



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

(Reference: [Review of Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013: bushfire preparedness](#))

**Members:**

**MR B SMYTH (Chair)**  
**MS M PORTER (Deputy Chair)**  
**MS Y BERRY**  
**MS N LAWDER**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2014**

**Secretary to the committee:**  
**Dr A Cullen (Ph: 620 50142)**

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

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

## **WITNESSES**

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 3 pm.**

**RATTENBURY, MR SHANE**, Minister for Territory and Municipal Services, Minister for Corrective Services, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and Minister for Sport and Recreation

**BYLES, MR GARY**, Director-General, Territory and Municipal Services Directorate  
**IGLESIAS, MR DANIEL**, Director, Parks and Conservation, Territory and Municipal Services Directorate

**FARQUHAR, MR SCOTT**, Senior Fire Management Officer, Forestry and Fire Management, Territory and Municipal Services Directorate

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome, minister and officials. I now formally declare open the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts inquiry into Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013: bushfire preparedness.

In accordance with the committee's resolution of appointment, that all reports of the Auditor-General stand referred to the public accounts committee after their presentation, the committee has established procedures for its examination of referred Auditor-General's reports. The committee considered the Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013 in accordance with these procedures and resolved to inquire further into the audit report. The terms of reference for this inquiry are the information contained within the report itself.

While the terms of reference are the information contained within the report, the committee's inquiry is specifically focusing on key areas: elements underpinning strategic readiness for bushfire prevention and preparedness, the farm firewise program, and implementation of audit recommendations.

Can I start by reminding witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege, and draw your attention to the pink privilege card that is on the table. Could you all confirm that you have read the privilege statement and understand the privilege implications of it?

**Mr Rattenbury:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Can I also remind witnesses that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and are being webstreamed and broadcast live. Minister, before we proceed to questions from the committee, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr Rattenbury:** Just briefly, thank you, Mr Chair. Obviously, with respect to the Auditor-General's report, the government has made a full response, and I am happy for TAMS to give updates on progress in implementing some of those recommendations, if there are areas that the committee has a particular interest in.

In a broader sense, obviously TAMS is now well underway in preparing for the coming bushfire season. The bushfire operational plan for this coming year, for 2014-15, was submitted to the ESA commissioner on 25 August. The commissioner is currently considering that plan and we expect to have discussions in the coming

weeks to finalise that. But TAMS is already underway with preparing a range of those steps for this coming fire season, anyway, in terms of issues like fuel management, training, preparation of vehicles and the like. So in that sense a lot of work is already underway. I am happy to go into the details by way of the officials on any of those areas. I will leave it at that, and I am happy to go straight to questions.

**THE CHAIR:** Let us start with the bushfire operational plan. It has gone to the commissioner. Has it gone to the Bushfire Council?

**Mr Rattenbury:** Yes, it will go to the Bushfire Council as part of that process. The Bushfire Council is actually being briefed on it this Thursday evening.

**THE CHAIR:** Given that the fire season starts in about 20 days, is that not late? I have gone through some of the old minutes and normally it seems to go to the Bushfire Council in July. Why hasn't it gone to the council this year until September?

**Mr Iglesias:** The Bushfire Council have received one briefing already, Chair, in relation to the bushfire operations plan. They received that briefing in the August period. We met again with the Bushfire Council last week and they expressed a view that they would like to get a briefing in more detail, and we are going to do that on Thursday.

**THE CHAIR:** It is only advisory, isn't it? They can't modify the plan?

**Mr Iglesias:** I understand that the Bushfire Council advises the minister.

**THE CHAIR:** If the Bushfire Council sought any changes, how would that occur, and is there enough time given that the season starts in three weeks?

**Mr Iglesias:** We would envisage that comments would be made from the Bushfire Council to the commissioner and the commissioner would liaise with us to effect changes if necessary. We believe that the bushfire operations plan effectively operates as an integral document and it reflects previous years' work in relation to what was done and what needs to be done in the future. It has benefited already from comment made by various stakeholders, including the Bushfire Council. I would anticipate that any comments made by the Bushfire Council would be able to be accommodated.

**THE CHAIR:** On pages 10 and 11 it talks about things like the MOU and the bushfire operational plan. Why is it that until recently the MOU was never signed with ESA?

**Mr Iglesias:** Are you talking about the MOU from this year or previous editions of the MOU?

**THE CHAIR:** Any year. I know that the one for this year, the minister told us last week, has now been signed. But there have been seven iterations of the MOU and none of them were signed. Why is that, minister?

**Mr Rattenbury:** I would need to seek some advice on that. I am not aware of that history. I believe it is something that the Auditor-General has specifically picked up,

though. Of course, the value of having the Auditor-General do these things is that these things are now being addressed in a more timely manner.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Byles, do you have anything to add?

**Mr Byles:** No, I cannot answer that specific question, Mr Smyth, but I would suggest that it did not impede our combined operations. We can certainly take that on notice, as the minister suggested, and provide that feedback.

