



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE
AND COMMUNITY SAFETY**

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

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 25 AUGUST 2020

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 3.31 pm.

GUNNING, MR MARK

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, and welcome. I declare open this virtual, streamed public hearing of the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety. This is the third and final hearing of the committee's review of bushfire season 2019-20. On behalf of the committee, and in advance of their appearance, I would like to thank all who will appear today. The initial discussions today will be with Mr Mark Gunning, an experienced AIIMS-trained IMT controller, and we look forward to hearing from his knowledge bank. Proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and are being webstreamed and broadcast live. Any questions that are taken on notice should be back five days after witnesses receive the proof *Hansard* sent by the committee office.

I welcome Mr Mark Gunning. We have all seen your amazing CV, but would you mind, for the record and for the public, giving a little rundown on what you have done in your professional life and any opening remarks you have for us, as we try and work out what to do better for our next bushfire season.

Mr Gunning: Thanks for the invitation to speak. Obviously, I began as a firefighter some 30-plus years ago and just naturally extended through a range of command positions and management positions. Probably in the last 11 years, since the Black Saturday fires in Victoria, we have gone through a huge transformation which has included some really severe training and assessment of incident controllers. To give you a bit of an idea, when I did mine we did eight one-hour practical assessments, where each hour got more stressful than the one before. That was obviously overlaid with psychometric testing, suitability and a whole range of things, plus ongoing professional development to maintain that currency.

I do not know whether it is good or bad, but I have been able to utilise those skills across a range of emergencies. Obviously, I am very heavily involved with fire and bushfire but also with structural and marine incidents and more recently managing COVID outbreaks in housing commission towers in Melbourne and rural Victoria. So I have a huge breadth of experience in that regard. I quite often speak to executive management courses and the like about—not so much emergencies, which get run and done—the ongoing consequences emergencies have for communities and the real-life impacts of those emergencies that sometimes are not felt for some time.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much, Mark. Part of the information that has been presented to this committee and that we have gained through conversations we have had with witnesses includes the idea that we could do better at training people and having enough people ready and trained to be involved in incident management teams. We have a legislative instrument that actually names those who are ready to be in charge of an IMT. However, some of the names on it appear to be people who no longer work in the system. There will be a range of recommendations that we make, but one of the things I am really focused on is how to get more people ready for those tasks.

My understanding is that once you commit to an IMT for the season then you are one

of the people who can be called on for the season, and that that is how the system generally works. What do you think it takes to make a useful, competent and qualified AIIMS-trained member or controller in an IMT?

Mr Gunning: To be effective you need to understand your subject matter and what happens on the ground. I have been to the ACT—I have never worked there—but you are obviously a small demographic, so it is a matter of best result for what you can do. In training, obviously there are elements that are theory based. They talk about consequence management and managing teams effectively. Sometimes the best incident controllers do not have to do a lot because if you build a really strong team you can be very, very effective without doing a lot yourself. But to stay in the strategic space you need to have a range of management capabilities as well as practical emergency-related capabilities. There is that blend of the two, and sometimes you use more management than practical skill, and then, in other incidents, it will be the inverse.

But it takes time. It takes reflection and continuous improvement. So, when you ask, “What can we do better,” I reckon the good incident controllers go home every night and say, “What can I do better tomorrow?” and then at the end of each season say, “What am I changing for next season?” But to have a process for that is really important. There should be, somewhere, a capability to maintain that list. Lists are out of date the day they are printed—you know, people move on—so I am never too fussed with lists, but what are your core capability needs? Do you need three or do you need 30 incident controllers? And then what does it take to maintain that? Who is maintaining the list and the oversight?

I have to refresh. As well as renewing my currency every five years, I have to go through the whole process, pretty well, again, and present an evidence portfolio of currency and competence. Someone needs to drive that to make sure that we are consistent across the board.

THE CHAIR: If our jurisdiction wanted to get better at this and maybe get some advice from interstate, what sorts of bodies do you have that keep an eye on that sort of thing? You probably have more people putting their hands up to become incident controllers, but is there a centralised spot where you register your interest?

Mr Gunning: Yes. First of all you are basically nominated. Within your agency, you can express an interest. In Victoria that would be by the Victorian State Emergency Service for storms, floods and earthquake and landslips. It could be fire-related, either from the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning; Fire Rescue Victoria or the Country Fire Authority. You can nominate through your organisation. You can be accredited as an incident controller to operate within your agency’s jurisdiction, but in my case I am also endorsed and accredited to operate across multi-agency jurisdictions.

