



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 N LAWDER
MS Y BERRY

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 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.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.31 am.

HARDING, MR IAN, President, ACT Volunteer Brigades Association

THE CHAIR: Good morning all and welcome to this formal hearing of the public inquiry into the Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013 on bushfire preparedness. In accordance with the committee's resolution of appointment, all reports to the Auditor-General stand referred to the public accounts committee after presentation. The committee has established procedures for its examination of referred Auditor-General's reports. The committee considered 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. While the terms of reference are the information contained within the report, the committee's inquiry specifically focused on three areas: elements underpinning strategic readiness for bushfire prevention and preparedness, the farm firewise program and the implementation of audit recommendations.

I welcome you, Mr Harding, on behalf of the ACT Volunteer Brigades Association and thank you for appearing today. The format for the hearing will commence with your oral submission, after which the committee will ask questions. I remind the witness of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the coloured privilege statement on the table before you. Could you confirm that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Harding: I understand the parliamentary privilege very well.

THE CHAIR: I also remind the witness that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes, as well as being webstreamed and broadcast.

Before we go to questions, Mr Harding, I invite you to make your oral submission.

Mr Harding: Thank you, Mr Chairman, and good morning to the committee. I thank the committee for inviting me. My predecessor sent me an email from the secretary and I landed in it, so to speak. I am relatively new to the position of VBA president, and I find myself a bit nervous on this side of the table. Having been asked to appear, I sought input from the members. The Volunteer Brigades Association is different to other volunteer brigade-type associations in other states as we only have eight members and they are the brigades themselves. Each brigade has two delegates so it is not much to manage and it is pretty good.

Firstly, I will refer to the headline to an article in the *Canberra Times*, "Preparedness is essential as bushfire risk grows". That is probably very fitting. The volunteers are ready; they have been practising and training hard during the winter months. I know a lot of our members have been doing weekly training, which is quite onerous in the winter months as it gets quite cold out in the bush.

Today gives me an opportunity to highlight some of the issues the VBA members have raised. One of them is specifically a readiness thing, and I will address all my comments to that. I am not going into firewise or the recommendations.

The “pack test” is seen by some of our members as being discriminatory. In 2006 it became compulsory to complete this test every year. It is claimed the test is indirectly discriminatory because it has an unfair effect on people of a particular sex or physical attributes.

THE CHAIR: Mr Harding, could you describe what that test is?

Mr Harding: The test involves fitness and there are three levels. There is a basic test where you have to walk something like 1,600 metres. Moderate is walking 3.2 kilometres in under 30 minutes carrying 11 kilos. The next level is arduous, which is what my brigade and most brigades aim for, and that is walking 4.8 kilometres in under 45 minutes carrying 20 kilos. So you can see why the test is seen by some as discriminatory to some of the female members of the group and the older ones like me.

The Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre is the only place we know of that has done a study into it, and it suggested it needs further review in terms of its appropriateness. We also pointed that out in the Treasury review—that something was needed in terms of better fitness tests for females and some males, along with a better uniform for the females because the guys’ ones are not too good. Having said that, that is not the view of all VBA members and that is why we think further investigation needs to be explored.

Just recently I attended a Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations meeting in Sydney and I found there that the volunteer associations in some of the other states, Queensland in particular, were quite worried about fitness tests being introduced into their jurisdictions as part of a bargaining by the government as a precursor to presumptive legislation. I know the ACT government was looking at presumptive legislation for a while, but that seems to have dropped off. I have been informed that Western Australia and South Australia have adopted presumptive legislation for volunteers in terms of cancer being the main thing.

Also on readiness, members generally are focused on recruitment, training and the retention of volunteers, something that we find wanes over periods and then gets really high. After the 2003 bushfires there was a real push to be a member of the RFS and then that died off a little bit. After the Victorian fires there was a little bit of upsurge and that sort of thing.

One of the concerns we have is the ACT RFS headquarters operating at the moment with several vacant positions. The VBA submission to the Treasury review said there was a 40 per cent reduction in staff from 13 to eight. That impacts obviously on their work supporting the volunteers. I call the volunteers the people who squirt water. They are the people out there at the fire front, not the people sitting in the office, unless they are in an incident management team centre or something like that.

A number of operational positions have not been filled, and we are concerned that there are operational issues there. We consider this as a problem because the volunteers are ready. We are already into the prescribed fire season and the people in headquarters who support the volunteers are quite stretched and overworked and pressured.

The auditor's report—boy, it was a big report; I hate reading things on the screen, but I did not want to print it—at paragraph 5.69 refers to the community education plan and how the plan provides for joint agency campaign, which is the ACT Rural Fire Service and the ACT Fire & Rescue. The Emergency Services Agency conducts awareness, and to all the CBR campaigners are out there now, I hope you all have your little red bags. If you have not, see somebody in the ESA and get one or attend a fete or a public display.

