expert opinion—

**Mr West:** I am not an expert, I am sorry.

**MR PRATT:** No, but you are a man who is experienced and who has had to live with this threat for a very long time. Is that so?

**Mr West:** Yes. We took action at our house in case we did have bushfires. We had

64 sprinkler heads around our house in case there was a bushfire.

**MR PRATT:** Of course. This committee admires that effort and the way that you face those predicaments. With respect to what Doogan said about what basically is the benchmark for a bushfire management plan, would you agree in your experience that that would be correct?

**Mr West:** I would agree with that being correct because Victoria changed its direction after the 2006 fires. They had the 2003 fires and they had the 2006-07 fires, and they are now changing their direction. In the Cann River area, they are going to carry out a 50,000-hectare hazard reduction burn this autumn.

**DR FOSKEY:** As a sometime resident of east Gippsland, I know what people experience over autumn there. That is not to say anything about the burn itself but the smoke issue perhaps should not be dismissed so lightly.

**Mr West:** All I can say is that the smoke we had in 2003 was far greater than any other smoke.

**DR FOSKEY:** Yes, point taken. In regard to fuel reduction, what we heard yesterday and at other times is that in the area that was burnt in 2003—and I think you have alluded to it yourself—there is quite a lot of fuel in the nature of woody weeds. What was different about the 2003 burn that produced those weeds that we could avoid in fuel reduction burns?

**Mr West:** A fuel reduction burn will not create the devastation of 2003. I am not talking about Canberra. Canberra people might worry about ACT devastation; in actual fact if you go out in the bush that is where the devastation occurred. If you go out and look at the Goodradigbee River, after the fires we found dead platypuses on the river banks. We still have not got platypus. We have not got freshwater crays back in the river; we have not got water rats back in the river. Our bird life was just obliterated in that sense.

If you go up the Dingi Dingi fire trail, which runs off the back of Mount Corrie, there was a fire in there in about 1999. I do not know how it started; I think they put it down to arson. That was a fire that burnt slowly and for a number of days. It was put out by Rayco lines. The same area was burnt in 2003. If you went up there—and I am quite willing to take you up there to have a look at it; I would take great pleasure in showing you—and saw the burnt area today, you would be amazed. The fuel load was not there and the fire just did not generate the heat to burn the ground. It burnt everything in our area.

We have got nothing in our area; we still have very little there today because of the high fuel loads. Some people say they want zero fuel loads. I am not that biased. I understand you have to have higher fuel loads and lower fuel loads, but the no-burn policy we have had for the last 20 years has meant we have ended up with very high fuel loads.

**DR FOSKEY:** I am aware of the difference between a hot burn and a cool burn. I suppose that is the difference between a fuel reduction burn and a bushfire. I believe

that quite a number of resources are needed to properly conduct fuel reduction burns. It would seem to me that the managers of national parks would have the capacity to conduct them if it was understood to be a good preventative measure and if they had the resources. Could you comment on that aspect of personnel with that expertise in both Namadgi and Brindabella national parks.

**Mr West:** Tumut forestry used to drop incendiaries out of planes and had basically no men on the ground. They did that on a regular basis over a mosaic pattern. They would not burn off a large block of land in one hazard reduction burn. The incendiaries would burn patches out, and, because they were repeated regularly, some patches might burn more often than other patches. It just depended where the incendiaries fell out of the plane because it involved random dropping.

National park resources are totally limited. In 2003 they had no resources. With respect to the McIntyres Hut fire there were a few staff up there. There were probably 12 staff on the ground and 20 at the control centre. The volunteers are in the area and they are made up of the adjoining farmers and communities. Everyone has an interest in maintaining the fuel loads and in the removal of bushfires. You can use them as a training exercise. Hazard reduction burns were used as training exercises.

Today, we do not see any training exercises for the new recruits. I refer in particular to the way the Rural Fire Service is going from a brigade that was made up of the rural communities—basically bushies, farm owners and people who worked on the farms—to now being made up of city people and town people who have very little instinct about being in the bush. They need a compass in order to find north. They do not know how to look at the sun or the stars. Being able to read the land has been eroded away by the city people coming into the brigades. They do not go out in the bush enough and they do not live in the bush. They are used to having a sign on the street showing them where to go and how to get there. I think the Volunteer Firefighters Association would welcome hazard reduction burns as exercises for their members.

**DR FOSKEY:** Do you see any efforts to create a partnership of a kind between people living on the edges of national parks and rural landholders? Are there active efforts to get a partnership arrangement so that they can swing into action and even sit down and discuss the next year?

**Mr West:** I will go down that avenue. You will understand why the rural community have no time for national parks. National parks have caused the problem, not the rural community. Our boundary is the national park. The Goodradigbee River is on the east and we are on the west of Brindabella national park. I have no objection to a national park. I support national parks so I have no hard feelings in that respect and we use national parks quite regularly.

In our instance, when the extension was done to Brindabella national park, a ranger called Rob Hunt, the senior ranger in the area, came out to see me and my neighbour, Mr Milanovic. We talked about fire: if a fire happened on the western side of the Brindabella national park, on the eastern side of the Goodradigbee River, how would they attack the fire without access? He had lunch with us. We talked about access across the river, through our place to the western side of the Goodradigbee River. The

road through our place was a dirt road. The neighbour used to bring his 535 BMW into the property on the road, so it is a very well-kept, well-maintained road.

When the fire did break out, it was initially reported by Matthew O'Brien as being east of Blackfellas Flat. That was my neighbour's property; we have one fence between us. Until Saturday, 12 January that road was never used. So the national park came out and made us feel very good. We isolated watering points on the river. We felt happy that if there was a fire they would access it through our property. From the 8th to the 12th I made something like 12 or 14 phone calls.

It is a relationship that the rural people would love to have, but the direction taken by the national park staff is that they know it all, and that is it. They go to university and get a degree and all of a sudden they become experts. You will find that these fires had been predicted many, many times. At a parliamentary inquiry in New South Wales, Kurt Lance told the inquiry that the Kosciuszko national park would burn and the management of that park was flawed. What happened? It burnt. What happened to Kurt Lance? He has been canned everywhere he goes, but he made the true prediction.

The park managers should change their attitude and attend the same universities as the forestry staff. Forestry staff have the attitude or training that they extinguish the fires ASAP. The parks people seem to have a different philosophy: they are allowed to burn; they let them burn.

**DR FOSKEY:** Can you make any observations that apply to national parks management in the ACT in terms of working with rural landholders?

**Mr West:** Rural land owners I think would open—

**DR FOSKEY:** But does it happen?

**Mr West:** It does not happen only because of the bureaucracy. That is what I am trying to say today: the bureaucracy is the problem, not the people.

**DR FOSKEY:** It is an approach?

**Mr West:** It is an approach that needs to be changed. Dr Gilligan from New South Wales National Parks made statements after the 2003 fires that were blatant lies. Now we can prove they were. The state government has acknowledged that some of those facts were not true. Why does that have to happen? I say the same thing today. On the coast a farmer did a back-burn the other week and it got into the national park a little bit. They have now taken legal action against him. Five years ago, when the national park had a fire and it got from their property into his property, they were happy to let it go and he was happy to let it go. It was a matter of accepting that that was where the fire would travel.

**DR FOSKEY:** Yes, I think we have got to the crux of the matter.

**MR PRATT:** So you are saying that, in terms of emergency management, certain players in the environmental departments have too much sway over the decision making, in terms of the management of parks?

**Mr West:** I think a trend has been set that they do not realise the extent of what they are trying to do and they do not realise what the extent of the fires can do, if you let the fires burn.

**MR PRATT:** In your opinion, those responsible for emergency management do not have the authority to override what you see as being reckless decision making by forest management people?

**Mr West:** I think this inquiry should look at whether the environment act overrides the emergency services act. If that is the case, that shows how hypocritical it is.

**THE CHAIR:** I am not sure what the answer is on that one, but that is a point which we will take up. You mentioned a slow burn in 1999 which effectively was a hazard reduction. I take it that the area that was burnt out, and which was burnt again in 2003, is quite different from the Goodradigbee River, with dead platypuses, where the earth was burnt. You did not finish your answer there. I take it that that area has actually rejuvenated, there are living creatures in it and it shows a difference?

**Mr West:** If I took you there, you would not believe it. That shows the total difference in two areas—one that had a hazard reduction burn, which was a fire that was ignited on the side of the fire trail, and the other in an area adjacent to it that had not had a hazard reduction burn and which is devastated. The other one is just incredibly open woodland, which is what our forebears found when they came to Australia.

**THE CHAIR:** That is what I meant to say: does it have flora and fauna there?

**Mr West:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Whereas the completely devastated area from January 2003 does not?

**Mr West:** That is correct.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your assistance to the committee and for your appearance today. If anyone has any further questions for Mr West, would you mind answering them if they put them in writing to you?

**Mr West:** Yes, I am quite happy to do that.

**THE CHAIR:** I invite members to do that.

**Meeting adjourned from 12.50 pm to 2.00 pm.**



**BARLING, MR PATRICK**, President, ACT Volunteer Brigades Association  
**GREEP, MR TONY**, Captain, Hall Rural Fire Brigade, ACT Rural Fire Service  
**SCOTT, MR ROHAN**, Captain, Molonglo Volunteer Brigade, ACT Rural Fire Service  
**VIRTUE, MR STEPHEN**, Captain, Jerrabomberra Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade  
**WASSALL, MR DAVID**, Captain, Guises Creek Rural Fire Service, ACT Rural Fire Service

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, gentlemen, for appearing and for your submission. You have all by now had a chance to read the yellow card. This is an Assembly inquiry. You have got certain privileges and certain responsibilities, responsibilities to tell the truth to the best of your recollection. What you say is protected by parliamentary privilege, so you can be full and frank in what you say. That means you are protected from such actions as defamation et cetera, but it also means you have got to tell the truth; that is the responsibility on you guys.

Firstly, Mr Barling. You put in a submission; is there anything you want to at this point elaborate on in terms of your submission—any additional material you want to put before the committee—before I start the ball rolling with a few questions?

**Mr Barling:** I would like to make a bit of an opening statement, for want of a better term. As you may be aware, 12 months to the day ago we parked some trucks out the front there to say that we had had enough of being treated with contempt. At this stage nothing has changed in that 12 months; in some cases I believe it is far worse. We also had significant concerns that the current ESA management is hell-bent on destroying the RFS and creating a single fire service.

**THE CHAIR:** Just on those two points, you say nothing has changed in terms of morale since March last year and, if anything, it is far worse. In what way is it far worse?

**Mr Barling:** Basically, as Mr Jeffery pointed out yesterday, in June 2006 they went back under JACS and were no longer a statutory authority. Come 6 March 2007 the ESA commissioner decided to have a restructure. The consultation process, for want of a better term, occurred with an email on Sunday, “Come on Monday night. This is going to happen.” The next day it was announced. I do not believe that is consultation.

A couple of weeks later we parked the trucks. We had had enough. As firefighters, as volunteers, we put our lives on the line for the community. We do not ask for anything. We do not ask for money. What we do like is to be valued, respected and have our view acknowledged. We actually do know a little bit about firefighting in the ACT, and to be dismissed so casually is quite insulting, but particularly to the community. The community expects the RFS, the emergency service people, the fire brigade, the ambos, to do their job. We cannot do our job if we are treated—I cannot say that word—harshly, with no respect and not allowed to do our job without interference.

**THE CHAIR:** You indicated you thought it was worse since March 2007. What has happened to bring you to that opinion?

**Mr Barling:** The keys in the bucket: it took 113 days before we had three simple questions answered by the commissioner. Part of that commitment was that on 1 October 2007 the terms of reference for a review—that was part of his offer—would be agreed to and the first review of how things were going was 1 November. At this stage, 14 March, we have neither had the terms of reference agreed to nor a review. Further to that, I had to write to the minister towards the end of November, reminding him of that commitment in writing and in the media from the commissioner about a review process and terms of reference, and the commissioner reneged on that and the minister had to direct him to actually fulfil those commitments.