THE CHAIR: And is there a process for that?

Mr Gunning: Yes. Emergency Management Victoria oversees that and, if I could be so bold, I will share some documents with you. Hopefully, you can now see my screen.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Gunning: I have two Webex lots open, because the link I had jumped into the education space for you.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Gunning: This is a joint standard operating procedure, which is put out by Emergency Management Victoria, but it outlines the roles of appointing regional incident controllers. With respect to regional controllers, we divide the state up into five emergency management regions across the board. Sometimes I play in that space, which is a very strategic space. And then we go through this. The procedure is laid out there. I am happy to share these documents. They are public documents through Emergency Management Victoria, anyway.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Gunning: There is actually legislation that sits behind these that allows those things. I have another document to share. Here we go. We have a role pathway map. This has a CFA logo on it, but it is the same for DELWP. Clearly, the only way to get to be a major incident controller—if you can see my mouse—is to go through either a planning stream or an operational stream, so you have really strong practical on-ground experience. Those documents are readily available, and I am happy to share those.

THE CHAIR: That would be really helpful if you could forward copies of those to the committee for us to have a good look at afterwards.

Mr Gunning: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I have plenty more questions, but maybe I will let the other committee members have a go first. Ms Cody, do you have a question for Mark?

MS CODY: I was reading through your CV, Mr Gunning. Was the Advanced Diploma of Public Safety (Firefighting Management) part of what you did to get to be an incident control manager?

Mr Gunning: I have only recently qualified for that. I had a couple of outstanding units. But it is stuff I picked up over time. Certainly, I have had the vast majority of units for a long time now. I got asked to finish it off more recently. We have within that a number of units that are either operational or planning focused. You will also notice that I have a logistics qualification. I do not play in the logistics space, but if you have to establish base camps for hundreds of personnel or medical units to actually assist communities, having an oversight of major operations and having a knowledge of how those functions work is really important for major incident management.

MS CODY: And that is something that is done through the CFA?

Mr Gunning: Yes. That course is a national course. There are a number of providers from right around the country that provide it, but CFA is a registered training organisation for that.

MS CODY: Okay, cool. Thank you.

MR GUPTA: Thanks, Mark. I come from a bit of your background, with logistics and training. On a previous occasion we talked about there being lack of training for the troops down here in the ACT. You have said there is a certificate IV in emergency controller and incident controller. Can that knowledge be passed on here to someone as well, because we do not have that kind of level of qualification here in the ACT?

Mr Gunning: I think there are ways to go about it. We are a very portable sector, and last year I played in Queensland. I have played in New South Wales before and I have worked across in South Australia. It is amazing that, the further we go, the more people we seem to know as we have grown. I think that forming really good alliances and partnerships is a great opportunity both for training and for scale of training, but also just to share your experiences with others. Then others come in and share theirs with you, and that will develop people more quickly.

One of the things that we have seen in recent years is the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council. As a country, we are sending people over to the United States this week and we can gain some really super valuable experience out of that to bring home and apply in Australia. You know, whether it is done at a state and territory level or whether it is done at a national level, there are opportunities for mentoring and development across the board to assist.

MR GUPTA: So there is no specified or nominated RTO who can give broad training to people all across Australia? Or are you sending people overseas?

Mr Gunning: For the basics in training, as far as qualifications go there are plenty of places in Australia that deliver that really well. Certainly, some of the Queensland experiences in major disasters are unbelievable, and their universities have adapted to that really well. But you still need that on-ground experience. You can learn all you like, but you do not know until you have experienced trying to operate in a major environment with no communications because they have failed or there is a major logistics failure because you cannot get road access—what we saw in eastern Victoria this year with roads cut for weeks—not days but weeks. Logistics had to bring the Navy in to get people out. We had to air-lift food and water and basic supplies. You can train all you like, but you need to experience those types of environments too. And that is part of development. I think some of the best training I have had has been watching really good operators do what they do in the field. Unfortunately, someone is suffering when that occurs, but it is very real.

MR GUPTA: Thanks, Mark. Chair, can we as a committee put a recommendation that this kind of training should be available for the ACT as well?

THE CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. In fact, part of the reason I was so keen to get Mr Gunning here was so that we can have some really solid recommendations about making sure we have lots of people ready for IMT controlling and being a part of

IMTs, so that the next time we hit a big event there is a plethora of people to choose from. I would love to see that.