**THE CHAIR:** Has TAMS in the last seven years always complied with the content of the MOU?

**Mr Iglesias:** Yes, we have. That MOU has been in place now for some years. Both parties have been consistent in its application. I believe that this year it has been moved to a point where both parties are happy to sign it. But in relation to the MOU, we have certainly held faith with it.

**MS PORTER:** I want to talk about recommendation 14—across-government project management. Minister, how do you think that across-directorate work is happening, particularly in preparing for the next season, which is practically upon us? Could you talk about the way that across-directorate work is happening? Do you see any opportunities for any further work in that area?

**Mr Rattenbury:** I think that, at the highest level, that coordination comes through the development of the strategic bushfire management plan. As you would be aware, version 3 is currently out for consultation. So that is an important part of ensuring, in the preparation of that document, that the three agencies—EPD, TAMS and the ESA—are strongly coordinated.

Certainly, the Auditor-General's report highlighted a number of places where at least the formality of the coordination could be improved. My sense of the Auditor-General's report was that there were places where the work was happening but perhaps it was not being formalised. This goes to Mr Smyth's earlier question around the signing of the MOU. I think a lot of stuff has been done probably because of people knowing each other and it being a small town, and by people simply working together well. But I think the Auditor-General has highlighted a number of areas where the agencies have now responded to those recommendations and some of that formality has been increased as well.

**MS PORTER:** Would you not see a danger, minister, having regard to that previous approach that you just discussed, about everyone knowing one another, in having a situation where we did have a similar emergency to what we have had before, when a key person or persons were out of town at that time, and therefore the people who are known to each other are actually not here?

**Mr Rattenbury:** I think that is an issue. Members here have perhaps been around for longer than I have and were certainly here in 2003. There are certainly many members of the Rural Fire Service and TAMS who recall it very vividly. I think that we are simply a world away from where we were in 2003, in terms of our structures, our response capability and our understanding of what is possible in an emergency

situation. Despite my earlier comments, I think the structures are much stronger than they were in 2003. I think the Auditor-General's report has simply provided us with the next iteration of improvement.

**MS PORTER:** With regard to the across-government arrangements, there are also the total across-government arrangements. So we are talking about the whole of government. Do you want to make any comments about how you see that happening, and also about the ECC when there was a stand-up last year and how you thought that that worked?

**Mr Rattenbury:** Certainly, from the position that I hold, the across-government structures are very clear. With respect to the process for the ECC being activated, the lines of communication through that are very clear. Within TAMS, the agency is very clear on its responsibilities and who it must answer to. I guess there is both the proactive work, and all of that is through the bushfire operations plan, reporting to the ESA commissioner and also in the event of a stand-up and the like. My sense is that there is real clarity about role and responsibilities. I do not have any sense that there is uncertainty in those circumstances.

**MS LAWDER:** In the Auditor-General's report, recommendations 11, 12 and 13 related to a new database system. Can you give us an update on where that is up to? Will it be ready for this year?

**Mr Iglesias:** We have completed the development of a new TM1-based database system, which will effectively give us the capacity to align our operational plan, which is the bushfire operations plan, and literally every single line item, which are in the many hundreds of activities, with Oracle, which is our financial management system. So we now have a very powerful tool to be able to not only record and report against our operational tasks but to be able to cost that through the Oracle system. For the first time we have a very powerful tool to be able to report and to be able to keep on top of that whole process.

Importantly, our colleagues in the Emergency Services Agency also have access to the same TM1 database. So they can interrogate it. At any point in time the commissioner might choose to investigate how we are travelling on one particular item. He would log on to the TM1 database, bring up the item he is interested in and get the latest information relating to the particular issue.

**MS LAWDER:** Will that information be reflected, for example, in the annual report of the directorate this year? What other uses will you have for that?

**Mr Rattenbury:** TAMS intends to publish the reports on its website on a quarterly basis. This is the first time we have done it. We have a sense that quarterly would be the most useful reporting period, in the sense that it will broadly reflect the seasons. So that is the intention at this time.

**MS BERRY:** Given that Canberra is growing now, and this report was done over a year ago, has extra work been done to make sure that new areas in Canberra are prepared, or have you just been reacting to the Auditor-General's recommendations?

**Mr Rattenbury:** In terms of new areas, to my mind the Auditor-General's recommendations largely went to procedural matters. In terms of the growth of suburbs, things like Molonglo, the bushfire operational plan is done each year, and it is done to reflect the circumstances in that year. So that is where the movement comes, I suppose, and then the bigger picture provided by the five-year strategic bushfire management plan will also take those things into account.

I know that those considerations have been done, including the discussions I have been involved in, around, for example, issues of development of the area out near west Macgregor—Riverview. There was consideration in the earliest planning stages of, "If that goes right up to the border of New South Wales, how do we deal with the fact that a different jurisdiction has responsibility for the approaching fire front?" Certainly those considerations are being worked on all of the time.

**MS BERRY:** That was my next question: in those new areas, particularly the ones backing onto New South Wales, when you talk about taking on those considerations, are we changing the way we work with New South Wales when our blocks of land are going to be right next-door?