As an emergency service person, and particularly a volunteer, it is very difficult for an individual when you cannot trust the people at the top to keep their word and they are not prepared to honour their commitments they have given in writing; I think a “gentlemen’s agreement” was the term used.

**MS MacDONALD:** This might be a little bit long, so I apologise, but can you give me an understanding, because I am not involved in this, of how frequently you, in your capacity as president of the volunteer firefighters association, meet with both the minister and Gregor Manson?

**Mr Barling:** I believe at our first meeting the minister made an offer—I think it was around June 2007, well after the parking event—and suggested a six-weekly meeting be held between representatives of the Volunteer Brigades Association, CFUs, Renee Leon, Gregor Manson and the minister. About every six weeks we would have a meeting, since last July. So I think we have had about six since then, give or take.

**MS MacDONALD:** So you have been meeting, but it has been with the CFUs and the other organisations as well?

**Mr Barling:** Yes, that is correct.

**MS MacDONALD:** Do you believe that that actually complicates things? That is sort of a leading question—

**Mr Barling:** No, I do not have a problem with speaking in front of other people. I believe that the minister and the commissioner and Ms Renee Leon need to be told fairly bluntly if there is a problem and I believe that frank and robust discussion is required. I believe the CFUs, when I saw them, were quite happy to do the same so I certainly did not feel intimidated with the other people around—far from that.

**MS MacDONALD:** Yes, it was not a belief that you might feel intimidated not to say anything, but that it might complicate things by having other parties there when maybe you need to sit down and address the issues specific for the volunteer firefighters.

**Mr Barling:** The commissioner had attended a number of the captains group meetings, so there is a chance for one on one there. If I felt I needed to talk to the minister one on one, I would have rung him and said, “I want a meeting one on one,” so I did not have that problem.

**MS MacDONALD:** Yes, okay.

**THE CHAIR:** So basically you said the minister had to intervene to get the ball rolling on these three things. Has that happened yet? Have the three conditions occurred yet?

**Mr Barling:** I do not believe the structure has been put on hold, so no. I am not too sure if it has been explained what was wrong with the old system. To me—maybe the captains might have a different view—I have yet to see the benefits of the new one.

**THE CHAIR:** And you also mentioned that the ESA seemed hell-bent on destroying the Rural Fire Service.

**Mr Barling:** I cannot remember the exact number of staff that have left, but those people have talked to me to my face and told me the reason why, and I cannot think of any other reason why staff with that much history and association with the RFS would leave in December.

**THE CHAIR:** Are there any recurrent themes as to why they are leaving?

**Mr Barling:** The ESA management,

**THE CHAIR:** Was that the main reason?

**Mr Barling:** To the best of my knowledge; that was what was said to me.

**THE CHAIR:** What in particular are they telling you which you can pass on to us?

**Mr Barling:** I feel a little bit uncomfortable; I would suggest that probably the best way of looking at it is either to talk to individuals or ask for their exit interviews. I think that would be far more appropriate.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have any documents listing reasons given? When you do an exit interview do you make notes as to the reasons?

**Mr Barling:** I was not part of that, but I believe there are. I did mention to Renee Leon that she should look at those because there seemed to be a recurrent theme as far as I was concerned.

**THE CHAIR:** Can you tell us what sort of recurrent theme?

**Mr Barling:** The commissioner.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. Do you talk to the commissioner? Does he attend the six-weekly meetings between the minister and you?

**Mr Barling:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have any private meetings with him?

**Mr Barling:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** None at all?

**Mr Barling:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** Are you meant to?

**Mr Barling:** I am not too sure. I must admit that, quite honestly, I feel quite uncomfortable to have to deal with him. I would much prefer dealing with Brian Parry and Tim McGuffog. That seems to solve most of the issues.

**THE CHAIR:** And what positions are they?

**Mr Barling:** Brian is the Deputy Commissioner, Fire and Rescue, and Tim McGuffog is, I suppose, the head of the RFS—operations manager or something.

**Mr Wassall:** Operations manager or something is the latest title they have given him.

**Mr Barling:** He is Deputy Chief Officer, as far as I am concerned.

**THE CHAIR:** He is full time; he is part of the ESA?

**Mr Barling:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Has the commissioner ever rung you direct to talk about anything?

**Mr Barling:** Not that I can recall, off the top of my head.

**THE CHAIR:** And have you ever rung the commissioner yourself direct, or tried to ring him direct?

**Mr Barling:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** Apart from these meetings with the minister and the commissioner and those other groups, have you had any other meetings with the minister—say, just you and he, without the commissioner?

**Mr Barling:** On occasions, we have probably seen each other out at the river shed, but in terms of meetings, not that I can recall off the top of my head, not since we have parked the vehicles.

**THE CHAIR:** Yesterday—you were here; you have been here for most of the hearings, listening in—Mr Jeffery said a number of things. One was that, in his brigade, he would normally get—I think he used the figure—22 or something like that and over the last 12 months I think he said he had had only two volunteers. He was saying that the volunteers are very much drying up.

Mr Barling, could you comment on that? Is that a common experience throughout the brigades? And to each of you four gentlemen: what is the state of play in terms of

your strength? Has it improved, remained static or decreased—March 2007 seems a significant date, so certainly since then—and indeed has there been any trending upwards or downwards, say over the last five years?

**Mr Barling:** In the rivers brigade, from what I have noticed, we have the usual turnover of volunteers and we have had new ones coming in and old ones leaving. I do not say we have been inundated, but it is probably a comfortable level. Probably the biggest concern is the loss of experience. The new people we are getting in at present are sensational—they are keen, young and really raring to go—but the problem is that they do not have the experience. So it is a bit of a balance, trying to keep the experienced people and getting the new ones with the enthusiasm. But I think these gentlemen are probably better qualified to answer.

**THE CHAIR:** I will ask them individually. Mr Greep, as far as Hall is concerned?

**Mr Greep:** I will go back further than one year. We used to have a core strength of about 50; currently we have a membership of about 35. The core strength there would be about 15; over half my membership now have joined since the 2003 fires and we have had some fairly quiet seasons since then, so the skill level is very well down in my brigade.

**THE CHAIR:** When was it 50, Mr Greep?

**Mr Greep:** It would have been back in, say, 2001 and 2003, through the fires.

**Mr Wassall:** Exactly the same with Guises Creek. We have a membership of about 35; out of that we are looking at about 15 on what you would class as a regular basis. Once again, out of that, there are only about half a dozen that would be what we class as old members; the rest are all new, so once again we have got no experience in the brigade, and it is very hard to keep them occupied. It is mainly because, from what I can see, of the disillusion with what is happening with the RFS.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Virtue?

**Mr Virtue:** We have a total membership down at Jerrabomberra of probably close to about 140; out of those active firefighters we have about 70 on the books at the moment. We have about 35 to 40 who are there on a regular basis. Most of those 30 or 40-odd people are new recruits that we have picked up since the 2003 fires and, again, are as keen as mustard: whatever call you put out, they are there. The problem is with the older members, who have just had enough, particularly since the fire.

We have gone from the ESB days before 2003 and 2002. I do not think ESB was running all that very well. Then we come into a new tide, where we came into the Emergency Services Authority, then that was disbanded, then we ran off into the agency again, and I think the agency has taken us back to the pre-2003 fires. I think it has taken us back to 2002, the ESB days.

I think a lot of our senior members have just had it with all the up and down, they have had it with the lack of high-level leadership—not so much the leadership within RFS itself; it is more ESA—and the fact that commitments are made and then

commitments are broken. There have been a lot of things happening there. So, yes, we have got a lot of new active members, we still have a high membership rate, but we have lost a lot of experience.

**THE CHAIR:** When you said you had 140, when was that? Was that at a certain time?

**Mr Virtue:** That is about what we have got at the moment. That includes landholders and that sort of thing. They are people who pay membership to the brigade; they are not necessarily down there all the time.

**THE CHAIR:** And the 70: are they regular?

**Mr Virtue:** Of the 70 we have at the moment, a lot of those are new people that we have picked up. We do have a tendency to pick up a lot of new recruits in our area, given the location and the fact that we have a lot of suburbs and that around us.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Scott, what is your experience?

**Mr Scott:** We have got 36 active members at the moment; of those I could probably rely on 20, if there was an incident, say, right now. Of our 36, I would say at least 50 per cent have come in the last two years, so our depth is very thin and our older members are at the stage, like everyone else has mentioned, where they have had enough of the stuff going on behind the scenes and morale is definitely really low at the moment.

**THE CHAIR:** You have heard Mr Barling indicate, when I asked him about the exit interviews, the common theme. Do you guys do exit interviews at your brigades, or is that done somewhere else?

**Mr Scott:** At our brigade, we tend to sort of ask people why they are leaving. Some people leave due to work commitments or they have just basically had enough of the way things are happening; they turn up and there are too many changes and they are just not interested in the constant changing.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Barling, you were here when Mr Jeffery was giving evidence, and he indicated very strongly that he felt the old Bushfire Act of 1936 worked well and that the structure in place up until about 1991 was a very effective structure. He indicated, I think, that the ACT had jurisdiction in terms of the lease right through the Brindabellas to a patrol at the Goodradigbee River, that any fires that occurred there were put out and there were no serious fires until basically January 2003, and certainly no serious fires during the term of that period he was referring to yesterday. He indicated that that structure, independence for the RFS, was an ideal structure, the best he could think of. How long have you been around?

**Mr Barling:** I joined in 1988. When I first joined, the Bushfire Council was still a statutory authority as such, before self-government. I suppose, in all honesty, I was more interested in fighting fires than the politics of things. However, in saying that, I saw the evolution of ESB in about 1992, or whenever it was, and I saw the way it just gutted the job we did. The bureaucracy took over, everything was about the dollar,

they were massaging figures—the whole lot. So I saw how it deteriorated from fairly fresh to 2003, and I think enough has been said about that.

**THE CHAIR:** You have 20 years experience now. Do you agree with Mr Jeffery's comments in relation to that structure being probably the best?

**Mr Barling:** Put it this way: when Peter Dunn came in and we had a statutory authority, I could see the potential and the real positiveness of having an independent authority. I am a great believer, with the greatest respect, that old people have a lot of knowledge, a lot of experience. If the likes of Val Jeffery and the older people—I mean that with the greatest of respect—suggest that sometimes things in the past were worth a lot, I think you would be a fool to dismiss that without considering it. I must admit, it caught me—I had to sit down and think about it—but I believe his suggestion needs to be really set down and nudded out for technicalities to see the feasibility of it. I think it would be foolish to just dismiss that suggestion, because it did work.

**THE CHAIR:** I am asking for your views. Obviously, he is an experienced person and he has put forward a suggestion, which certainly would be something I would imagine we would consider in our deliberations. I just wanted your view of that. Do you agree with him or do you think maybe there is some other variation? Would that be probably, in your experience, the most realistic sort of best structure we could look to?

**Mr Barling:** I prefer to keep things simple. To me it sounds simple. Without sort of being patronising, I think sometimes old things and simple things work the best. The job we do as firefighters is fairly basic; it is putting water on the fire and putting it out, or whatever. It has to be kept simple and we have to be independent. To me, without having a lot of information, it seems to be well worth considering, bearing in mind that the statutory authority, the ESA when it was that, was going down that sort of path of giving the RFS independence. Something that gives it complete independence I reckon has a lot merit and should be considered.

**THE CHAIR:** Gentlemen, you are captains so you are all fairly experienced officers. I would like your comments on that structure. I have tried to paraphrase it. Mr Barling and I were both here when Mr Jeffery said it. Going across from Mr Greep, I would like your views on that structure and your individual views on, if there is something different, what sort of structure you think would enable you to do your job best in terms of protecting Canberra.

**Mr Greep:** I think there is value in Val's comments but there is also value in the ESA of the linking of the four services. It sort of mirrors the South Australian method where you have got the four service chiefs, which we used to have, which reported straight to a minister, whereas nowadays we go through this multilayer of bureaucracy and do not even get to the minister. There is value in taking out some of the weight so that it served the four services. If they were in the ACT, we would report straight to the minister rather than go through the commissioner. That is the way I think it should be.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that South Australian authority a statutory authority, do you know?