MS CODY: Can I just ask a quick follow-up from Mr Gupta's question?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MS CODY: Mr Gunning, you were just saying that you have been to Queensland and New South Wales. I think I heard you say both.

Mr Gunning: Both.

MS CODY: How do you think the new COVID situation is going to affect this? The bushfire season starts soon. How do you think COVID is going to impact on the sharing of resources, which is what we have always done across the country?

Mr Gunning: Well, again, the United States went into a fire season with COVID arriving at the same time. They are experienced and have honed their procedures, and they are available. FEMA—the Federal Emergency Management Agency—in the United States and the US Department of Agriculture and Forestry share a lot of their information. So a lot of their procedures are readily available. We have utilised some of that.

In recent times we have obviously had IMTs form here for different emergencies, including COVID. You can operate in that space, but it is a changed world. I think adapting to that has been unique. We have spoken at a national level for some time now about having pre-formed teams that live together, train together and get deployed together, and the United States does that really well. Here we tend to chop and change with who is available. We tend to be a bit more, “How's it going to fit?” I actually think in a COVID environment we need to be much more stringent in having teams that can operate together.

We have tried virtual teams in the COVID emergency. They are okay when you are in a maintenance mode of keeping things ticking along, but to set things up when there is a lot happening, situational awareness is critical. And in this case you are looking at fire. Fast-moving grass fires do not wait for a meeting in an hour's time. There would be decisions that need to be made in a really timely manner, and virtual teams are not an option. So we need to adapt to that, and that is probably not going to be convenient for all personnel, but I think it is important that we accept that that is part of our role.

THE CHAIR: One of the groups of people that had perhaps not the best experience during the summer was our Rural Fire Service, which is our volunteer service. One of the things that I am thinking of recommending is that there be more opportunities for them—or some of their key players—to be prepared to be on IMTs. The problem obviously is that it is a volunteer force; they are not available always during the week for training and preparation and so on. Do you have any insights into how to get volunteer forces ready for IMTs?

Mr Gunning: Yes, and you are robbing Peter to pay Paul. Sometimes those experienced people on the ground are worth their weight in gold to make really quick

decisions.

THE CHAIR: On the ground.

Mr Gunning: So let me just preface my next comments with that. However, we have adapted some of our courses in Victoria, which have traditionally been five-day Monday-to-Friday courses or weekend-type modules so that they can be delivered on a Friday night, Saturday and Sunday. That can be volunteer friendly. Or they can even be broken up over a couple or three or four weekends, if need be, and spread out to be volunteer friendly. So there are opportunities to amend your training, because it is nearly all modular now, anyway. It is about making sure that they are available for the whole course so that you do not have stragglers missing little bits here and there.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MR GUPTA: Mark, do you have any wellbeing programs?

Mr Gunning: Yes. Ongoing there is peer support and all the agencies tend to use their own wellbeing programs, but we tend to have wellbeing processes built into both training and into our operations now. It is a big thing to maintain mental wellbeing across your sector. You make your best decisions when you are mentally fresh. Learning to deal with stress is not easy to do and you need processes that sit behind that. I have been lucky enough to work with some great people. When I got sent into the housing commission flats in North Melbourne I used some processes that General George Casey used when he went into Iraq.

It is really hard to say that I am using military doctrine in an emergency environment, but your focus always narrows if you are really stressed. The thing is to have some processes to make you think laterally and keep your thoughts really broad so that you can have the best outcomes for the community. I think that is the other thing. Training is important but underlining doctrine and principles are critical. We call it our six Cs—command, control and coordination, which are well known to most emergency services, but we also have communication, community connectedness and consequence.

When you think about being connected with communities, it is not just about putting the fire out. If you have a grader there that has cut a fire break, that grader could stay and reinstate the fire break for the farmer, get them back on track and producing. If that grader could knock some trees down so that they can get their fences back up so their livestock do not wander on to the road and cause a traffic hazard, we can get roads open quicker for communities. Those sorts of principles are really critical and underpinned. Your key leaders need to be across that and setting that guidance for your key control staff.

THE CHAIR: Yes. The commentary about recovery afterwards for people who have lost fences, for example, is really useful, because that is something we suffered during our fires. And they are not always insured. They cannot always be insured. As you say, there are immediate dangers to livestock and safety of property and so on.