The auditor's report noted that the ACT Rural Fire Service is the lead agency responsible for the preparation of the ACT community for the threat of bushfire each summer, which is pretty good. The ACT RFS, including the volunteers, works with ACT Fire & Rescue to do the campaign. I am a little bit lucky in that I am in the Gungahlin brigade and we are in the joint emergency services centre. Of course, the rural fire brigade as well as the urban fire brigade are there and we talk a lot and climb over each other's trucks and know what is going on with the other side of things.

I mentioned that we are concerned about staff. The VBA finds it difficult to comprehend the need for the ESA to establish a unit outside the RFS that is involved in community education when the auditor's report says that it is the responsibility of the ACT RFS. I think there is a governance issue there where someone is leading a campaign against bushfires and, by their own admission, does not have any bushfire training and is not answering to the chief officer of the RFS. I find that difficult to understand, but I have worked in the public service and I know how it works. It may be money, but that leads me to the strategic management bushfire plan.

Somebody was taken offline from the RFS headquarters to implement that plan. Funding was taken from the deputy chief officer's position. That was not filled and that position is still not filled; it is one of the five positions that still are not filled. We are in a fire season and the VBA wonders what impact that might have in the future on support for volunteers. When their pagers go off or their mobile phones go off and they jump into a truck, they are wondering what is happening back here and who is running the show and managing it. Now the strategic bushfire management plan is completed and the fire season is upon us, those positions should be operational and should be moved back into the RFS to provide a good outcome.

I also want to push, rightly or wrongly, that perhaps the government should allocate some extra funds to the ESA specifically to ensure that the RFS is adequately staffed. I said at the start the volunteers are ready, but the VBA has real reservations that the ESA is not committing to have the ACT RFS ready.

I thank the committee for this opportunity. I am glad to take any questions. If I cannot answer them, I will do like they do on the hill and say, "Can I take them on notice?"

THE CHAIR: That is quite allowable. Perhaps we could start where you finished: what are the concerns or the reservations the VBA has over the ESA's attitude to RFSs? Is it just that they are not backfilling the positions or does it go beyond that?

Mr Harding: They are not backfilling positions, and they are not backfilling key positions. At the moment—this is hearsay from my point of view—I understand there are three operational officers who are duty officers. If there was a 24-hour fire

tomorrow that is three guys who have to operate 24 hours, which is quite a difficult ask for them. I know some people are off on stress leave and other medical leaves. I am concerned that the organisation itself is not being supported in the way it should be. Training is one—it is really hard to get training organised. There is only one training officer in the RFS itself. The ESA has some other training people for specific RFS bushfire training. Writing manuals and basically adapting manuals from New South Wales is how we do it, and that is a lot of work for one person. I have been talking to the person who is doing the review and they said the training section is one person doing 1.58 FTE. That is a lot of work when that person still has to be an operational officer and a duty officer as well.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned people at headquarters, that the communication centre is critical to this and there have been changes there recently—physical changes. Are you happy with the setup of the comms centre?

Mr Harding: I cannot comment on that, Mr Chairman. I do know the changes are there. I have heard reports that there is an exercise showing some flaws in the way it was designed, the way it was operating. I expected exercises to do that to make sure that it is going right. If you cannot test it when it is not real, then when it becomes real it becomes a disaster.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: You may have already answered this in response to the chair's question, but you mentioned someone being responsible for you or in charge of you who does not know anything about bushfires. What role is that?

Mr Harding: No; I did not say “in charge of us”. The people in the ESA who are ACT RFS headquarters are all firefighters training. The person that is not a firefighter is the person implementing the community awareness bushfire campaign, the doorknock campaign, which was all done and organised without consultation with RFS or us.

MS PORTER: Who is that person? What role, what position, is that person in?

Mr Harding: I do not know what the ACT government would be. He is equivalent to a director in the commonwealth. I do not know how the ACT government runs its staffing levels.

MS PORTER: Does he not have people underneath him who have been organising the actual community awareness who do know something about bushfires?

Mr Harding: They do have. He does. Just recently, they have employed more staff to do that. He has a team of three now, I think—three, 3½, part time. But they are not RFS people; they are from elsewhere in the ESA, I believe.

MS PORTER: They do not have the skills either? Is that what you are saying?

Mr Harding: They probably have skills in getting information together and collating bags to hand out. The ESA has asked volunteers in certain brigades to doorknock.