**Mr Greep:** I do not know.

**Mr Barling:** Yes, it is

**Mr Wassall:** I am a bit the same way as what the other ones are saying. I just reckon that you are cutting from four different services back to two people running the service and I do not think they are actually looking at the interests of the particular service. The commissioner steps in and tries to run it, and I do not think that is his role. I think his role is to supervise overall.

But my feeling—and I hope it does not happen—is that, if a fire does start tomorrow, a big fire not a little one, the commissioner will step in and take control, and I do not think that is his role. I think it should be the head of that department, whether it is the Fire Brigade, RFS, ambulance or whatever. Whatever the incident is, the head of that department should be running it. The way the structure is at the moment, which we have not been consulted on, it does not allow for that.

**Mr Virtue:** I certainly agree with what has been said so far, so I will not reiterate a lot of that. I think the current structure that has basically been forced down our throats does have way too many layers in it. If something goes wrong, you have got so many levels to get through. There are a lot of issues there.

**Mr Scott:** I have got to be exact with that. I have got no more really to add to that.

**MR PRATT:** I have a supp. Do you want to go on to any other programs afterwards?

**THE CHAIR:** I think you could go on with that. What we have dealt with so far are some issues in relation to March 2007 and comments about morale being even worse. We have gone through a bit about exit interviews and that. Then you came in. So if you do the supp on mine that will be fine.

**MR PRATT:** Good afternoon, Mr Barling and captains. It is good to see you here. Could I ask Mr Greep, as a supplementary to Mr Stefaniak's question on the South Australian model: do you happen to also know whether the South Australian model incorporates the four service chiefs sitting on a board with the commissioner, or do the four service chiefs sit on a board which reports direct to the minister, perhaps with one as a chair? Have you any idea on that?

**Mr Greep:** I believe—and I could be wrong here—that the four service chiefs report directly to the minister.

**Mr Barling:** Just on that, I think an administrative-type person is involved, but the four chief officers report to the minister.

**MR PRATT:** Direct to the minister.

**Mr Barling:** Yes.

**MR PRATT:** If there is a need, do they arrange a chair to coordinate the four as



a chair and not as a commander or a commissioner?

**Mr Barling:** It is called SAFECOM, if I remember correctly. To put it fairly easily, it is probably simpler for this body to go to their web page. That actually explains how it is set up probably far better and more accurately than we could probably do it.

**THE CHAIR:** We heard before lunch—Mr Barling, you were here—about the Ellis report, which does not appear to have seen the light of day. Perhaps you could advise the committee, just for the committee's sake, whether you guys were consulted, when that report was actually due to be released and whether you can shed any light as to the status of that report. You might also tell us what it was inquiring into and what input you guys were having.

**Mr Barling:** In terms of the exact date, I believe Renee Leon organised Stuart Ellis to come and do some review. I think it was capability or some sort of thing in terms of how ESA and the services compared to other states and territories. She asked if the volunteer brigades and reps from the captains would like to meet Stuart Ellis, which we did, and actually the Bush Fire Council too I should say.

We sat and had a coffee—I think it was January 2007 or December 2006—and he asked us a lot of questions. We put forward some of our thoughts. At this stage, which is one of the things that probably annoys most of us, the report that taxpayers paid for has been shelved somewhere. I do not know what he said. He was involved in the McLeod inquiry. He used to be the Chief Officer of the CFS, Country Fire Service, in South Australia, so he has a good background in that.

I always worry when a consultant is asked and is never allowed to put his things in public. I do not know why. It is really disappointing, because we really want to fix things and make sure the Canberra community has got the best service it can have and the best structure. It seems to me we have been denied that opportunity because we do not know what he said.

**THE CHAIR:** Did any of you four talk to Mr Ellis?

**Mr Barling:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** It might be something we will follow up in terms of getting the report, or maybe Mr Ellis might like to give evidence before the committee.

**DR FOSKEY:** We have asked for the report.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, which hopefully we are getting. Failing that, he might want to give evidence himself.

**Mr Barling:** I would like to correct the record a little bit yesterday. Dr Foskey, you mentioned, if I remember correctly, there was a debrief held after the 2003 fires. There was in fact one by the Yellow Edge.

**DR FOSKEY:** The Yellow Edge?

**Mr Barling:** It is called the Yellow Edge report. It was a sort of debrief questionnaire that all volunteers—Fire Brigade, ambos and RFS paid staff—were entitled to answer. In terms of where that went—

**DR FOSKEY:** So you never saw a compiled report based—

**Mr Barling:** I have got a copy of a final one, many years after the debrief; so I have no idea how it was massaged.

**DR FOSKEY:** We can check that out, too.

**MR PRATT:** The copy you have got is a final, final draft.

**Mr Barling:** It is just the Yellow Edge report. I have a copy of it. I have no idea exactly what its standing is and how it relates to all the data collected.

**THE CHAIR:** You mentioned something in relation to the review of the ESA reorganisation as a result of promises made by the minister, the officials, about 12 months ago. Have the terms of reference been completed?

**Mr Barling:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** What is happening with those? Have you been told or have you found out what is happening either with the old terms of reference or is something happening with new ones? Has any reason been given to you?

**Mr Barling:** I had a phone call from Deputy Commissioner Brian Parry saying they had to go to a consultant, which I find rather ironic, to get the terms of reference written. I find it somewhat strange that the taxpayer has to pay for a consultant to work out the terms of reference and how to actually consult with volunteers, but I will leave that alone.

My understanding is that at some stage there seemed to be some problems with the way they set up the contract and it has been scrapped and they have to start again. I would suggest that it is probably more appropriate to ask the ESA what has happened there than me, but I believe it has been knocked on the head at this stage.

**MR PRATT:** What was your understanding as to when those terms of reference for the review of the organisation were supposed to be completed and the review commenced?

**Mr Barling:** As I said in my earlier submission—

**MR PRATT:** I am sorry but I missed it.

**Mr Barling:** That is fine. On 1 October, the terms of reference had to be agreed to by the commissioner, Bushfire Council, the captains group, the volunteer brigades association. I am not too sure about JACS; I am a little bit vague on that one. The first review was to be completed by 1 November 2007 and a second review, if necessary, was to held by 1 May this year. Bearing in mind that it is now mid-March and we

have not had the first one or the terms of reference, it is going to be interesting.

**MR PRATT:** Given that that review was a very, very important exercise and very, very close to the hearts of volunteers in terms of the difficulties of no consultation and what I am told is the lack of leadership or the lack of connectivity between the top and the bottom, I presume that you consider that review to be essential and requiring quick expedition?

**Mr Barling:** These captains here were also here 12 months ago. The reason they took back their rank was that the commissioner wrote and guaranteed that there would be a time frame and the terms of reference would be agreed to. They took back their captains' stripes and officers' stripes on the basis that they were given a commitment. As I said, that has been reneged on.

**MR PRATT:** Have the captains been consulted at all by the commissioner, the department of JACS or by the minister on what is happening with the review?

**Mr Barling:** I will pass to the captains.

**Mr Greep:** I believe, in a meeting earlier this year or late last year, that structural comparison review that was sort of promised after the standing down of the trucks and the trucks being parked near the fountain is now more a look at ESA, how it is going, sort of management—a typical workplace survey.

**MR PRATT:** Given that that review was, as you did just outline, very, very important in terms of trying to build the bridges that clearly broke on 15 March—we are past the anniversary—you, I presume, badly want that exercise to go ahead as quickly as possible.

**Mr Barling:** Correct.

**MR PRATT:** Can you tell me a bit more about the captains meeting—and tell me if this question has already been asked; I do not think it has been—and about the unanimous vote of confidence and support undertaken by the captains about 10 to 12 days ago in relation to a senior RFS officer?

**Mr Wassall:** Do you want us all to speak at once?

**MR PRATT:** Would you like to speak in turn?

**THE CHAIR:** One at a time, going from Mr Greep like we have been doing.

**Mr Greep:** I do not actually recall that one.

**Mr Wassall:** We were never consulted. We have been told that this is going to happen. All the way through that, we stated that we were not in favour of a TIM2 position, as it has been called. We cannot see a need for it with the structure that we have in the RFS at the moment.

**MR PRATT:** You are referring to, are you, a new appointment for a new senior

position?

**Mr Wassall:** That is exactly right.

**MR PRATT:** What is the concern about that?

**Mr Wassall:** We do not think we need that person at that level, when we were losing people at the lower level which supported us. All of a sudden, we would lose the people down in the lower level at RFS, namely, operations manager, operations officer, and logistics officers and helicopter support officer. All those things were sort of pushed out to make way for someone to come in at a higher level, to do exactly the same job as our chief officer is doing at the moment. We cannot see the value in it.

**MR PRATT:** Are you also saying that you have got full confidence in the senior leadership of the RFS?

**Mr Wassall:** Yes.

**MR PRATT:** Is that what the unanimous vote was about, by the captains at the captains meeting, to shore up confidence in that particular officer?

**Mr Virtue:** Yes.

**Mr Scott:** Yes.

**Mr Virtue:** We unanimously agreed that we had full support for the staff in the RFS. It is the levels above that where we do not have the confidence.

**Mr Greep:** Yes. Sorry, Mr Pratt, I did not actually understand your question.

**MR PRATT:** That is okay, Mr Greep. There are a few things flying around here.

**Mr Greep:** We did support the current management of RFS.

**MR PRATT:** Are you able to tell me something about the circumstances—perhaps Mr Barling, because I presume you were involved in a ministerial meeting—if this has not already been asked, of the previous volunteer ministerial meeting, which I understand might have led to this unanimous vote?

**Mr Barling:** There was a meeting a couple of weeks before the captains meeting, the usual six-weekly meeting with the minister. In that meeting, there were three RFS representatives there: me, John Jenkins, who is the captain of Gungahlin brigade, and Nicole King, who is a deputy captain of Rivers and takes minutes for us, just to keep a record. Basically, the minister started off rubbishing and having a real go at the actual RFS staff. The commissioner jumped in and one of his comments I found somewhat amusing, talking about the business plan. That seems to be the catchcry: we have to have a business plan. He said of the first business plan of Tim McGuffog—I cannot work out what his actual role is; the deputy chief officer—“In that business plan, there was not one mention of ‘volunteer’.”

It is interesting because I have that at home. I did a word search using Word and, after 12 mentions of “volunteer”, I thought: there are a few volunteers in there. After that, they actually got a consultant in who did the Fire Brigade’s business plan. It is interesting that she wrote the Fire Brigade’s one and that was acceptable, but when she wrote the RFS one it was not. So, basically, there was a fairly unprecedented attack by the minister and the commissioner on the RFS staff. Maybe I am old fashioned, but if someone is going to have a go at someone, they should have a right of reply and you actually say things to their face. Saying things in front of RFS and CFU delegates, without the staff having a right of reply—call me old fashioned, but I do not think it is right.

As part of that, obviously we talked to the RFS staff and said, “This is outrageous.” Tim McGuffog, at the captains meeting, basically tabled a document and we filled in, the rest of the captains, about how the attack on the staff was. As a result of that, a motion was moved, by all the captains, the DVA, of full confidence in both Tim McGuffog and all the remaining staff of RFS. We asked that it be noted that it was unanimous, that there was no abstaining or anything like that, and we asked Bushfire Council delegates who were at that meeting to take it to the council and have it on the record there.

**MR PRATT:** The minister, in recent weeks, has said, in answer to a question about the ministerial meeting of some four weeks ago, that his level of concern was only about the business plan, the RFS business plan, and he said he was a bit frustrated about that and that is where the level of frustration was going. To your recollection, was that the entire scope of the criticism levelled at the RFS?