**Mr Iglesias:** Every season we get together with our colleagues in New South Wales and try and understand where the relative risk might be, and try and understand how we might be able to respond in a coordinated way. As the planning proceeds for an area like Riverview, it would not be surprising to formalise an arrangement with New South Wales, so that we would be clear about our resources and they would be clear about theirs and how we would interact. That is down the track, as the planning matures in relation to that particular subdivision. Further south, for example at Namadgi, we often have joint workshops and we share information about how we are managing. Again, we share the risk and we agree on how a response might progress should there be an emergency.

**THE CHAIR:** Going back to the MOU, when we spoke to the auditor on 26 August she said:

We would be looking for an MOU or some equivalent that actually gets signed off so that all the entities involved know exactly what they have agreed to in their roles and they go and deliver accordingly. I think it is seven years of discussion every year about whether to sign or not to sign. That suggested to audit that there was disagreement.

You said you would take it on notice; can you particularly outline, if there was disagreement, what the area of disagreement was? It does seem that there have been seven years when an MOU has been able to be signed by the two bodies who have responsibility for fire control. The auditor goes on to say it does present a risk and that "it would be prudent to have that governance arrangement firmly in place".

**Mr Rattenbury:** Yes, we will provide that.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. One of the other issues that the auditor raised, which starts on page 11 and goes over the page, is funding for bushfire operational plans. It talks about budget bids and moneys received. It goes on to say:



Despite the large amount of funding being invested in implementing the Territory and Municipal Services Directorate's Bushfire Operational Plan, and the rationale in the 2010 budget submission to the ... Government ... the Directorate could not:

relate budgetary provision to expenditure to date ... and

account for the cumulative effect of outcomes achieved and spending in relation to the ten-year goals ...

How is it that we are not in a position to be able, through the directorate, to account for the expenditure to date?

**Mr Rattenbury:** I will speak about the present and then we will go back to the past. Certainly, with the new database which Mr Iglesias talked about, there is now the capability to relate directly the expenditure to the activities. I certainly expect, going forward, to not see a similar observation from the Auditor-General in the sense that there is now very clear tracking. I will ask Mr Byles to give a historical perspective.

**Mr Byles:** I might let Mr Iglesias speak to this issue and I will follow up with subsequent commentary.

**Mr Iglesias:** I think the critical term, if I may speculate on what the Auditor-General was intending, appears towards the end of the second dot point, which states:

... to confirm that a 'reasonable level of preparedness' has been achieved.

So the point was made that, whilst we can report on our yearly expenditure against the BOP, we were lacking the capacity to demonstrate that that expenditure had in fact translated to an improved level of preparedness. In linking an operational document like the BOP with the financial accounting system, that gives us the capacity to clearly demonstrate that. So as each year went by, we could demonstrate that there was a level of protection afforded, because we completed 95 or 100 per cent of the BOP. But over a 10-year period, what does that look like? I think that is the point that the Auditor-General was making.

**THE CHAIR:** I am not sure that it is. I will read the first dot point again:

... in the 2010 budget submission to the ACT Government for enhancing activity levels in accordance with the Regional Fire Management Plans, the Directorate could not:

relate budgetary provision to expenditure to date, including activity that has been cancelled or deferred, and activities not foreseen in the ten-year plan ...

So you could not account for the expenditure, and then the second dot point reads:

account for the cumulative effect of outcomes achieved and spending in relation to the ten-year goals set out in the budget submission to confirm that a 'reasonable level of preparedness' has been achieved.

She says, in the second dot point on page 12:

... a 'resources available' figure, which provides an indication of expenditure associated with specific Bushfire Operations Plan activities. These figures are rough estimates made at the commencement of the year and do not distinguish between funds (and activities) carried over from previous years. Furthermore, no further consideration is given to the cost estimates set out in the Bushfire Operations Plan, either item by item or by activity type, once the Bushfire Operations Plan has been agreed and is being implemented.

So you got money, you cannot account for what was spent and you cannot tell us, according to this, whether you had actually confirmed that a reasonable level of preparedness had been achieved. It does not sound very good. I note your answers to recommendation 12 and 13 and the government's response to recommendations 12 and 13, but can you go back, say, to the 2010-11 year and every year subsequently and give the committee a list of how much money was spent and what it was spent on?

**Mr Byles:** Yes, we can, Mr Smyth. Both of those dot points raised by the Auditor-General are of concern, naturally. I have a level of confidence about the second dot point, about our level of preparedness. That is what we have probably explained during this sitting. I am particularly concerned about the first dot point, about being able to account for the money expended. That is something we will do based on your request.

**THE CHAIR:** So we can have every year from 2010-11 through to current, as to how much was appropriated, what it was spent on and what was achieved?

**Mr Byles:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** That is very kind. In the same area, it goes on in the second dot point on page 13 to say:

Infrastructure completion rates vary between 25 and 75 per cent of planned activities.

Is there a reason for that?

**Mr Iglesias:** Typically, in any given year, infrastructure works are heavily dependent on the cooperation of the weather. For example, if we are funded to deliver a major upgrade to a major connecting road or a major arterial road, given the nature of these roads—there are myriad tracks, effectively—if it is a particularly wet season or a particularly cold season, we cannot get in to the national park to do it in a way that would be both safe for our people and environmentally sensitive. So whilst we set the target at the commencement of the year, there is a degree of being at the mercy of the weather. What we have tended to do is to acknowledge that in subsequent BOPs and bring jobs forward to the next year, and a program for completion.