Gungahlin is doorknocking the whole of Forde, I think, this weekend, talking to residents about the possibility of ember zones and things like that there. The Molonglo brigade is doing some Belconnen suburbs. The question was asked why southern suburbs were not involved, but there was some strategic plan assessment done and they picked the suburbs for west Belconnen and those sorts of places for this year. I do not know why.

MS PORTER: I am aware—and Ms Lawder will know; we are both members—that we doorknocked in our area on Saturday. So the CFUs are doing it as well.

Mr Harding: Yes.

MS PORTER: We hand out the red bags.

Mr Harding: Yes, and you can keep one for yourselves.

MS LAWDER: I am in Tuggeranong.

MS PORTER: I am Hawker. Could you also answer the question about the fitness tests? You seemed to be indicating that it was women in particular that could not pass the fitness test. Is that what you are indicating—or that some of them would not be able to?

Mr Harding: There might be a need for a different sort of test for females—not necessarily; maybe it is less weight or maybe it is a different link. I do not know. I am not—

MS PORTER: Would these women carry out different roles from the men in the event—

Mr Harding: No.

MS PORTER: I am just curious as to whether they would be fit enough to be able to do what the men do if they had a lower fitness test. That is all.

Mr Harding: I can only speak for Gungahlin brigade, because I know it. We had females in crew-related roles; RAFT, or remote area fire teams; truck drivers—all females—and advanced firefighters, basic firefighters.

MS PORTER: I am not questioning their skills.

Mr Harding: No. They are covering the whole range of jobs as equally as males.

MS PORTER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry.

MS BERRY: A supplementary, chair?

THE CHAIR: That is all right, Ms Berry.

MS BERRY: Just regarding the fitness tests, they are for health and safety as well as community safety. Wouldn't it mean that it would be wise to know what people's fitness levels are? Even if the fitness test is not suitable for some people, maybe women or older men, there are always going to be people who are faster or stronger than other people. Wouldn't you want to have a test to see what people can do rather than have separate tests for different people and then have a problem with whether or not they can do that part of the job or whether they are a risk to the rest of the team, the community or themselves?

Mr Harding: I agree with you. What I said were not my personal views. They were views that were put to me by members because I asked for comments because I was coming today. I agree that the fitness test is a fitness test. If I am on the fireground with a person, I want to know how fit my crew is. One of the things that is interesting, and we did point it out in the Treasury review, is that 15 per cent of New South Wales rural firefighters who died died of heart attacks, but it was only three per cent in the ACT. That tells me that perhaps there is some benefit. I am 67 years old and I managed to do the arduous test okay.

MS BERRY: How many members are in your organisation?

Mr Harding: As I said before, the VBA is different from the other organisations. We only really have eight members, because the brigades themselves are the members. Each brigade has a number of volunteers, so I suppose when it boils down to it the VBA has around about 500 and something people they look after. But we do it through delegates and the brigades; it is a lot easier to manage. We do not collect fees from members or anything like that; it is all just done by donation. People give us money to help our cause.

MS BERRY: Regarding Ms Porter's question about the community education officer and their staff, is it that they are not communicating with you—that you are not getting any feed-in or playing a role in where the education happens, and they are just picking the areas rather than talking with you, when you probably know the areas better?

Mr Harding: I think it is partially that. It is more a governance issue. I would expect something that involved the RFS and the CFUs to be running through the tree of officers to the commissioner rather than to a person outside. I just thought that the chief officer of Fire & Rescue, which is responsible for the community fire units, would be involved in a more controlling way. It is just a governance issue; I am into governance. The operations officer who is the person responsible for the operations of the units in CFU cases is the chief officer of Fire & Rescue; in the case of rurals, it is the chief officer of the Rural Fire Service. I just thought that the lines of communication should be up and down between those—and then communication out to the various members in terms of CFUs as volunteers and also the Fire & Rescue guys who are involved in it as well, a paid person.

MS BERRY: Sorry; I am not clear. Are you saying that the engagement is sort of skipping all of the people in the middle?

Mr Harding: Yes.

MS BERRY: So it is coming from the community education team or whatever they are called and then straight to the volunteers, instead involving—

Mr Harding: The commissioner is here at the top and it is going off to these people on the side; it is not going to the chief officers. I am just saying that with the chain of command their governance is not what we would have expected.

THE CHAIR: We will come back to Ms Lawder's question, but I remind members that the Hall Rural Fire Brigade put in a submission and they also mentioned some concerns with the suitability of the current fitness test. But we are talking—

Mr Harding: Yes, they did, and they have given me the same information.

THE CHAIR: We will get to Hall shortly. Ms Lawder, a new question?

MS LAWDER: When you talked about that fitness testing—what did you call it?