**Mr Barling:** It seemed a lot more personal than that. Obviously there was a lot of harping on about a business plan. Probably the question needs to be asked: did they actually tell the RFS what was actually wrong with the business plan in the first place, so they could fix it, and did the consultant who had the second go and was rejected actually get paid? I would have thought that, if you employ a consultant to write something, you do not pay them until they get the job done properly, but, again, maybe it is a new way of doing business. My perception was that it was more than just about the business plan.

**MR PRATT:** Okay. Can I ask a final question perhaps in this series, chair?

**THE CHAIR:** One final question; Dr Foskey has been waiting patiently for a while.

**MR PRATT:** Since 15 March 2007, when we saw the unprecedented strike, has morale improved much amongst the services?

**THE CHAIR:** I have asked that and he has answered.

**Mr Barling:** Again, for the record, no.

**DR FOSKEY:** You say in your submission that you are an independent organisation receiving no government funding?

**Mr Barling:** That is correct.

**DR FOSKEY:** Have you ever had the value of your services costed by anybody?

**Mr Barling:** I believe Volunteering Australia and various people have had a sort of vague costing of what the value of volunteers is. At this stage, to be quite honest, you cannot measure it, but as a ballpark figure, I believe John Fisher, the previous deputy chief officer of the RFS, valued it and each volunteer was worth in the vicinity of \$60,000 per annum as a ballpark figure. That is not counting captains who, as these gentlemen will tell you, would be far more than that. That is just a basic number as a budget figure. How he got to that—you would have to ask him.

**DR FOSKEY:** How many volunteers would you say there are?

**Mr Barling:** There are 450 that we are aware of and there are also 150-odd departmental firefighters.

**DR FOSKEY:** So that is a fairly significant cost saving to the taxpayer.

**Mr Barling:** If you then throw in the SES volunteers, who again are in a similar vein and there are 150 of them, it is all about us saving the government money. You must be aware of that; without us, they could not afford to do their job and they could not afford to protect the community.

**DR FOSKEY:** Do you feel that your contribution is valued? Of course there is the monetary value, but there is the other kind of value as well.

**Mr Barling:** I did not join for the money, or whatever. I believe the Canberra community values us as highly as one can be valued. I do not believe the politicians and bureaucrats do.

**DR FOSKEY:** Do you have contact with other voluntary fire brigades around the country?

**Mr Barling:** Yes, I am a member of the Australasian assembly of volunteer brigades, which has New Zealand. All of the Australian services retain firefighters; we are a member of their association. We have two meetings a year—an annual general meeting plus a sort of midyear one. We have email links and all that sort of stuff. Yes, we do relate. I tend to get a standard invitation to the New South Wales RFS association AGM as sort of the president of the adjoining service. So, yes, I have good links with fellow services.

**DR FOSKEY:** Do you know of any model or any other jurisdiction where there is what you consider state-of-the-art relationships or structures for dealing between the actual bureaucracy, the paid service providers, which I suppose you could call firefighters, and the volunteers? Can you suggest a good model that might make a difference?

**Mr Barling:** I probably could put it this way and hopefully it will answer your question: they keep touting about a single fire service. Every state around us—New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia—has three fire services. They have the

metropolitan fire service, a volunteer type organisation and land managers, whether it is state forests New South Wales or whatever. So every state in our area has three fire services, just like we do. In terms of the model, all those, to the best of my knowledge, are a statutory authority where the bureaucrats are well and truly kept out of it, and they have their own legislation based on that. In terms of models, I think each model evolves to suit the particular state or territory.

What works in South Australia probably would not work here or would have to be modified, which means it has to evolve. What works in Tasmania may work there. But, if I remember correctly, it took 20 years to get to where they are and they are still having problems now. So it is horses for courses. You cannot bring someone else's model, shove it down our throats and expect it to work—and that is what they are trying to do.

**DR FOSKEY:** So what model do you think you are confronted with? Is it similar to any other state or territory?

**Mr Barling:** I am not aware of any other state that runs under a bureaucracy, but I am willing to be corrected.

**DR FOSKEY:** Yet other states, of course, have got that bigger separation between the bush, say, and cities and—

**Mr Barling:** I do not believe South Australia would agree with that. I think the—

**DR FOSKEY:** Not at the moment; that is for sure.

**Mr Barling:** To say that is probably misleading, because the interface, for want of a better term, is getting wider and wider. You have the hobby farmers. The urban guys have to deal with a lot of other stuff, and the rural guys. Somewhere in the line, it is getting a very big grey area, so you have to be very careful about saying that sort of thing.

**DR FOSKEY:** Okay. Sorry, Pat. Thank you. So the other states do share some of our problems. But would you say, though, that our size—population size, geographical area—could give us some advantages in working out a structure that works? If you were standing on Mars and you were talking about the ACT, I think you would think we would get it together.

**Mr Barling:** You can, actually; it is a simple matter. You come to the volunteers, have a chat to them and listen to what they say. You go to the urban guys and ask them, get their opinion. You go to all the services, sit down, bring them around the table and you start working out how best we can serve the community. That takes time. Unfortunately, to be quite blunt, politicians are in for three years and that is all they give a stuff about—

**DR FOSKEY:** Four now.

**Mr Barling:** My apologies. Bushfire politics is 20 years, 30 years—whatever. To do anything in terms of a structure, you guys and ladies have to give time, and a lot of

time, and it takes time. It is a culture. The urban guys, with the greatest of respect to them, have their own culture. It is completely opposite to the way we do our stuff. You cannot make two cultures combine without a lot of time and a lot of respect—and at this stage we do not have either.

**MS MacDONALD:** In relation to that, because it relates very much to that point, and I asked this, I think yesterday, of Mr Jeffery: what do you believe the relationship is between the rural fire services, the rural brigades and the urban fire brigades?

**Mr Barling:** From my experience, I have had virtually no problems with the guys on the ground. Unfortunately, when you go to a bushfire you all get dirty and grotty and you never enjoy it. I have the greatest respect for them; they know their stuff. I sincerely hope they, as a service, respect the RFS.

I think we need to be clear: we are not interested in doing their job. We do not want to do that. We are bushfire fighters. That is what we are trained to do. That is what our vehicles are set up to do. I found that, particularly, say, in the Weston Creek area where Rivers are, we have a very good relationship with the urban guys because, unfortunately, we have to go to fires together, because of the interface. And, when you work together with other cultures, you respect them: they can see that we can do the job and we can see that they can do the job. It is built on mutual respect. That is how any structure will work—mutual respect. We do not have that at present and we are not allowed to have it.

**THE CHAIR:** Why are you not allowed to have it?

**Mr Barling:** Because they want to force it down our throat without talking to us.

**MS MacDONALD:** You mean with a single service?

**Mr Barling:** Any structure they want. The consultation from Manson was: Monday night, “This is what is going to happen. What do you think?” The next day he announced it. That is not consultation. That is not mutual respect. That is nothing.

**DR FOSKEY:** Especially given that this problem is a longstanding one—we have had how many reports and so on—

**Mr Barling:** Too many.

**DR FOSKEY:** and therefore an investment in the time it takes would seem to be a lesson that could have been learned, I am interested that, although this is a broad-based inquiry with terms of reference that cover pretty much most of the emergency services, nearly all the submissions we have got are from people interested in the rural aspect of it. I am just interested in why that is. Does that mean pretty much everyone else is happy with the way things are going? You can only assume that, because people do not write submissions when they think everything is great.

**Mr Barling:** I disagree. If you think about it, volunteers are not government employees; we are independent. The Fire Brigade are employed under the Public Service Act or whatever. The ambos are employed under whatever their act is. Maybe



they are not allowed to. You would have to ask them why they have not. Val Jeffery made a comment yesterday that is very true and I think has to be noted: the biggest single threat to the ACT, that does the most damage, is bushfire. That is why probably people like us are stupid enough to want to keep coming to these inquiries to try and get our message across that, “There is a problem. Listen to us, instead of treating us like garbage,” which is the case at present.

**DR FOSKEY:** You are basically telling me that it does not mean that there are no other issues; but might it mean that this the area in which there are most issues?

**Mr Greep:** Put it this way: why is the inquiry going on? Why have we had two coronials? Why have there been so many other inquiries in the past? Obviously there is an issue out there.

**Mr Virtue:** Never assume people are happy.

**DR FOSKEY:** Okay, thanks.

**MR SMYTH:** Gentlemen, thanks for your time. I have seen some documents that talk about the RFS brief for the business plan and at the top of the list are the words “achieve integration”. Are you aware, or have you had discussions with either the commissioner or RFS staff, about what that means?

**Mr Barling:** I can answer a part of it. In December 2007, as part of the so-called restructure-cum-inquiry, an email was sent out to all the captains, me and Bushfire Council, and one of the comments was “achieve service integration”. From my point of view, they are the similar words to what the coroner used, which means a single fire service. Part of Commissioner Manson’s three-year business plan is a single fire service, which is at odds with what both the Chief Minister and the minister have said to my face. So I am trying to work out: are we going to get a single fire service or aren’t we?

**MR PRATT:** Is the concept of a single service being looked at perhaps as a budget-saving measure?

**Mr Barling:** I am not too sure how they budget. At present, most of the management of the RFS is by the volunteers themselves; the captains manage their brigades. We have eight staff, or whatever is left, in the RFS. We do need eight staff or 10 staff to manage us, so at the end of the day there have to be paid staff to look after us—whoever. So they need 10 people, six people—whatever the magic number is. I do not know how you can save money if you still need 10 people to make sure the volunteers can do their job.

**MR SMYTH:** In that regard, some of the documents I see say things like the RFS has struggled to develop a draft plan. You are obviously aware of at least two draft plans that have been put forward. Are you aware of any—and you partially cover this—reason for the rejection of both of those plans, given that one was put together internally by skilled and experienced staff that you have, as captains, voted unanimously to support in the way they do their job and the other was done by an independent consultancy that obviously was able to produce an acceptable plan for the

Fire Brigade? What is wrong with these plans that are being put forward?

**Mr Barling:** No-one has actually told me, except that Commissioner Manson said that the first one, the one that the RFS staff put in, had no mention of “volunteer” in it. But I did a word search and found there were 12 to start with and gave up. That was the reason given then. The second one: I have no idea. He did not explain; he just said it was rejected. But I still cannot believe that the consultant could do one for the Fire Brigade but could not write one for us. I do not know if she was paid or whatever, but I would have thought he would have sent them back to get it right. And did they actually say what was wrong with it? No-one has told us what actually was wrong with it.

**THE CHAIR:** Was the first plan put together by volunteers?

**Mr Barling:** Tim McGuffog wrote it and I believe it was sent out for having a look at; the staff at RFS put it together.

**THE CHAIR:** But with volunteer input, though?

**Mr Barling:** I do not know. I remember seeing it and there were a few comments sent back, but how much input I do not know, to be quite honest.

**THE CHAIR:** It just seems a strange comment by the commissioner, that is all.

**MR SYMTH:** Just on comments of the commissioner, the commissioner is also on the record as saying that all of the trouble with the RFS has been caused by a few noisy volunteers who are uninformed. One, are you aware of any uninformed noisy volunteers? Two, and more importantly, you are all elected, certainly as captains and then the captains and the volunteers elect the brigade, the association membership. Is the wide-held view of the volunteers that they are not getting the support to be allowed to simply do the job they volunteer to do?

**Mr Virtue:** Absolutely.

**MR SMYTH:** And what is it that the volunteers want?

**Mr Virtue:** Support and that sort of thing—the support network above us. Most of them have resigned. People are not happy—and they have resigned not because they want to go elsewhere. They love the positions, but they were just not happy in that position because of certain hierarchy and that sort of thing, which is the main reason why they have left. We are left without that support. There was a struggle to even backfill those positions. Certainly, the impression that I got was that the upper level did not want to fill those positions, and we thought that if those positions were not filled we would lose them et cetera.

**MR SMYTH:** I think something like four of the long-serving officers of the RFS who directly look after the interests of the volunteers and the brigades, for instance, quit in December, in the middle of a fire season. Are you aware of why they have quit? I understand they have done exit interviews. Chair, this might be something that we would ask the—

**THE CHAIR:** I have already asked for them.

**MR SMYTH:** Are you aware of why they quit, why they have taken all this experience that they have and gone to other jobs?