**THE CHAIR:** That is the point that the auditor makes: it is very hard to tell what has been completed and what is brought forward. But we will see the reconciliation. With the preparation plan for the coming season, have all the objectives been reached? What percentage have been carried out?

**Mr Iglesias:** As far as preparation goes, we have commenced training of our staff. We have commenced fitness training. That will continue over the next four to six weeks. We have commenced pre-season training. That will also continue over the next six weeks. Of course, the fitness training does not mean that we do not have fire-fit people as of right now, because the previous year's fitness lasts for 12 months until the next year's takes off. So preparation has commenced.

**THE CHAIR:** Specifically, on your target for fuel reduction for the start of the 2014-15 season, have we completed all the fuel reduction that was programmed?

**Mr Iglesias:** Fuel reduction from the previous year?

**THE CHAIR:** Fuel reduction in the lead-up to 1 October this year. Has everything you planned to do for the start of the coming season been done?

**Mr Farquhar:** We have commenced fuel reduction activities where possible. We have undertaken a number of burns. At this stage we have not commenced any of our slashing activities. We try to time that to growth and curing rates. We have contracts in place ready to go. We would be looking at a mid-October start for those. The contract is locked in and it is ready to go. Discussions have taken place with graziers, including the Molonglo cattle group, who do a lot of our grazing for us. We have processes and plans in place to start the grazing in the next couple of weeks. We will not deal with much of the grass hazard until it gets to a point where it is starting to cure. So we are probably looking at about 60 to 70 per cent, to ensure that we meet the standards under the SBMP.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of the burns, how many were planned and how many were carried out, and what area was to be cleared and what area has been cleared?

**Mr Farquhar:** Over the current financial year we have 50 burns. We have completed four of those. They have been done in the last couple of weeks. We are now at a point where we probably sit in a bit of a window where everything is becoming quite green and we will not be able to burn. We would be looking ideally at starting up again in October, with a view to our major Namadgi burns being undertaken in late summer and autumn, with a possibility that we may look at some of those in springtime if the conditions are suitable.

**THE CHAIR:** What area do the planned burns represent and what has been achieved?

**Mr Farquhar:** In total area?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Farquhar:** About 30 hectares.

**THE CHAIR:** We have done 30?

**Mr Farquhar:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** What is the target against the 50?

**Mr Farquhar:** Just shy of 8,200 hectares.

**THE CHAIR:** Is it normal that we have achieved so little?

**Mr Farquhar:** Yes, because we cannot burn in the Namadgi areas, which is where those large-scale burns are. Without knowing the figures, two or three burns would probably make up the vast majority of that. It is the smaller asset protection burns that we look at doing pre and during the season, and then those larger strategic burns in the Namadgi areas.

**THE CHAIR:** So at this time of the cycle, in the lead-up to the season, this is reasonable, or are we less prepared?

**Mr Farquhar:** In fact it is a good result. We often cannot burn prior to the start of the season. We have got a number in.

**MS PORTER:** Recommendation 15 talks about the farm firewise program and land management agreements. With respect to the relationship between TAMS rangers and the owners of the land, how does that relationship work in making sure that the farm firewise program is being rolled out effectively, as the season starts, particularly?

**Mr Iglesias:** Farm firewise is a responsibility of the ESA. That effectively delivers, if you like, a bushfire operations plan for the rural lessee. The land management agreement is a broader document that picks up a number of issues that TAMS wishes to engage in with the rural lessee, including weed control, pest control and any number of other land management issues. Included in that land management agreement is a reference to farm firewise. So there is overlap and dovetailing of the requirement to deliver, so that each lessee has a farm firewise and a land management agreement.

What we have done since the A-G's recommendations is to bring that together even more, simplify it and make it easier for the rural lessee to see one lot of bureaucrats, so that they can deal with their land management agreement and their farm firewise. Ideally, I would like to see one sitting where our TAMS employees, together with their colleagues from ESA, visit a rural lessee and develop their land management agreement and their farm firewise. At the moment there is a clear need to pursue farm firewise, and we are catching up with our land management agreements. What we have done in the last two or three months is to understand the backlog of land management agreements and to get a schedule put together and to understand a process by which we will start to knock some of those off.

**MS PORTER:** How much of a backlog is there?

**Mr Iglesias:** I could not tell you just off the top of my head. We give priority to developing land management agreements where lessees enter into new lease agreements with the territory. We cannot issue a new lease over a rural block unless there is a land management agreement. So we preference that cohort of land

management agreements and we are working through those. Then we go back to the ones that already have their lease but may have a land management agreement that might be a year or two years old, and we work through those as well.

The important point is that we are looking to simplify a land management agreement from a document that used to be quite large to one that is a lot simpler and captures the key information that we need reassurance about in relation to land management, as well as fire, without making it an onerous thing that maybe a rural lessee will not get to, if it is too big or too clumsy.