Mr Gunning: Yes. I know I am speaking to government personnel, so please forgive

me when I say this, but sometimes we are caught up by government bureaucracy. One of the doctrines I got—what is the word?—indoctrinated by a few years ago is that you can do things right, which is ticking all the boxes, or you can do the right thing. What is the right thing to do for communities? Quite often we will close roads, but we might be stopping people like BlazeAid, which is a non-government agency that does some critical and fantastic work. How can we get them into communities quicker? How can we enable them or empower them, while we have still got the machinery of government on the ground, to get the recovery operation going? Whatever it costs in the initial firefight you will spend tenfold at least in the recovery operation.

THE CHAIR: And the mental health impact on the people on the ground can be much greater in the following weeks, months and years than on the actual day.

Mr Gunning: Spot on. And people like BlazeAid, believe it or not, are not counsellors, but they do a lot of counselling, because they can speak to farmers and people that have suffered loss at a local level in a very informal way, and they form bonds that are there for lifetimes. We have seen that across numerous parts of Australia, be it in flood or fire.

THE CHAIR: Yes, 100 per cent.

MR GUPTA: Fatigue management is very important, Mark, as you have mentioned. Is that something that should be there all the time, to help manage the fatigue because these operations are getting bigger and more complicated?

THE CHAIR: We just have a couple of minutes left, and I just wonder if I could go to the process for maintaining people once they have reached a level. From what I understand from what you have said before, we need people who have plenty of on-the-ground experience. These are your experienced firefighters, ambos, bush firefighters with the RFS and in our case Parks and Conservation fires as well, who really do know what they are doing. In getting them trained up ready for an IMT and then maintaining it, what is required for maintenance? Do you have something like a matrix that you use to maintain people as prepared and ready?

Mr Gunning: Yes. We have a host of things that go into what we call our evidence portfolio, which is attendances at briefings and professional development forums. Participation in exercising is really critical. Other evidence is what you have done on the ground, where you have done it and what the outcomes of those things were. So maintaining an evidence portfolio is something we all do. [*Interruption in sound recording—*] I can send you some examples of that if you need that, too.

THE CHAIR: That would be really helpful. I will just put that down as something to follow up. Yes; fantastic. I think some of our agencies are doing it better than others, from what I have heard anecdotally. We could definitely do with getting that standardised and pre-emptive so that when the emergency comes there are more, rather than fewer, people ready to fulfil those roles.

One of the things that we have had said to us by some of the volunteers is that there should be someone in the IMT who represents the volunteers, because they have some unique needs. For example, they have taken a day off work, they have taken a day of

leave or they have taken a day away from their business and they are losing money, they are about to be sent to a fire and they have their shift cancelled. When you have a full-time paid force it is a bit different for them. I wonder whether they need a representative, like a volunteer representative, or whether they just need to be an integral part of every IMT. What is your experience of how to keep on top of that volunteer side of things?

Mr Gunning: I reckon having people that understand volunteers is really important. And the skills you need in the level 3 space are difficult for volunteers to maintain. So having them always embedded is never easy, but it is really critical. Or you have embedded in there the principles and understandings of what is important to volunteers. We will always have shifts cancelled because we need to plan for the worst case. If you do not, you will get bitten, and that happens, unfortunately. Having really good expectation management for volunteers I think is really important in that space. But if we get our planning right—if you have got really experienced fire planners—that should not happen as often, so you can reduce the gap. That is where you need to aim, and you need to be volunteer friendly.

The other thing is to be flexible in your shift times. One of the things we experienced during the south-west fires in Victoria was that we had a large dairy contingent and cows have got to be milked morning and night. We had a 10 am till 4 pm shift. We had a lot of people available for that, but if you stick to AIIMS rigidly it says that you show up at 8 o'clock and you knock off at 8 o'clock and then there is a night shift that comes on for the next 12 hours. You have to be more volunteer friendly. You have to understand your people and be prepared to have swing shifts or ad hoc shifts that can contribute to the operation but not be so detrimental that it scares people away and impacts our volunteers detrimentally. Because in Australia we cannot afford the alternative. You know, we simply do not have the money to offset what we get out of our volunteers. They are a critical part of what we do.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I think there is a morale issue, which we are starting to try to unpack and work out how to resolve. Some people say, “They need to be recognised,” but they do not do it for a pat on the back. They do not do it for a medal; they do it to be valued by being given useful tasks to do.

Mr Gunning: Yes.