**Mr Virtue:** I think you should probably find that out through the exit interviews and that sort of thing. But, having talked to those staff members, it relates to the upper management, the ESA management. That is what it comes down to from my interpretation of all the people that I have talked to.

**MR PRATT:** Would it be true that the loss of something like nine out of 13 senior and middle ranking offices in the RFS over a fairly short period of time would have meant a hell of a lot of destabilisation and—

**Mr Virtue:** Absolutely.

**MR PRATT:** a severe impact on the support to the brigades?

**Mr Virtue:** Absolutely—and morale amongst the volunteers and that sort of thing. It is a disgrace. You have got so many high-level people that have been in the service for so long pulling the pin because of people above. I think that is just criminal.

**MR PRATT:** Not to mention the loss of corporate knowledge; is that also an issue?

**Mr Virtue:** Yes, the amount of knowledge that has gone out the door from so many different areas—the experience and that sort of thing. We have taken a huge loss.

**Mr Scott:** It is also the morale that we have built up with those senior officers. Now we have got to introduce ourselves, to get to know, these new people, which means we have taken a huge backward step again. We have developed friendships, both personally and professionally, and now we have got to do that with these new people. It makes our job a lot harder as captains as to who we call for incidents and who we call just for general administrative stuff at brigade level.

**Mr Wassall:** I would just like to add a little bit more to that. We have lost those people, but my understanding is that the people who have come in to replace them are only there for three months anyway and then they could be gone and we might get someone else in. How many times are we going to go through this change of management at RFS level because of our superior, our commissioner? My impression is the same as Pat's: I think he is just there to—pardon the French—stuff us and get rid of us.

**MR SMYTH:** That does lead to fire preparation. The commissioner, the minister and the Chief Minister are all on the record this year as saying that we have never been so well prepared for a season. Did we approach this season prepared, in terms of planning, equipment and volunteer readiness to fight what is potentially, and still could be this year, a very dangerous season?

**Mr Wassall:** We have been very lucky this year that we have not had any fires. We

have only had a couple—very small. I have stated before to other people that, if you thought the 2003 fires were bad, we were not even prepared and ready for 2001 fires. If a fire started tomorrow—sorry. The volunteers would be out there doing the best we can but—

**Mr Virtue:** I think we went into this fire season very ill prepared, particularly with the pre-season workshops and that sort of thing that we have. There was a lot of stuff there. The pre-season was delayed for various different reasons and I think we have just been incredibly lucky that it has rained this year. So—

**THE CHAIR:** In what way were we not prepared, Mr Virtue? Could you elaborate on why we were not prepared?

**Mr Virtue:** Lots of little things, little basic things. Who is manning fire towers, are we manning fire towers, what are we doing with fire weather, is fire weather going to be broadcast, what radio system are we using, are we using TRN, are we using VHF or are we going back to carrier pigeons—lots of little things like that that have sort of mounted up.

**MR PRATT:** Are you aware, captains, of any readiness report that might have been submitted to ESA by the RFS that would indicate that perhaps the services were not as ready as they could be—or not so much the services but the entire emergency management system was not ready to move this year? Are you aware of any reports?

**Mr Wassall:** Not that I am aware of.

**Mr Virtue:** Not that I am aware of.

**MR PRATT:** Are you aware of any reports submitted by the senior officers of RFS indicating, for want of a better term, a third statement in terms of preparedness?

**Mr Barling:** Not at this stage. The only one I am aware of is that the Bushfire Council was asked to prepare a statement for the minister for readiness or a capability study. I believe that was given to him, but what was said there I do not know and it has not been released yet. However, I would suggest that, considering there were some delays and it was not all rosy and whatever, there were certainly issues. Unfortunately, it is another report that does not seem to be released.

**MR PRATT:** Ex-Fire Brigade Commissioner David Prince said in this place last week that in his view the services were not prepared for another “macro event”. Val Jeffery said pretty much the same thing here yesterday. Mr Michael Ross, ex-chief of the Rural Fire Service, who appeared this morning, said the same thing: “We are not ready for a macro fire event.” We have every confidence that you guys at the unit level are certainly ready to do the best that you possibly can. What is your comment on that broader view about strategically able to face another macro event?

**Mr Barling:** I was there when Mr Prince made his comments. I have known Dave for a long time and I have a lot of respect for him. I suppose the analogy is our Canberra Raiders: they train, practice and plan quite regularly so that they can win the grand final—unless St George beat them. We have not done any sort of planning or

otherwise, so how can an emergency organisation, if it does not plan, practice and train, as in actually practicing some of the plans and working with the fire brigade, the SES or the ambos in joint exercises, say we are prepared if there is no plan and no practice?

**THE CHAIR:** And there is no plan and no practice?

**Mr Barling:** I have not had any practice or any plans.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you just practice at an individual level?

**Mr Barling:** At the brigade level, yes, we do little scenarios, but they are for small incidents, so that we can do our job. But it is the next level up which is always the problem, and that is where the failure is. Unless people play together, they can't work together.

**THE CHAIR:** So you are basically doing platoon level training and not battalion level or above?

**Mr Barling:** Yes.

**MR PRATT:** Since 2003, have the Emergency Services in general, and the RFS as part of that, exercised the surge capacity on the ground in preparation for a macro event?

**Mr Greep:** We have done some training, probably about two or three inter-brigade nights since the 2003 fires.

**MS MacDONALD:** How many brigades would participate?

**Mr Greep:** The maximum was three and at our most recent one there were two.

**MR PRATT:** So you are not aware of any exercise with the other three services as well, in terms of exercising—

**Mr Greep:** There has been what I have seen in the papers, but the RFS was not involved.

**Mr Barling:** When the police do their terrorist thing, the RFS for some reason is not involved. Again, I find that somewhat strange. We have 450 trained firefighters. They are rural firefighters, but we do not seem to be asked to attend, which is somewhat strange. There was an exercise—I can't think of the date—when we did a whole-of-service out at Athllon depot. It was more of a communications exercise. Again, I do not remember any fire brigade or ambos there, but we did have some New South Wales RFS crews there. That was more of a communications teething problem type exercise.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of macro events, this afternoon we have discussed what happens if there is a repeat of 2003. You indicated earlier your staffing levels. Would you have the staff necessary to effectively attack a major fire?

**Mr Greep:** I have sweated many nights thinking about what would happen if we had another 2003 event with our current numbers. I am sure the other captains have as well.

**THE CHAIR:** They are all nodding.

**Mr Greep:** The first crew out would not be a problem; with the second crew, it would probably diminish a little bit; a third crew would be virtually impossible.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Wassall?

**Mr Wassall:** Yes, it is also at the management level. On the ground, I feel confident I could get crews to go out and put the water on the red stuff, but at the higher level, you must have respect for the person up there as well. You just cannot bring someone in that you do not know and then expect them to say to you, “You go and fight that fire over there and you will be perfectly safe.” From my point of view, if I am not confident about someone telling me to go over and do that, I would hesitate.

With the leadership we had before, which we have now lost, if they told me to go and jump in the river, I would know it would be safe to go and jump in that river. But with the people we have got up there, I am not confident. I am not comfortable with it. I do not know them; I do not know how they are going to react, what they are going to tell me to do or how they are going to manage it.

**THE CHAIR:** Your numbers are down, at any rate.

**Mr Wassall:** Definitely, numbers are down.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Virtue?

**Mr Virtue:** We have healthy numbers in the brigade, as I have stated before. One of the problems we face is our high level of inexperienced people within the brigade, crewing vehicles and that sort of thing, particularly once you start getting into your second and third shifts. Senior people have just become uninterested, more or less, having regard to all the politics and the constant change going on. There has not been any sort of conformity, and we would be struggling.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Scott?

**Mr Scott:** Our numbers are definitely good for two shifts. A third shift would probably be reduced by a vehicle or two. We have kept our numbers to a cap because we lost a vehicle in the season which is yet to be replaced. That is coming online in a couple of weeks. So we have kept our numbers down. We have found if we keep the numbers too high, if it is a quiet season like we have had, luckily, this year, people disappear into the smoke, if you want to put it that way. You have to keep your numbers to a manageable level so that they do not get too bored and leave.

**DR FOSKEY:** Did you find that there was more interest amongst people volunteering for the rural fire brigades after the fire? It would seem to be a human reaction.

**Mr Wassall:** Definitely, after 2003 we had a big influx. There was money pushed into the training side of things from the government: “Yes, you’ll have 500-odd recruits.” Out of those people from 2003 that came to Guises Creek, I would probably have about two left now, because nothing has really happened since 2003. Once again, they have just drifted off.

**Mr Greep:** That is like any major fire event. In the 1994 fires in Sydney, we jumped by 80 members overnight. We lost pretty much 80 of those within two weeks.

**DR FOSKEY:** I suppose people want to be there and really want to help while the action is on, but they are not trained, so that could be more trouble than help, I guess. Is there some way that that could be capitalised on? I am wondering about the way communities can be trained for preparedness which could make them more able to step across into a more active line. Another issue in our inquiry is how to build up that community preparedness so that people do know what to do and they do know how to work together.

**Mr Greep:** Following the 2003 fires, a firewise program was set up to educate the community on what was going on. There were fewer and fewer people attending as the weeks went by. There were pretty much more presenters than actual people attending. I think it is just human nature: if the event is further down the track and you were not adversely affected by it, you are not going to attend.

**Mr Wassall:** I am a firewise facilitator. We did introduce the firewise program and it was going pretty well. With the fires on the north side of town, they were more affected, so people over there would be more interested. With the people on our side of town, at Guises Creek, we would not get as many. But in the last 12 months that program has been scrubbed as well. There has been no funding put into it from RFS or ESA. ESA have come back and said, “It’s not warranted, so we’re not doing it anymore.” I just feel that is wrong. Even if you do a firewise program, you go out to the community, advertise it and talk to people, and you get one person, that is better than not doing it at all.

**DR FOSKEY:** There is a Victorian program that I am pretty fond of spruiking where they employ community development people—at least 10 across the state—who work with communities to develop street plans so that, hopefully, if a fire was threatening, everyone in that street would be accounted for because they have got a system to do that. I did not know the firewise program had been scrapped.

**Mr Wassall:** They have introduced the farmwise program this year, which has kicked off, but that is different from the firewise program.

**DR FOSKEY:** The firewise program was at the urban edge, wasn’t it?

**Mr Wassall:** Exactly.

**Mr Virtue:** I think the urban fire brigade have taken a lot of control away from us in relation to more or less advising people and going out and doing these firewise things. So we have lost a lot of that. In Jerrabomberra, we used to do a lot of Red Hill and a

lot of those areas—the places that still have not burnt. That has not happened. Once upon a time we used to do the Canberra show. It always used to be a valuable tool to talk to people—people would come to us. We lost our invitation to that a number of years ago.

**MS MacDONALD:** How many years ago?

**Mr Wassall:** Two years ago. The funding was withdrawn, so that was it; we were never allowed to go again.

**THE CHAIR:** Was it government funding?

**Mr Wassall:** ESA.

**Mr Virtue:** And we have got plenty of volunteers in the system who really would love to get out there and do that sort of thing.

**THE CHAIR:** I remember your display.

**Mr Virtue:** They see that as part of their role, but we are not allowed to do it.

**DR FOSKEY:** That is something that we will definitely follow up.

**THE CHAIR:** Indeed.

**DR FOSKEY:** We heard from Mr Jeffery yesterday that the Bushfire Council used to have quite a different role from what it has now—or what I think it has now. It is now probably seen as more of an advisory council to government. I am interested in the way the Bushfire Council affects you, if at all. Do you have confidence in it? Could it actually be a really useful tool?

**Mr Barling:** The council at present gives advice. The minister appoints them as an expert body. They give advice to the minister. Probably my first suggestion is for the minister actually to listen to that advice and take note of it. It has more teeth than it has had for a long time. All the people on it are independent. They are not government employees, so they can get up and state the facts without fear or favour. That advice is given; it is then up to the minister to act on it.