**MS PORTER:** When Mr Corbell appeared before us he said he thought there was a lot of cooperation and that a lot of firewise programs were working really effectively. I asked him whether any landowners were resistant to coming on board and he said no; that there were some who were just so busy that this was not necessarily a high priority. As the bushfire season approaches, I guess it is becoming more and more of a priority. You talked before, minister, about the administrative level and then the practical, on-the-ground work. Practically, how does that work? Do rangers get into one-to-one discussions with landowners about farm firewise programs?

**Mr Farquhar:** There have been a number of cases where staff from the fire management unit have gone out to some of the properties. Often the landowner may request to speak to someone from TAMS; alternatively they may ask for someone from RFS. I have been out to a number of properties as well. It is about talking to people and providing them with some options for protecting themselves and also providing some protection to their neighbours. It is quite a collegiate approach with staff from the RFS and TAMS.

**MS LAWDER:** Recommendation 21 is about personnel information and capabilities. It is on page 170 of the audit report. The government's response is "agreed in part". Are you able to tell me which parts the government disagrees with and why?

**Mr Farquhar:** The VETtrak training system is used by the ESA as a training record for a suppression role. As a land management agency, our training requirements are significantly more than fire suppression. Our fire records have always been maintained with the RFS. We run a parallel system within TAMS, which is a larger database, if you like, that illustrates the skill set that we have within our agency. VETtrak is purely for suppression fire management type training records, and then we have this other database. It was not deemed appropriate that the training skills of some of TAMS's employees were maintained externally, because there was no relevance to the RFS or to the ESA, with some of our training. It is quite separate to what they require.

**MS LAWDER:** So that system would not have user-based access? You could have the information in there, but depending on the user they cannot see it—a user-controlled kind of system?

**Mr Farquhar:** I am sorry; I am not following that.

**MS LAWDER:** If you log on and you are the manager of this area, you can see the whole lot of the information, but if I am the deputy manager I might see a lot less

information than you. So you are using the log-on to see the information. You might keep more information in the system but different people do not always see it.

**Mr Iglesias:** I think the issue is more about the limitations of VETtrak, in that it is designed and used by the ESA purely as fire training, whereas our requirements are HR based, for example, which VETtrak cannot provide for us. So we cannot keep all of our records that relate to certain types of training that are not fire related on VETtrak.

**MS LAWDER:** In the TAMS directorate, how is your progress going towards keeping the information? You said in your response that it is on the way; what are you up to now?

**Mr Farquhar:** With the training database that is maintained within TAMS, we were able to import all the data from the RFS. The RFS are the custodians of our fire training data, if you like, and it is maintained within VETtrak. We then export that information to keep the internal database up to date as well. They are running in tandem, with the TAMS one having a whole lot of stuff that is not relevant to fire, for example, plus the up-to-date information that is coming out of VETtrak.

**MS BERRY:** How do you decide which areas are going to be grazed and which areas are going to be burned or slashed?

**Mr Farquhar:** There is a range of reasons. It may come down to ecological reasons. We seek advice from conservation planning and research, and the fire ecologists there. It may come down to simple logistics of tractors not being able to go on the land because of a lot of rocks, accessibility or whatever it may be. It may be well suited to grazing. It is a fairly broad question; it is sort of horses for courses. It is determined by ecological factors and operational considerations.

**Mr Iglesias:** It would also be true to say that that certainly is the case, but the very first filter that we put over it is the risk filter. We try to understand where there are grazable lands within particularly high risk areas. Behind Palmerston is a good example, along the Nudurr Drive alignment. That is a higher risk area, where we are able to mow and then supplant that with strategic grazing. It is true to say that it is strategic. We go in there for a specific period of time to achieve a specific goal as far as the SBMP goes. As Scott said, that would be dependent on the nature of the land—if it is grassy land, if it is hilly, if it is particularly steep, if it is used a lot for recreation. So we bring a lot of factors to bear and then we say, “Okay, that’s where we graze.” The availability of stock is another factor.

**MS BERRY:** Do you ever mix it up?

**Mr Farquhar:** Yes. Dunlop grasslands are a good example. This year it is planned for burning and over the last couple of years it has been primarily grazing. Again there was advice from the ecologist to mix it up and change the seasonality a little bit. We try not to repeat the same activities year after year, if possible.

**MS BERRY:** You might not know the answer, but with the Dunlop grasslands, some native grasses come back with burns or they will be contaminated when they are

slashed or grazed. Are those things taken into account? With the Dunlop grasslands, what is happening there and how is that being communicated to people in that area—the reasons why a burn might be happening over a mow or a graze?

**Mr Farquhar:** We do a letterbox drop to our neighbours prior to doing a burning program. That invites some comment. We try to provide some information as to why we are doing it. In the case of Dunlop, being a temperate natural grassland we would really be looking at a high intensity, very short period of grazing. That would be the ideal situation. Sometimes we may not be able to achieve that. There is a significant amount of research being undertaken at a national level and also at local levels in terms of management of grasslands for fire. We try and keep ourselves at the forefront of that. The result is that we do get a fair amount of variation in field management regimes.