THE CHAIR: And, as you say, it is never going to be perfect, but how do you make sure that there is not a war? Do you know what I mean?

Mr Gunning: Yes. I think recognition happens in many ways. It is an appreciation of what they offer, rather than trying to get them to come into a more government structure. What other flexibilities can we offer, and then how do we make them feel like they have contributed at a local level? Have we used them in their local space?

THE CHAIR: So it could be part of our evidence portfolio for IMT controllers that they have some experience, or knowledge, or they have shown that they have been involved in shifts with volunteers on the ground. We do not have a million different types of volunteers because they are mostly city-living people or local farm personnel or country personnel. It is not as diverse, in a way, as what you are dealing with. So if

they maybe were just out in the sheds a few times before they become controllers, that could help.

Mr Gunning: Yes. My day-to-day job is dealing with volunteers and managing volunteer fire brigades. That is part of my day-to-day job. And you have a level of trust when you go in there. They know that you understand what their needs are. If you have that mutual trust, using your key people that work with volunteers in a direct contact operational role or in a planning role so that they can actually have influence, is really important. It will make them feel more included, whether they are directly linked in or not, if they have people they trust making decisions on their behalf.

THE CHAIR: Yes, okay. That sounds good. We have our next people in the waiting room so unless there are any desperate questions from other committee members, we might go to a very brief break. Thanks very much, Mark. You will get a transcript soon, so tell us if we have the transcript right.

Mr Gunning: You would be pretty right. Do not be afraid to yell out if I can do anything to help and good luck with your process.

THE CHAIR: We really appreciate your expertise. It really adds something to what we are trying to do here. Thank you so much.

GENTLEMAN, MR MICK, Minister for Advanced Technology and Space Industries, Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Minister for Planning and Land Management, Minister for Police and Emergency Services and Minister for Urban Renewal

WHELAN, MS GEORGEINA, Commissioner, Emergency Services Agency

SCOTT, MR ROHAN, Acting Chief Officer, ACT Rural Fire Service, Emergency Services Agency

FOLEY, MR JUSTIN, Acting Executive Branch Manager, Parks and Conservation Service, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Mick Gentleman MLA, together with officials from the JACS directorate and the Emergency Services Agency. We welcome Mr Foley from the Parks and Conservation Service and Commissioner Whelan. Thank you so much for giving us your time this afternoon. This is a great opportunity for the community to ask questions and have its say. Many things have been raised with us. I am sure you will have been watching some of what we have been dealing with.

Just to start off, I have some questions for the Parks and Conservation Service. I have had it brought to my attention that parks and cons is pretty good at having people ready to be IMT controllers. So, can you give me a little bit of information about what parks and cons does to prepare people for those roles, how many personnel you have trained up or have trained all at once, and what you do to prepare and maintain this skill set for these roles?

Mr Foley: I acknowledge the privilege statement. The question referred to incident management team support from a Parks and Conservation Service perspective. I will make a broad comment here. The Parks and Conservation Service applies the incident management team model to all of our programs. So we will talk about fire in this instance but acknowledge that we run a range of programs, whether it be, for example, the kangaroo cull or other operational programs. We are based on the incident management model, and the fire unit in particular operates along that model. It is important for us as an agency to make sure that we have that capability to deliver on our land management function 12 months of the year. I guess that is very important.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Foley: We learn that capability and provide that capability in incidents of fire suppression. So when we are talking about our capability in the context of fire we have, over a long period of time, trained staff in incident management team roles. Whether that be a small number of incident controllers, people with planning experience, people with operational experience and the others, we make sure that we have a range of skills in the organisation.

That happens through specific training but also building experience through incidents. We work with RFS and in other operational contexts outside of fire to make sure that our staff are getting not just the training but also the operational experience. And, yes, it occurs in the context of fire, but also think biosecurity, think kangaroos and think of a whole range of operational departments we run to do that.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Foley: I do not have the numbers at hand at the moment, but I can—

THE CHAIR: Can you take that on notice for us? Would you mind?

Mr Foley: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Is there is a goal that you work to? From our non-expert view it looks like some of the other agencies could do more of what you are doing.

Mr Foley: Okay. Look, we will provide you that information.

THE CHAIR: Do you use an evidence portfolio to keep up to date with who has done what, or is it done on a central model?