I am actually quite pleased with the council. It has good teeth. I believe the recommendations have been to our benefit and the community's benefit. We have volunteers on that body. We know them and we do interact and have a coffee, so that is not a problem. The captains group and the VBA, if necessary, can put items up to council if there is an issue for us. I believe the captains, on occasions, have done that, as has the VBA. As a body, I think it is very important in getting the communication up there. The fact that when it gets up there the communication is ignored is an issue that you guys have to deal with.

**Mr Greep:** When I first joined the RFS, the Bushfire Council was very strong and very powerful. We actually had their patch on our shoulder. It has changed over the years as it has declined in strength. It rose up again under the ESA sort of model so



that it actually was a viable group. It is certainly stronger than it has been over the years and it is certainly a valuable group.

**MR PRATT:** Yesterday, I asked Mr Jeffery a question about hazard reduction work in relation to some burning that he did on Tharwa Drive in late 2005 or early 2006 after the long grass sprouted. I asked him whether he did that because he was directed to do so or whether it was programmed as part of a strategic hazard reduction plan. He said, “No,” and that he basically went ahead and did that off his own bat. I think he then said he advised the RFS later, and they were quite happy that he had done that. Have you ever been given instructions, as captains with your own areas of interest, to carry out a series of hazard reduction tasks through the winter and the spring approaching a bushfire season? How does that work for you blokes?

**Mr Wassall:** That sort of thing is normally handled by TAMS, departmentally. There is the odd occasion when we are asked by a rural lessee to do something on their property. We very rarely get involved at a brigade level in organising it.

**MR PRATT:** Therefore, I presume brigades are not given areas of responsibility to perhaps go and risk-analyse in the approach to a bushfire season to (a) give advice to land managers and landowners and (b) perhaps to carry out tasks?

**Mr Wassall:** No, not really. It is normally done by risk management, which is part of the service. TAMS do their own. Bear in mind that in a lot of areas they are either rural lessees or it is government land. Going back to Val’s example a couple of years ago, he identified that the roadside was a problem. We then went out and looked at other roads. The Monaro Highway was identified as one. We were on the verge of burning that as an exercise and to reduce the fuel load there and, before we had a chance to light it up, they came through and mowed it. That was another way of reducing the hazard, which is okay. That is the way it happened.

**DR FOSKEY:** Did they know you were going to burn it or was it just a coincidence?

**Mr Wassall:** They would have been pretty sure that we were going to burn because the plans were already in. The development thing was ready to go.

**DR FOSKEY:** So you had applied for a licence and everything.

**Mr Wassall:** You have to put out a burn plan and organise that.

**MR PRATT:** In terms of preventative planning, are you satisfied with those sorts of arrangements or do you think it can be improved upon at perhaps the more strategic level?

**Mr Greep:** I think it can be improved upon. Back when Mike Ross and John Fisher were on board, they put in a good burning program, got us involved and got it happening. It has been about two years since we have done any active burning amongst the—

**Mr Wassall:** That was at about the same time as Val Jeffery’s burn was happening. We used to get out and do a bit.

**Mr Greep:** There is still burning going on but it is more a matter of TAMS doing those. We get invites and we can attend.

**THE CHAIR:** Is it two years since you have done any burning?

**Mr Greep:** Not since we have done any burning, but since the RFS has taken some action to implement some burns.

**Mr Wassall:** To clarify that, TAMS are part of the RFS as well. They look after the management role of their areas. But being a brigade of the RFS, I suppose it still comes under the authority of the RFS. We are invited to participate in these burns. One of my beefs is that they normally do their burns Monday to Friday. We are volunteers and we work for a living, but nothing really happens on weekends or when it is available for us. That is an issue we have always had with RFS, with TAMS.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of burns and fuel loads, Pat was here yesterday, when we heard Val Jeffery say that there are a hell of a lot of areas in the ACT where it is at least 20 tonnes per hectare, plus there are real problems with the heath country—and we will come to that; that is a separate issue.

Wayne West gave evidence earlier today. He has a property just over the border—Goodradigbee in the Brindabellas. Fuel loads there are up to about 27 tonnes. He was lamenting that there were no real burns occurring in the Brindabella national park area, certainly on the New South Wales side, and he understood that to be the case in the ACT as well. In terms of fuel loads and burns in your area of responsibility, what is happening there? What are the fuel loads like? Have there been any controlled burns, back-burns, by anyone in the last 12 months? Is there a program of fuel reduction for the areas of the ACT that you guys are responsible for, as the Rural Fire Service? If so, are you happy with whatever plans there are for fuel reduction in the ACT?

**Mr Greep:** In western Belconnen, I know that Bruce seems to get burnt out every year. Certainly, having regard to the western edge of Belconnen, from Dunlop down to the Belconnen golf course, I have not seen a burn done there since the 2003 fires.

**Mr Scott:** Tony and I share common ground in Belconnen. Most of our area is grass related on the urban edge. None of that has been burnt for many years. As a way of getting our new recruits trained up and also as preparation for the season, we could actually do some prescribed burning of these grass areas, particularly down through the back of Dunlop and places like that. TAMS generally do Bruce ridge nearly every year, in strategic patterns. They also did some areas on Black Mountain this year which our brigade was asked to attend.

However, as Dave said, they are always Monday to Friday and are generally run by them, whereas most of our guys work from Monday to Friday. It would be more beneficial, from an education and training point of view, if we, as officers, could actually run and plan these on the weekends and get our volunteers to do it on the weekends.

**MR PRATT:** I think TAMS has responsibility for carrying out hazard reduction in

ACT parks, including on this side of Brindabella park, which these chaps have no control over—

**THE CHAIR:** So you have no control whatsoever there?

**Mr Virtue:** In our area, unfortunately, we have got all the areas that did not burn in 2003—Majura, Ainslie, Red Hill, and all those sorts of places. Some of those obviously have quite high fuel loads. What is hiding out there in Majura, in the pines and that sort of thing, is quite scary. Even in Fairbairn Pines and all of Kowen, there are quite a few areas in there, but we do not have any jurisdiction there. We will go and assist rural landholders but TAMS do all of that. TAMS will put their hand up and say that areas need to be burnt. There has been some HR work done around Kowen. Some has been done around the escarpment, at Molonglo gorge. Again, it is always done during the week and we do not get an opportunity to go out. I should not say that the opportunity is not presented because the invitation is there, but it is not an appropriate time for volunteers to go out and do these sorts of things.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Wassall?

**Mr Wassall:** Guises Creek does the Monaro Highway down to the border, Tuggeranong Hill and Rob Roy. I do not ever remember a hazard reduction burn being undertaken on Rob Roy or Tuggeranong Hill. I have only been to one fire in a small area on Tuggeranong Hill, and I have been in the service for 13 years.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Barling can probably answer this: did you guys ever have responsibility for the western edge of the ACT—in other words, the mountains such as the Tidbinbillas and the Brindabella part in the ACT?

**Mr Barling:** As far as I am aware, it was ACT Forests, then Parks and Cons and now TAMS. There are rural lessees scattered amongst that and we have assisted them when they have asked us, but it is basically a TAMS issue. Again, from a Rivers point of view, we get an invite but it is Monday to Friday. Most of us would love to go along and learn and then be able to teach the new ones, but unfortunately we all have a life to live and we have to have a job.

**THE CHAIR:** Indeed. Are you satisfied or otherwise in relation to any burns that are being conducted there? With the fires that come out of the west, we have heard about fuel loads, and we have heard from Val Jeffery about the heath country. What danger does that pose? Have you got any idea how that problem can be addressed? How could the RFS be involved?

**Mr Barling:** There is a lot of grass. I think it goes all the way along the western edge, even around the paddocks of the rural lessees in Weston Creek and along that Murrumbidgee corridor. There is a lot of regrowth from the fires along the Bullen Range. It is all epicormic stuff—the stuff that goes up and down the trees.

The use of the term “heath” is probably not quite accurate but it is close enough for all intents and purposes. We had a training night last night and someone asked, “How do we fight that?” I was a bit like Val and I said, “At this stage you start at the very back, go slow and watch for the wind to change.” That is about the best advice I have. I

have no idea. If there is someone who knows how to fight those fires, I would love them to come and tell us how to do it.

**DR FOSKEY:** We know that the heath is a response to a very hot burn. Obviously, the soil quality is not there. If nature had its way, it could go on for 100 years or so before there is a recovery. Often, heath country remains heath country. You just said, “We don’t know what to do.” It seems to me that there is a real urgency for someone, presumably ESA, to find out how to work with fire in that sort of vegetation. We have not heard anyone say that they know how to do that. We will ask ESA.

We can make recommendations about those kinds of things, but have you ever asked TAMS specifically whether they would work with you to do what everyone is saying—to have a weekend operation in order to give all these volunteers a sense that they have joined something and actually get a chance to do something? We have talked about the people who came in after the fires and then went off again. Have you ever put a specific request to TAMS? If so, what response did you get?

**Mr Barling:** They have tried to do some weekend burns but my understanding is that the TAMS staff would then have to be paid overtime. In fairness to the TAMS guys, they like to involve the volunteers because they obviously understand the need, but there seems to be a budget issue there. The thing that is probably more important, and that these guys have touched on, is that TAMS have only a limited number of staff.

The volunteers have 450 and we have 50-odd officers. They are not getting the skills at the management level that they require in the event of a fire. As Mr Scott suggested, if they were allowed to run and plan a hazard reduction burn, that is a very good learning tool. I was fortunate, when I was an officer, to have a few opportunities like that. I learnt the hard way and I made lots of mistakes. They are not getting the opportunity because there are no weekend burns that they can run.

With respect to the few that we have, we had one at MacKillop College recently, and I ran that. I think I had half of the ACT Rural Fire Service volunteers turn up to help me with a very small fire, and I had trouble trying to give them work to do. The volunteers will turn up, will assist and will do hazard reduction burns, but unfortunately, as has been said, we work from Monday to Friday and we have families. Weekends suit us best. Interestingly enough, most of the worst fires seem to be around the weekend, too.

**MR SMYTH:** You have all said that nobody knows how fire affects what has been termed the heath country. Rohan, how long have you been in the brigades?

**Mr Scott:** Ten years, 11th season.

**MR SMYTH:** Steve?

**Mr Virtue:** This is my 20th year. I started in 1988, back in New South Wales, in the Wingecarribee Shire, so there was some limited experience down there with some heath-related stuff. Generally, they are very fast moving fires, very unpredictable and very uncontrollable, particularly if you have the right weather conditions. I have been here since 1995. I was also a ranger up in Namadgi national park, a Bendora ranger,

plus in the Murrumbidgee River corridor for 3½ years. So I know that area quite well, and what is up there at the moment is quite interesting. I think a hell of a lot more can be done. Before 2003, if I had put in a recommendation to have a fire trail cleared, it was thrown out the door straightaway. Any form of hazard reduction seemed to be thrown out the door straightaway.

**MR PRATT:** Still?

**Mr Virtue:** No, that was previously. There has been a lot of work done on fire trails since then, so I think the little light switched on, but a hell of a lot more needs to be done up there.

**MR SMYTH:** Dave, you have had 13 years experience?

**Mr Wassall:** Thirteen years in the ACT but I have been in the Rural Fire Service for about 25 years, all told. I started off down in Bombala, New South Wales.

**MR SMYTH:** Tony?

**Mr Greep:** Nineteen years.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Virtue, you mentioned that a lot more could be done up there. You said that some work has been done on fire trails; we have heard that from other witnesses. What more could be done up there?

**Mr Virtue:** I think there could be some strategic hazard reduction burning up there. At the pre-season workshop it was earmarked that TAMS had the intention of doing a number of burns up there. Some of them were up to 700 hectares. I think the weather ended up going against us this year in some areas. That is also possibly relating to budget, too. Some of these 700-odd hectare fires obviously are required to be done on the weekend so that volunteers can be involved, because they cannot do it with their limited number of resources. So there are things there that can be done.