**THE CHAIR:** Can we go back to the slashing. What is the budget for the slashing this year? The auditor says on page 12, at the last dot point, that there is a need to clarify funding for slashing.

**Mr Farquhar:** In a number of the areas, the line between amenity slashing and fire slashing is probably fairly hazy. That has been acknowledged now and vast areas have actually been removed from the BOP. What is actually shown in terms of hectares for slashing has been reduced, but that is more a reflection that a lot of this mowing is actually amenity mowing as opposed to bushfire. It serves a dual purpose but its primary purpose in a lot of cases is the amenity mowing.

**THE CHAIR:** That paragraph continues:

For example, in 2012-13, 52 per cent of the 8,018 hectares proposed for slashing was described as urban amenity cuts.

Have they now been taken out of that, and what is the area proposed for slashing this year?

**Mr Iglesias:** The slashing quantum for this year is 4,488 hectares. That is 178 separate locations. Following on from what my colleague just explained, I would suggest that that includes the amenity deducted. So what we have now is 4,488 hectares of fire—

**THE CHAIR:** You are concluding; so is it or isn't it?

**Mr Iglesias:** I would suggest it is, but we will double-check and confirm, and get back to you with that clarification.

**THE CHAIR:** You cannot tell me how much slashing has been done this year?

**Mr Iglesias:** 4,488 hectares.

**Mr Byles:** In previous years it is over 8,000 hectares.

**Mr Iglesias:** So that would suggest that the amenity element has been removed.

**THE CHAIR:** I am concerned that you are using the word “suggest”. Has the amenity element been removed or not?

**Mr Byles:** Mr Iglesias has suggested that he will take it on notice.

**THE CHAIR:** I am saying I think you should know what slashing you are doing. I am quite amazed that we do not know how much slashing we are doing that is strictly for the reduction of fire threat.

**Mr Byles:** With due respect, Mr Iglesias has given a figure of 4,488. He is going to clarify whether it includes a particular component.

**THE CHAIR:** This is the problem that is in the auditor’s report. She goes on at the end of that paragraph, at the top of page 13, to say:

It is not made clear in the 2010 budget submission whether the 8 000 hectares per year target includes or excludes these amenity cuts. The Audit Office cannot therefore conclude planned and implemented slashing levels meet Regional Fire Management Plans targets.

That was in the 2010 submission. Here we are in 2014 and you still cannot tell me whether the 4,488 hectares is all bushfire related or whether some of it is amenity. Again I make the point: I am quite amazed at that.

**Mr Byles:** Again we have suggested we will take that on notice. But I do not think it is a matter of meeting targets. The targets will be met. As we have articulated, it is the componentry of those targets.

**THE CHAIR:** So what is the target?

**Mr Rattenbury:** The target is 4,488 under the bushfire—

**THE CHAIR:** How much of that is bushfire related and how much of that is amenity?

**Mr Rattenbury:** That is what the bushfire operational plan dictates needs to be done.

**THE CHAIR:** But if you read that paragraph, that is the whole point of what the auditor is saying—that it is unclear. And here we are a year after this report is tabled and it is still unclear. She goes on in the next point—

**Mr Rattenbury:** For my purposes the bushfire operational plan tells me, through the directorate, what needs to be done to prepare us for the summer, and that plan tells us that that is how many hectares need to be done.

**THE CHAIR:** Your budget bid in 2012-13 was for 8,018 hectares, but we now find out that probably half of that was just urban amenity cuts. I hear what you are saying; you are going to take it on notice. But I am quite surprised that you are appearing before this committee when we have had a report of this nature, containing that



particular paragraph, and you still cannot tell us what the 4,488 hectares is. It is quite amazing. In the next paragraph the auditor goes on to say:

The Directorate's Bushfire Operations Plans and the accompanying end-of-year narrative reports do not provide an adequate mechanism for reporting progress in the development of the access network.

The final line in that paragraph reads:

Therefore, no reliable conclusion can be drawn about achieving the Regional Fire Management Plan access network goals in relation to the funds and timescales agreed.

Can you now tell us: have the time scales agreed and the goals been reached?

**Mr Iglesias:** I think the issue there is the reporting. So the reporting is not clear. It is not saying that the work was not done; it is just saying that the reporting is not clear.

**THE CHAIR:** So has the work been done?

**Mr Iglesias:** Yes, the work has been done.

**THE CHAIR:** If the work has been done—

**Mr Iglesias:** We report every year on what the bushfire operations plan achieves, and we have done so ever since we have had a bushfire operations plan. We would be able to provide you, if the committee so wishes, with a summary of what was achieved in each year.

**THE CHAIR:** Take that on notice; that is very kind. How many years will you go back—to 2010?

**Mr Iglesias:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** That is kind. The next dot point talks about infrastructure completion rates varying between 25 and 75 per cent of planned activities—from 2,000 bucks for a trough to \$250,000 for a dam. The final line says:

Reporting on the percentage of activities completed at year end, with no indication of the size or importance of the activity, can be misleading.

Have you changed the way you will report on infrastructure development so that we can actually understand better what has been completed?