Mr Foley: We keep track of our staff capability. We have a program that we apply internally, which keeps track of the qualifications and skills that our staff have.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Foley: I say again, it is important that we do that for all of our programs, and we are very clear on the level of fire training that our staff have as well. So, putting aside the incident management team skill set that is absolutely critical, we are also very aware of the level of training we have right—

THE CHAIR: For everybody at all times, yes. Fantastic. Again, that is something that we have heard a lot about and that we would love to see replicated in some other areas as well. So anything that you can provide us with about how you track that and anything that is unique to Parks and Conservation would be fantastic.

Just before we go on, I just managed to miss some wording that I need to read regarding the minister. Minister, the committee received your letter of 19 August which had two attached documents—the independent report on the ACT Emergency Services Agency operational review of bushfire season 2019-20 and the report of the review of the whole of the ACT government coordination and response during the 2019-20 bushfire season. With your blessing, the committee will publish your letter and attachments as the ACT government's contribution to this inquiry. Is that understood and accepted?

Mr Gentleman: Yes, of course, chair.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. Thanks very much to Mr Foley for acknowledging the privilege statement. If each person who speaks could do so, that would be most helpful. Minister, do you have an opening statement that you want to make before we go on to other areas?

Mr Gentleman: Yes, I do, thank you, chair. I, too, acknowledge the privilege conditions. Thanks for the opportunity to appear before the committee today to discuss the response to the 2019-20 bushfire season. Of course, the lead-up to this

season saw some of the driest conditions on record. During the season we saw some of the most unprecedented weather conditions in Australia's history. Large parts of Australia were impacted by significant fires, with the unpredictable and dangerous fire behaviour fuelled by hot, dry and windy conditions. These conditions meant fires developed easily and were hard to stop.

Bushfires to the east of the ACT at Braidwood and on the New South Wales coast caused thick smoke—I think we will all remember that—and several days of hazardous air quality in the ACT and the region. On 23 January this year, the ACT experienced its first significant bush and grass fire of the season within its borders. The fire started at the Pialligo redwood forest and quickly spread across to Beard, threatening Oaks Estate and Queanbeyan. An additional fire started in Pialligo the following day. That joined the Beard fire, eventually taking the fire to 424 hectares. And the fire was deemed out on 29 January 2020.

On 27 January this year the Orroral Valley fire commenced. As we know, this fire threatened the southern rural areas of the ACT with the potential to impact on a number of rural land holders and residents of Tharwa, Banks, Gordon, Conder and Theodore. The Orroral Valley fire remained out of control until 8 February 2020 when, after receiving some much-needed rainfall, the status of the fire was downgraded to “being controlled” and was declared out on 27 February 2020. The Orroral Valley fire burnt over 86,000 hectares of land, representing approximately 30 per cent of the ACT's total land.

Immediately following the fire, significant rainfall caused widespread flooding and movement of sediment and ash into the waterways of the Cotter River catchment and the ACT and Queanbeyan's primary drinking water supply. The fire and floods impacted the unique biodiversity and ecosystem of the Namadgi National Park, including a number of EPBC-listed threatened species and ecological communities. Ngunnawal cultural values, heritage places and objects, and important public infrastructure were also heavily impacted.

In the days following fire containment the ACT government deployed a rapid risk assessment team to assess the impacts of the fire, and this team delivered the *Orroral Valley Fire Rapid Risk Assessment Namadgi National Park* report, which identified key risks to the environment, heritage assets, infrastructure and community safety. Of the recommendations outlined in the RRAT report, most of the extreme risks to wildlife and ecosystem functionality, cultural and European heritage, water catchments, erosion, infrastructure and community safety have now been completed. These initial steps in the post-fire recovery journey have placed the ACT in a strong position to develop a long-term response to the devastating impacts of the 2020 bushfires.

The 2019-20 season provided several opportunities for ACT personnel to assist firefighting forces on a national front, deploying approximately 2,160 personnel over 177 days. The ACT's efforts this bushfire season demonstrated a professional, collaborative approach to incident management and response. The relationships forged with and between services will also benefit the ACT well beyond this bushfire season. Much is owed to the expertise and professionalism of the ACT Rural Fire Service, ACT Fire & Rescue, the ACT Ambulance Service, the ACT State Emergency

Service and the Parks and Conservation Service, as well as aviation fire and rescue services, the NSW Rural Fire Service, Fire and Rescue NSW, ACT Policing and the Australian Defence Force.