**MR PRATT:** If they are not spending the budget on a highly important, urgent preventative task, such as doing something about hazard reduction in heath country, where is the money being spent?

**Mr Virtue:** I do not know. I saw the shining light at the end of the tunnel and got out of there. I am not quite sure where their money is going at the moment.

**MR PRATT:** You seem to believe, Steve, that you could undertake some hazard reduction when the weather is right and do something about this heath country, to perhaps break down the potential momentum of a fire?

**Mr Virtue:** Absolutely. You can always do strategic burning to try and have some sort of control—

**MR PRATT:** To break it up?

**Mr Virtue:** over fire behaviour if you had a major fire come through, whether it is in

compartments or in different areas like that. Working within the constraints of fire trails and creek lines, you might be able to burn an area out. So if you get something that does come over from the western side that will impact, at least you have an opportunity to slow it down.

**MR PRATT:** I have seen that country and it is bloody frightening. For the record, chair: where are the priorities in funding?

Turning to another issue, in most jurisdictions I understand that SES and RFS units and equivalents have a role to play where there is a terrorist threat—in getting involved in terms of available manpower, capabilities, communications and all the things that RFS organisations can offer. Has the ACT RFS ever received instructions, training or had discussions about perhaps getting involved in some way in supplementing the emergency services—the fire brigade, the police and the ambulance services—should there be a large terrorist activity, such as a building collapse or an urban attack of some sort?

**Mr Greep:** They may have but they have not told us.

**MR PRATT:** So you have not been exercised or even had a computer exercise, a map exercise or any sorts of discussions about roles you might be able to play in such an event?

**Mr Greep:** No exercises, no discussions.

**Mr Virtue:** The only thing is that occasionally a request has come through for volunteers for mass casualty sorts of exercises. There has been nothing to do with the planning or anything like that. It is just for someone to lie on the ground with a bit of fake blood.

**Mr Scott:** In our brigade we have a member who has subsequently left Calvary Hospital. He was in charge of their decontamination unit. He approached RFS to see if they wanted our brigade trained up in the use of that equipment. That has gone nowhere, as far as I am aware.

**MR PRATT:** Fascinating. In terms of your professional backgrounds and your assessments of threats to the ACT, how do you feel about that—the fact that the RFS does not have a direct role, even in an academic sense?

**Mr Greep:** My workplace has a business continuity plan. Not every staff member is aware of it, but certainly those that need to take control are aware of it. If an event did occur, we would certainly have back-up resources, back-up accommodations and steps to work through what needs to be done to get business back up and running. From our point of view, if we needed emergency services, whichever agency, we would expect it to be there. Speaking from the point of view of my workplace, I do not think we would care whether it was RFS, SES or fire brigade.

**MR PRATT:** Yes. Everybody to the pump if something happens?

**Mr Wassall:** It goes back to the structure of the organisation. If you have a different

leader in each one, a chief officer in each structure, if a terrorist activity happened, I would imagine the police would run that. But we would definitely be there as back-up and, yes, we should have some basic training on what we are doing. Since I have been in the Rural Fire Service, we have only just started the structural firefighting. We are a firefighting organisation but, according to the experts, there are no buildings on rural properties; therefore, until recently we have not been trained in that. It has been one of the bugbears for a long time.

**DR FOSKEY:** I want to go back to the loss of firewise and the ways in which we might work in the community. I have read statistics that 30 per cent of Canberra's population changes every year. So the fact that people got a leaflet three years ago might not really count for much if we get another 18 January. Could you suggest ways that we could have much greater community preparedness and much more knowledge within each household of what to do—that was clearly lacking on the 18th—and any role that you believe the Rural Fire Service or other volunteers could play in that, given that I do not expect the ACT government to appoint community development officers to do it.

**Mr Wassall:** Volunteers will go to school fetes; they will go to the Canberra show if the funding is there to do it. We will go anywhere, because we have the volunteers, we have the people interested and we have the people trained to do it. But if we are not getting the backing from the ESA to go and do these things, it does not happen. One of the things they started to do last year and the year before was to put that program on the TV, based on the New South Wales thing.

**Mr Virtue:** “Our emergency, your emergency”.

**Mr Wassall:** Yes, that is right. They ran it for so long but, once again, the funding is not there to run it any longer than about two weeks. When you look at SES type stuff, they have a thing on Channel 7 basically every night of the week. For us, for some reason, the RFS funding is not there. You have got the volunteers and the people who know how to do it and will put it together, but if we do not get the backing from our leader, our commissioner, we just cannot do it.

**DR FOSKEY:** But it is not really a huge amount of money if we are talking about getting something or other happening at the Canberra show, is it?

**Mr Wassall:** We do not think it is, but it is according to the powers that be. We are talking probably about \$10,000 for a site. That is nothing.

**Mr Virtue:** But at the end of the day you can't even draw a comparison between money and community knowledge and community preparedness. You really can't say that \$100,000 is enough if it is not reaching everybody.

**DR FOSKEY:** When you think of how many millions get spent fighting a fire—

**Mr Scott:** Talking about community education, in our brigade we have a lot of urban interface with Aranda, Cook and places like that. We found that the firewise program, going out onto the streets, was extremely effective. As you said, there is a 30 per cent changeover every year. One of the best scenarios that we saw was one of the streets in

Aranda that had a combined street barbecue. It was very effective, and that would be a way for the volunteers to get out and meet with the public. The public respects us highly and it is a way of introducing that morale and togetherness back into the brigades. At the moment it is very stale.

**DR FOSKEY:** It could be quite exciting—the street barbecue idea, where maybe only one or two people might identify themselves as street leaders or contact people.

**Mr Scott:** As Dave mentioned before, even if we turn up and speak to one person, that is one more family or house that is educated. They may talk to Mrs Smith next door and educate her as well. One is better than nothing, which is what we are doing at the moment.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Barling, you were here when Mr Mansell was talking about FireLink, and Val Jeffery might have made a couple of comments on it. I would like to hear your views in relation to FireLink. We heard this morning that the equipment is still with the ACT government. If they decided tomorrow, it could be reactivated. I invite your comments on whether FireLink would be a good thing or whether there are problems with that. Would you like to see some system like that in operation and would it help you?

**Mr Barling:** I must admit I can't say that my dealings with FireLink were positive. In fairness to them, I do not know where the bottleneck was. There were some issues. The FireLink system as a vehicle locator is a sensational idea. As a safety factor, I do not have a problem with that. With respect to the way they wish to dispatch, unfortunately the RFS may be a bit backward but we actually like telling people on the radio to do things so that everyone knows what is going on.

However, I did go to some of the training things and I did make some suggestions. As I am getting on, I can't always read, particularly at night, and I made some suggestions to improve it, such as having bigger fonts so that poor old buggers like me can actually read it. Interestingly enough, it never happened. I do not know where that bottleneck was.

My nickname, "Grumpy", is for a reason. If I ask for something and people tend not to do it, I dismiss it. If I have got a fire to run and the tool works for me, I will use it. If there is a tool that I can't read or whatever, it is just a piece of junk that I can't use. If I have got a fire to run, I need to just run it and I will use any tool that I feel comfortable with.

In my few dealings with it, at night I had to ask the person in the back seat to read it because I could not read it. That is not saying my eyes are bad, but the font was too small. I am a controller; I have to make a decision. If I can't read it, it is irrelevant. The few times I actually used it, and taking into account what was said, it could well have been that it was the CAD system that failed and not FireLink; I do not know. I am not a technical guru. A tool is a tool. If it works, that is sensational. If it does not, I am not interested in it.

It was actually quite interesting to hear what Brian said because it sounds like it could have been a very useful tool but it was never actually finished, developed or whatever.



I think he used the term “change management”. In hindsight, if it had been done properly and all us old technophobes were brought along and slowly shown how it worked and given a bit of time to understand it, it may well have been appropriate. Unfortunately, once again, it was dumped on us by saying, “That’s what you’re using,” and in my few dealings with it, it did not seem to do what I wanted it to do, so it is a tool that I just put in the back shed until I could understand it.

**Mr Wassall:** Can I just add a bit more to that? At Guises Creek, FireLink relied on relay or vehicle to vehicle location. At our location at Guises Creek—if you do not know where we are, we are on the Monaro Highway—we have got Tuggeranong Hill in the way. We could actually get sent to a fire further down Monaro Highway, press all the right buttons and it would not even register at comm cen to know we had ever moved—unless something came up over the hill to bounce off; then it would work. So the idea was good, but the infrastructure was not there to make it work properly. The further south you got, you had no chance because the transmitters were not there. It relied on vehicle to vehicle, but, if there were no vehicles coming, it is not going to transmit.

**Mr Virtue:** We are not in the same area as Dave, but we are obviously in Symonston. Our trucks were always dropping off their system. They did not have any idea where they were. We seemed to have a lot of black spots there. So it was always a concern for us.

**MR PRATT:** Pat, was it difficult for your crews to train on this thing, this new white \$15,000 box? Was that time-consuming training?

**Mr Barling:** To be honest, I think young people into computers would have loved it—buttons to push on. I am not being facetious about it —

**MS MacDONALD:** You are not suggesting you are a technophobe, are you, Pat?

**Mr Barling:** I suppose the way I look at it is that, if I have a radio, I can hit the button and talk to it—sensational—and I can change the channels. That is really good, but, if I have got to start dialling things up and whatever, it is a problem. The problem is that it is the old people, senior people, or the more elderly of us, that are the controllers of the fires. The technophobes are the ones running it. So for us to use the technology you have to educate us and bring us along. Young people can read it—that is sensational for them—but unfortunately they do not make the decisions.

I love technology when it works. I think Brian’s comment was that his daughter says, “The web’s down.” I have the same problem. If the web is down, I go to him saying: “Fix it, will you. I am trying to do some work.” I do not understand the technology. I am familiar with it and when it works—sensational. But, if it is going to be up and down, from a firefighter’s point of view, looking after the safety of crews and whatever, I will go to another method, whatever that is. I do find that voice on the radio is fine. If there is another one that works—sensational—but, if it is not old-person friendly, it is going to be an issue.

**MR SMYTH:** Equipment wise, there are various classes of vehicles. Some supertankers have been funded in the budget. Have we got those and are they

operational and are they doing the job?

**Mr Wassall:** The supertanker: non-existent. The supertanker I think you are referring to is the water carter supertanker. That funding, I believe, disappeared somewhere. We have got no idea where it went. It also disappeared with along the lines of a command vehicle for Gungahlin at the time; that disappeared as well. Then they came up with the idea that they would get new command vehicles for every brigade—eight, I think, command vehicles—but then someone in their wisdom said, “No, we have already got one, so you do not need eight; you are only going to get seven.” The end result is that Guises Creek did not get a command vehicle; that got lost in the system somewhere. I have been told we are going to get it next budget, but I will believe it when it happens.

Tankers: we were only talking about this before we came in. We do not know what the deal is. We believe the cab chassis are being supposedly purchased, or in the process of being purchased—supposed to be Hino. We did have a lot of meetings at captains level to say how we wanted these things fitted out and what we wanted on them—how they were going to be built. But, once again, our leader/commissioner overrode us and said, “You will get this,” and we are not happy with that. So we —

**MR SMYTH:** You are not going anywhere at the moment.

**Mr Wassall:** No. Nothing has been purchased. These things were supposed to be on line before the start of the fire season—but no-one told us which fire season.

**Mr Barling:** Can I add to that? Two supertankers, ultra-heavy tankers or whatever, have been budgeted two years in a row and, again, I have seen neither. Going back a little bit, the last bushfire heavy tanker, the 3,500-litre one, was purchased in 2003, which is the Hall 10 tanker. The only vehicles after that we have got in terms of the tankers are the compressed air foam system, which is 2005 or whatever. I have not seen a new bushfire-fighting vehicle with a lot of water on since 2006. We have been promised many things. A lot of command vehicles are really good. You can put a knapsack in the back with 20 litres and away you go, but it does not actually help on a fire. In terms of the light units, I am not sure when the last one of those was ever purchased —

**Mr Scott:** Can I just add to that that there is a light unit coming in the next couple of weeks for us.

**MR PRATT:** Does the captains group get consulted, kept informed and kept up to date by ESA or anybody else regarding the equipment budget and where these equipment programs are going to?