**Mr Rattenbury:** The answer to that, Mr Smyth, is that that new database, which has line-by-line reporting, will make those distinctions. As I indicated earlier, those reports will be made publicly available through the TAMS website. I guess the answer to your question is yes, you will be able to distinguish those things.

**THE CHAIR:** Going back to the MOU, under the MOU what does TAMS broadly provide to the firefighting effort, in terms of staff on the ground, appliances and

controllers?

**Mr Farquhar:** We provide a minimum of 140 firefighters. It is generally significantly more than that—around 150 to 160. For those 140, it is built in to the duty statements of those people. We provide a number of additional specialist personnel, which may deal with air operations, RAFT, incident management personnel, burning specialists et cetera. We also manage the seasonal plant operations, the contracts there, plus we have access to additional plant. We obviously provide resources on a day-to-day basis based on the readiness levels or the fire danger. So we are the only part of the Rural Fire Service where there is a guaranteed availability from day to day.

**THE CHAIR:** How many appliances can you put in the field? How many heavy tankers, light tankers? Do you have Cat tankers?

**Mr Farquhar:** TAMS in particular or as part of the RFS?

**THE CHAIR:** TAMS and parks brigade.

**Mr Farquhar:** TAMS owns two heavy tankers, an additional three light units plus slip-ons. We can throw another three slip-ons together in the case of a protracted event. We have 10 command vehicles which are fully equipped for response, and then we have the resources supplied by the RFS. Without knowing the exact numbers—

**THE CHAIR:** No, specifically the bit you are responsible for. What about bulk water carriers?

**Mr Farquhar:** We do not have any bulk water carriers. We have access to a number through contracts.

**THE CHAIR:** You talk about specialist staff. With respect to incident controllers and operational controllers, how many of each category do you provide?

**Mr Farquhar:** Currently we have about five people who sit on the pre-formed teams. They are a combination of ops level 2, 3 and planning level 2s.

**THE CHAIR:** How many level 2 incident controllers do you have?

**Mr Farquhar:** Level 2 incident controller—

**THE CHAIR:** How many do you have to provide under the MOU and how many do you actually have?

**Mr Farquhar:** I am not aware that the MOU specifically says that we will provide X number.

**THE CHAIR:** How many level 2 incident controllers do you have?

**Mr Farquhar:** It is quite difficult because the interpretation of the level 2 can vary. It is often a group leader; sometimes it is referred to as a divisional commander. Sometimes it is referred to as an ops level 3. It would be a question better answered

by the ESA. They maintain the database for IMT personnel.

**THE CHAIR:** I was under the impression that under the MOU you had to have a certain number of officers at each level.

**Mr Farquhar:** Are we talking about brigade officers, who are our level 1 incident controllers, first response?

**THE CHAIR:** In all categories, whether it is through the brigade—or how many level 3 incident controllers do you have?

**Mr Farquhar:** We have one.

**THE CHAIR:** And that person is available for duty 24/7?

**Mr Iglesias:** The particular individual is not available to us in TAMS at the moment. We have to remember, Mr Smyth, the pool of level 3 incident controllers is one that is considered as a whole resource. So the parks service is but one of the brigades, and the Rural Fire Service maintains a number of level 3 incident controllers. I believe there may be four or five. And there is built in to that number a level of redundancy, understanding that at any given time one or more of those people may be unavailable for duty. But within the TAMS system there is one qualified level 3 controller that contributes to that pool of ACT government qualified people.

**THE CHAIR:** But that person is not available at the moment?

**Mr Iglesias:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** Has that job been backfilled so that you have a level 3 controller in parks?

**Mr Iglesias:** The job has been backfilled, but not with a level 3 incident controller, because we only have one qualified in TAMS. So what we have at the moment, if we speak about the ACT government capacity, is that one of those qualified people is not within the system. But as I explained, there is a degree of redundancy within the pool for exactly this sort of purpose. So at various points in time any number of those people may be in the workplace or be away from the workplace.

**THE CHAIR:** How many level 2 controllers do you maintain in TAMS?

**Mr Farquhar:** I started to respond to that earlier. The definition of a level 2 controller can be sometimes hard to define because it can vary from state to state. I am a level 2 controller; I am a level 3 operations officer. Without having the database in front of me, which is maintained by RFS, I could not give you those exact figures. Again it is a pool across government.

**THE CHAIR:** Could you take on notice within TAMS how many incident controllers you have, how many ops controllers at the various levels, and provide that to the committee?

**Mr Farquhar:** Yes.

**MS BERRY:** The remote area fire teams: are they in TAMS or are they ESA?

**Mr Farquhar:** They are spread across both agencies. We maintain two complete crews. With ESA I believe it has been two, and I think they have gone to a third one. It would be best answered by them. It is both agencies.

**MS BERRY:** Did you say two crews? So is that two people?

**Mr Farquhar:** No. A RAFT crew—

**THE CHAIR:** For the record, could you please tell us what the acronym “RAFT” stands for?

**Mr Farquhar:** “RAFT” is a remote area fire team. We maintain two of those teams, which generally have six people. They may be five people for operational reasons because you can sometimes fit five people in the helicopter that is available. We maintain those crews. We could probably raise an additional crew if we chose to. As I said the RFS also has a number of volunteer crews.