Mr Harding: It is called the “pack test” in our standard operating procedures.

MS LAWDER: What does that mean?

Mr Harding: You have got to carry a pack of 20 kilos. We all opt for vests rather than backpacks, because you can put seven kilos on here and 13 on the back and it means you can stand upright.

MS LAWDER: You spoke about presumptive legislation. Could you explain that? I am not familiar with it.

Mr Harding: No, I cannot; I am sorry. It is something that a previous president looked at, and I have only really heard about it through them. I think—don't quote me on this—presumptive legislation is to do with the likelihood of you contracting cancer and it being the cause of something you did a long time ago, where the presumption is that you have caught it while you were working in the rural fire service, the fire service, the police or something like that.

MS LAWDER: Is it in some jurisdictions but not in the ACT?

Mr Harding: I have been advised that it is in Western Australia and in South Australia, where they have just legislated for it in the last six months. I do have a VBA meeting on the 18th of this month; I am going to seek some volunteers to do some environment scans and look into presumptive legislation, and perhaps present it to the government again.

MS LAWDER: In general terms, for this fire season do you think the ACT is ready, given some of the concerns you have outlined?

Mr Harding: I think we are ready. I certainly know the volunteers are ready, and from what I hear about—

MS LAWDER: You did say that the volunteers are ready but that you have some concerns about the operational—

Mr Harding: It is just the support for the volunteers. If there was a big fire—not a huge fire—where emergency management would kick in according to the act, I am just worried that there may not be support there for the volunteers in the incident management team in headquarters.

I can speak from experience. At the Blue Mountains fires, I was in the incident management team at RFS headquarters here in Canberra, helping them to organise trucks and volunteers. I went there to volunteer for one day, and spent three days eight till eight minimum. There were really only two staff there, and they were run off their feet. I was just sitting there; they would ask me to do something, and I would do it and then go back and ask what the next thing was. They needed a few more people in the IMT, but they just did not have people to do it. That was the problem.

MS LAWDER: And you fear that kind of thing would apply to the ACT as well?

Mr Harding: It could well apply again. As with all things, people step up. People do things. They work beyond their time, so to speak, in terms of hours. Mistakes can be made; issues happen; accidents happen. That is my concern—the health and welfare of my members, I suppose.

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry.

MS BERRY: In recruiting volunteers, how does recruitment happen? Is it a natural phenomenon where people sort of roll in after events happen, or do you actively try and recruit people?

Mr Harding: From our brigade people?—

MS BERRY: Yes; just talk about your brigade.

Mr Harding: People roll up. In the *Chronicle*, Gungahlin brigade figured with some pictures, talking about the age of volunteers in Canberra. The three young volunteers that were there just saw us at an outing, at a fete or at a community event, and came up and said, “How do we join?” One young lady was serving in the Caltex Woolworths service station at Gungahlin when we drove in to fill up a truck. She said to the person who was paying with a government credit card: “I thought about joining. How do I join?” We just direct people to the ESA website under RFS. There is a volunteer package; you can fill that in and someone will get in touch with you.

MS BERRY: What is the commitment for a volunteer?

Mr Harding: In Gungahlin it is training on a weekly basis in the fire season and fortnightly out of the fire season. Sometimes in the depths of winter we just do one Saturday every two or three weeks. Then there is being on call. We have people who

are within a certain distance of joint emergency services that have a pager. That is run by the communications centre. If the pager goes off, we head to the station and we are told where to go.

If it is an interstate deployment, the captain of the brigade would be asked to send a couple of crews, a truck or two or whatever. It is the captain's responsibility then to pick people who have said they are available. People in the commonwealth get three days community service, so they can go for three days. Some get more. It is basically how much you put in yourself.

There are lots of courses. I spent the last weekend, two days, on an intermediate chainsaw course. That is a commitment. I have taken two days out of the weekend to do it. Some people are quite happy just to be on a truck and be told what to do.

MS BERRY: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I think we have come to the end of our time. You mentioned that the VBA have done a submission to the review of ESA.

Mr Harding: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Is it possible that the committee could get a copy?

Mr Harding: The Treasury review, it was. I can give you this photocopy or I can send it to the secretary electronically?

THE CHAIR: That would be kind. Any final questions? No. Thank you very much for your time. I think you took a question on notice, to provide some more information?

Mr Harding: Did I? I do not know, but if the secretary can send it to me it is probably easier.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we will get you that. We have asked that they come within about two weeks from the time. That would be kind. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for attending here today on behalf of the ACT Volunteer Brigades Association. When available, we will send you a proof copy of the transcript so that you can look at it and, if necessary, suggest any corrections. With that, I formally declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 10.05 am.