**Mr Greep:** I will sort of answer that in two parts. The captains group used to be the fire controllers group—we just sort of tidied up the membership of it—and I was the president of that group two years ago when we put a media statement out to say that 15 or 16-year-old vehicles were too old, needed replacement. As Pat has highlighted, since that nothing has turned up. There has been a lot of talk and a lot of meetings, and they have been great, but we have achieved no actual asset on the ground.

I do not think we actually get too involved in the budget. I have never seen an actual figure. We do hear the budget statements when they come out, when the government release the budget each year, and that all sounds good, but no actual assets come out of it.

**MR PRATT:** You are the operational users of this stuff, and clearly we have just heard that you do not get consulted in any way in terms of identifying new equipment types and design. You do not seem to get much input into what is going to work and what is not going to work. Do you think it is reasonable or unreasonable that the captains group, representing the command of the operational users, are not kept informed, the budget is not transparent and that you are not more deeply involved in identifying program design?

**Mr Scott:** With the consultation process, we were consulted but we were not really listened to. The classic example of this is the CAF system. It is good in theory that these vehicles turn up, but as an operational vehicle they are not very effective out in the bush where we need them. The best thing to do with those six CAF units which are in the ACT Rural Fire Service system is to convert them back to a proper water-carrying heavy and light tanker and get rid of the CAF system.

**MR PRATT:** Have you advised that?

**Mr Scott:** Yes, we have spoken about it quite a few times. There is actually a committee at the moment with Dave, me and Neil Cooper from TAMS to look into only changing the small ones, the single-cab ones, over. But they just turned up; there was no consultation with the CAF system.

**DR FOSKEY:** Sorry, what does this word mean?

**Mr Scott:** Compressed air foam.

**Mr Wassall:** Can I just add a bit to that about the committee that has just been formed? We have been asked to look at the vehicles to see if they can be, but there is no money being funded to do it. So, once again, we could have all this—we could go and talk, go and have a look at it, come up with a design—but I would bet you money, right now, that no-one will listen to us.

**MR PRATT:** Pat and the captains, has the group been consulted about what the priorities should be in terms of new equipment, new vehicles, in terms of what you want to see in your own units on the ground to make your job that much easier, or do you just get told what is coming on line or what is in the budget or whatever?

**Mr Wassall:** Back to these new tankers that were coming on line: we actually attended a meeting and we told the commissioner that we were looking at virtually two vehicles, one from CFS and CFA. We looked at the vehicles; we actually sent a couple of people, one of whom is no longer in the service, over to have a look at these and to come back and advise us if the CFA vehicles were the better type of vehicle.

**MR SMYTH:** CFA being which state?

**THE CHAIR:** Victoria.

**Mr Wassall:** They said, “Don’t even consider the CFS ones because the workmanship, the layout and all that is wrong; it would not suit us.” We then looked at the plans and the photos and whatever. We went back to the commissioner and said, “Yes, we want the CFA ones, with the modifications”.

**MR PRATT:** And what happened?

**Mr Wassall:** We are going to end up with CFS; I know that.

**MR PRATT:** So what was the result of your advice on that?

**Mr Wassall:** He just does not listen.

**MR PRATT:** What about your advice on what the mix of your fleets should be and the next priorities? Do you get consulted about that at all?

**Mr Wassall:** Not really. We are virtually told that this is coming. We are not really asked if we want them. Once again, it goes back to the CAF units. They purchased the three small CAF units as a sort of trial, basically, and then three extra big ones arrived. We did not want them, but we were stuck with them.

**MR SMYTH:** Just to finish up, because we are running out of time on the equipment, what is the state of the sheds? Are they fine, good, bad, indifferent?

**Mr Scott:** I think Tony can probably help me on this. Co-location with the sheds is an extremely difficult situation. At our shed particularly—and I know it is at other sheds as well—having the SES and RFS in the same shed is a huge space constraint and it will actually reduce your numbers. It is just not working.

**MR SMYTH:** The physical sheds: they are kept up to speed?

**Mr Greep:** Put it this way: there would not be just one brigade out there. We do not mind doing it, because they are our sheds, but a lot of our fundraising goes into the upkeep and the redesign of the internals.

**Mr Scott:** I think Pat mentioned \$60,000 a year, or some such figure. Nearly every shed maintains their own sheds with regard to mowing lawns, cleaning—everything like that. I do not think many other government departments do that.

**Mr Virtue:** It is the same thing with us. We have got two blocks down there on the Jerrabomberra site and we are forever pushing hand mowers around that site and it is quite a large one, and there are little things like the septic system. As I stated before, we do have quite a large membership and, if we have gatherings—Christmas party, big stand-up and that sort of thing—we can have close to 100-odd people down there. The sewerage system backs up every time; it comes out to bite everybody. No-one will spend the, once, \$22,000—now I think it is about \$26,000 or something—to dig up the road or bore a hole under the road to tap into the sewer system, which is right beside us. Instead, we have got to put up with this septic tank and the overflow from it

and that sort of thing. There are a lot of things out there. The governments do not maintain the sheds. We have got to really send out a number of emails and push the issue for someone to come down and throw some insecticide around for a redback infestation.

**MR SMYTH:** Personal protection equipment: the equipment is adequate and you get plenty of stores to back up?

**Mr Scott:** Equipment, yes, definitely; what we ask for we get, to a certain extent. We have all just been issued with T-shirts and things like that. There was not any consultation, as far as I am aware, with anyone as to the style of the shirts or anything like that. We have been issued with jumpers, but, unfortunately, only half the membership got them, I think. The others are on back order or something like that. Basically we get stuff from stores on a need basis, but a bit of consultation there probably would not go astray.

**Mr Barling:** On the PPE thing: again, because I am an old bugger, they have all gone to—

**THE CHAIR:** Just on that, Patrick: you just do not look that old.

**MS MacDONALD:** If you are not careful, we are going to ask you exactly how old you are.

**THE CHAIR:** Exactly how old are you, Pat?

**Mr Barling:** I will be 50 next year.

**THE CHAIR:** You are not an old bugger yet. Carry on.

**Mr Barling:** Back to the PPE: there is a real push for two-piece overalls and that. That's sensational—people love them and that's good—but there are people like me who are a little bit old fashioned and like the one-piece overalls, and it is getting harder and harder to get them. I think it goes back to what Rohan said about consultation: just because the two-piece are popular does not mean they are the be-all and end-all. I think the captains and the volunteers should have a bit of input and say that some of us who are a little bit old fashioned would like some of the old style ones. There is a sizing kit for the ladies—the ladies are, unfortunately, a different sort of shape and whatever to the rest of us—and I think that needs to be looked at.

**DR FOSKEY:** How unfortunate.

**THE CHAIR:** Or fortunately; it depends which way you look at it.

**Mr Barling:** It means that you cannot standardise. My daughter has joined. She is petite and two-piece overalls just hang on her. I think it is something that needs to be looked at. There are enough ladies in the system now. They are sort of looking at it but it is “sort of” looking at it. If there is a fire tomorrow or tonight, we will go. When we need something, with these guys, it is, “Oh, we are getting around to that.” If the volunteers acted the same way as the bureaucrats do, I will tell you what: Canberra

would have burnt down a lot of times. They have got to start reacting and looking after us. They are there to support us. We are the ones that do the dirty job, and they are not looking after us and they are not supporting us.

**Mr Virtue:** There are more and more females joining the service and more and more females who are getting annoyed with the system. There was this push to get all these female overalls and that sort of thing made up, and that died in the water.

**MR PRATT:** I return to the subject of the leadership and the morale, and I am sorry I have to come back to this. You are about the fourth witness to appear at this series of hearings, which would indicate that there is a very serious leadership problem from the very, very top government departmental level down, and that is having an effect on a lot of good officers at the RFS headquarters level, other service headquarters levels and the volunteer units. Somebody told me—can you confirm or deny it—that the CPSU have had to come in to get “deeply involved in sorting out what appear to be some bullying activities”?

**Mr Barling:** It is part of my submission.

**MR PRATT:** That is where I have heard about it actually. Can you expand on that, please?

**Mr Barling:** I do not really want to name people. I am not sure if it is appropriate because I am not sure exactly what the state of affairs is, but —

**MR PRATT:** I will not ask you to. I just want to know a little bit about the scope of the matter.

**THE CHAIR:** Perhaps if you could just comment as far as you can.

**Mr Barling:** I was approached by a member of the RFS, at a reasonably high level, and asked if I, as the president of the VBA, the volunteer brigades association, could write a reference. I understand that he had got an adverse report—or whatever the public service term is—about his performance. I know it affected him fairly hard, because I actually went and had a couple of beers with him and I have never seen a bloke so stressed and tense—and this was sort of in the middle of a fire season. I did write the reference. From talking to him, there seemed to be some issues, so I rang Kerry from CPSU and said, “Look, can we have a coffee and find out what’s going on?” They did give me some indication that there were some dramas in terms of certified agreements and that. In terms of the specifics, you would have to talk to, obviously, the member of staff or the CPSU to get the details.

I do know that it affected that particular individual very badly. I suppose I was disappointed, as my understanding of the process is—again, please correct me if I am wrong, and I said this to Renee Leon—that, if the commissioner had an issue with this particular individual, he should have the guts to do it face to face. Instead, he delegated it to someone else to do the dirty work. Again, I am old fashioned but I reckon that, if you have got a problem with a person, you say it to their face; you do not delegate it. I think it also put a lot of stress on that poor person who had to do the dirty work. That is an interesting style of leadership. You treat your staff like garbage,

you piss your volunteers off and then you run an emergency service organisation. I do not believe there is any leadership at the top there. It is not a word I would have used to describe it. I would say it is something completely opposite to that.

**MR PRATT:** Attrition perhaps?

**Mr Barling:** I did actually say at the beginning—and I think Dave has referred to that—that it is just trying to get rid of the RFS.

**THE CHAIR:** I do not want to prolong it; this is the last question and no-one is going to do supplementaries, because we have passed the time. But, because you have got it in your submission, was this person part of the RFS management? Did he have a direct contact with the commissioner?

**Mr Barling:** RFS staff.

**THE CHAIR:** What was he and what was the reference for? Was he joining some relevant area of government or what?

**Mr Barling:** Okay, my apologies for not being clear.

**THE CHAIR:** We will just do it quickly.

**Mr Barling:** Basically, there were a number of accusations in the adverse report saying that the relationship with the volunteers, and particularly my organisation, was not up to standard and that style of thing. I put in my submission that not only is the communication flow better than it has ever been; I actually know what is going on regularly. He has a lot of respect for volunteers. He actually listens to what we say. Obviously there are constraints on what he can and cannot do, but he is there trying to make it work for the ACT community and the RFS. As both the President of the VBA and as an individual volunteer firefighter, I have full confidence in him.

**MR PRATT:** Was this person being made the scapegoat for the breakdown in communication from the ESA headquarters down to the volunteer units?

**Mr Barling:** That was my perception.

**THE CHAIR:** Just what position did this person hold?

**Mr Barling:** Quite high.

**THE CHAIR:** What was the reference for? Was he going to a job or—

**Mr Barling:** No, it was to defend himself.

**THE CHAIR:** I see. Okay, thank you. I understand that now. Mr Barling and gentlemen, thank you very much for your attendance here today. Thank you for your comments on this very important inquiry and they will be very, very helpful to the committee. I also thank you for the work you do on behalf of the ACT community as volunteers. It is an incredibly dangerous job and it is obviously a job a lot of people

do not really appreciate, but everyone here today certainly does. So I thank you for the work you do and, particularly, for the assistance you have given this inquiry.

**The committee adjourned at 4.04 pm.**