**MS BERRY:** That is a fairly specialised team. How do you recruit for that? Do people volunteer to be part of a team or do you actively go out and recruit for it? Given the change of season kind of work, what happens to them when there is not a fire season? I imagine their fitness levels would have to be much higher than that of others.

**Mr Farquhar:** A lot of the people within the RAFT crews are within the fire management unit. They are full-time employees. In terms of prerequisites, we have a policy of a minimum two years experience as an advanced firefighter, with operational experience. There is a level of peer review undertaken by senior members in terms of availability. It is also determined to an extent by skill sets. If we required an advanced chainsaw or something like that we may target individuals. It is a role that seems to be sought after by a lot of the guys. I did it years ago; I am not interested anymore. We have no shortage of people within the workforce who are interested in doing that work.

**MS BERRY:** It must be quite frightening at times; do they get counselling provided for the work they are doing? I would imagine it would be quite frightening to be dropped into the middle of nowhere.

**Mr Farquhar:** A risk assessment is undertaken before you put people into unburnt country. It is something that they volunteer for, they are well trained for and well equipped for. There is no requirement for any counselling or anything like that. As I said it is purely a voluntary role, and it is one that they actually aspire to.

**MS BERRY:** With the helicopters that you use, how do you source those and where do they come from?

**Mr Farquhar:** They are sourced generally through the RFS, which is part of a

national area firefighting scheme. It is administered at a national level and managed by the RFS at a local level. We also have contracts for helicopter work, so we have alternative providers if necessary. The training is provided by a registered training authority. At the moment the Westpac rescue chopper has been providing the winching training. They are one of the few that are recognised in this part of the country.

**THE CHAIR:** With the RAFT team there is the requirement for additional fitness. The auditor makes comments about fitness and testing across the board. With respect to members from TAMS who undertake firefighting duty, when will their fitness testing be done?

**Mr Farquhar:** The fitness testing has commenced. It has been going for a month now. As we alluded to before, that fitness is valid for a 12-month period. At any one time essentially everyone is still valid in terms of their fitness. As I said it has been going for the last month. We will go through to the start of October and then we will do a couple in November which will pick up the second intake of seasonal firefighters, plus staff who may be absent at the moment on leave or whatever.

**MS PORTER:** Could I clarify the Dunlop example. You were saying sometimes it is burns and sometimes it is grazing. How do you make the decision? Is it based on the recovery of the grasses at that particular time?

**Mr Farquhar:** In the case of Dunlop we will generally heed the advice coming from the ecologists in conservation planning and research. We are looking at an outcome, and they are really giving us the preferred way of going in terms of ecological aspects. With an area like that, with high ecological value, we would certainly be paying heed to their advice.

**THE CHAIR:** You mentioned the FMU. I think the minister told us in the Assembly it has four staff. Is it fully staffed at the moment, and are they four permanent officers in those jobs? There were some who were away or not available. Are there four full-time staff or is it a mixture of permanent officers and others?

**Mr Farquhar:** Full-time four?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr Farquhar:** Does that refer to the senior managers?

**THE CHAIR:** The response was four staff. Is that senior managers? Are they all on deck at this stage?

**Mr Farquhar:** Those positions are all occupied, yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Are they the permanent occupants or have they been backfilled?

**Mr Farquhar:** A number of them have been backfilled.

**THE CHAIR:** How many have been backfilled?

**Mr Farquhar:** Three.

**THE CHAIR:** Three out of four. So in terms of fire preparedness, minister, are we prepared for the coming season?

**Mr Rattenbury:** Certainly all the advice I have from TAMS is that, yes, I believe that the people occupying those positions have suitable qualifications and experience and that, as we have discussed today, the implementation of the bushfire operations plan is underway and that there is no indication at this point there is any problem with the delivery of all of those elements under the bushfire operations plan.

**THE CHAIR:** Beyond the FMU, we are three weeks away from the start of the fire season. Has TAMS done all it can to have us prepared for the fire season?

**Mr Rattenbury:** Certainly TAMS is doing everything it intends to under the bushfire operations plan.

**THE CHAIR:** So are we prepared for the coming fire season?

**Mr Rattenbury:** We believe so.

**THE CHAIR:** We might finish there, unless Mr Byles wants to confirm that we are prepared for the fire season.

**Mr Byles:** I think the minister has said it all, Mr Smyth.

**THE CHAIR:** Very astute, Mr Byles!

**Mr Rattenbury:** I would add, Mr Smyth, that the weather forecasts are still changing. It may be that it becomes more of a grass season than a forest season, and we will need to change tack. But at this point the plans are in place.

**THE CHAIR:** We might finish there. You have undertaken on a number of occasions to provide further information. We have not particularly set a deadline for the receipt of responses, but if perhaps two weeks from today we could have those answers, that would be much appreciated. Minister, on behalf of the committee I would like to thank you and your officials for attending today. When available, the proof transcript will be forwarded and you will have the opportunity to check the transcript and make any suggestions. I declare the public hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 4.01 pm.**