The ACT would also like to thank the National Resource Sharing Centre and fire and emergency services in other jurisdictions who boosted our capability. The response framework, preparedness and investments by the government and, of course, our wonderful personnel, including our volunteers, helped us navigate through the toughest bushfire season since 2003. That is not to say that things cannot be done better in the future. The ACT government and the ACT Emergency Service Agency committed early to reviewing the season to ensure any lessons would bolster our emergency response into the future.

In April 2020 we announced our intention to undertake a strategic whole-of-government review to complement the already commenced internal operational reviews being undertaken within ESA and other government directorates. The ESA has also taken steps to reflect and learn from the response to the 2019-20 bushfire season. This includes—

THE CHAIR: Are you nearly completed, Minister? Are we getting close to the end, Minister, just out of curiosity?

Mr Gentleman: Just a couple more minutes.

THE CHAIR: Go ahead.

Mr Gentleman: We still have an hour and a quarter left to go.

THE CHAIR: Do not worry; there is more than an hour and a quarter worth of questions.

Mr Gentleman: Great. In April, as I was mentioning, we announced our intention to undertake a strategic whole-of-government review to complement the already commenced internal reviews. ESA has also taken steps to reflect and learn from the response of that season, and this includes the engagement of the external consultant to conduct an independent operational review. These reviews provide assurances and transparency to the Canberra community that, while our response was effective and professional, there was room for improvement and valuable lessons learned.

The government has accepted all of the recommendations of Deputy Commissioner Johnson's strategic review and has introduced proposed amendments to the Emergencies Act to put them into action. I seek your support on Thursday to get that passed, chair.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Gentleman: The amendments are targeted squarely towards enhancing the ESA and ACT government's ability to manage emergencies. And I am confident the ESA, led by Commissioner Whelan, is working through the short and long-term operational improvements suggested by the operational review. They have already proactively

made several changes. Government and ESA will consider any recommendations from the Legislative Assembly's committee inquiry into the bushfire season and also the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements to make improvements for future bushfire seasons.

This extensive work means Canberrans will be even better protected and informed during disasters in the future. The length of the previous season is still being felt by many of our volunteers who have given their time responding to bushfires here in the ACT, engaging with the community and deploying interstate. I commend all emergency service volunteers who continue to answer the call and protect our community. I would also like to thank the family, friends, partners and workplaces of those volunteers, whose support enables them to contribute to the continued protection of our community. I would also like to take this opportunity to commend all of the ACT government directorates and agencies, in particular, ESA and ACT Parks and Conservation Service, for their efforts in preparing and protecting the ACT from the last bushfire season. And can I make just a final comment of thanks to our bushfire council for the important work that they do in preparing us for the season.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, minister. I think you have covered every base. Very good. I might just go to Ms Cody, as I had the first question, and then Mr Gupta, and then we will come back to me.

MS CODY: Thank you, chair. I wanted to ask a question of Mr Foley, also. I want to talk about some prescribed burns. I have a couple of questions for you. We have seen some right-wing commentators jump on the bandwagon about prescribed burns. Firstly, what is your reflection from this year's season on the impact prescribed burns had on the fires on the east coast?

Mr Foley: That is a very broad question. I am probably not in a position to provide an answer on the impact of controlled burns on the east coast. I guess what I would say is that—

MS CODY: I think I read somewhere that the areas that were burnt had recently been through prescribed burns. Is that correct?

Mr Foley: Some areas that burnt had been part of prescribed burning program. It is probably worth recognising that prescribed burning is one of the actions we undertake to try and manage the adverse impacts of fire. It is very important to understand that when you get the catastrophic conditions that we had this year, fuel reduction is unlikely to stop a fire that is being fanned by extremely dry conditions, high winds and high temperatures. Prescribed burning is really more designed to give you a mosaic of fuel loads across the landscape.

THE CHAIR: To give you somewhere to fight from.

Mr Foley: That is right. You may see the fire slow as it goes through a prescribed burning area, and it does give you the opportunity to regroup. It might allow you to get firefighters in there. I think these are all issues that really sit under the IMT when it comes to decision-making around the fire, but the principle is that you reduce the load so that in less than catastrophic conditions it can slow the fire and help the

incident management team in making those decisions.

The other thing I would say is that as a land manager we absolutely work with fire to help manage adverse impacts, but we also use prescribed burning to help deliver on environmental and cultural outcomes as well. So we use fire, as an agency, in a land management context for a range of reasons, not just for fuel reduction for the purpose of managing a wildfire.

Mr Gentleman: Chair, I just wondered if I might ask Mr Foley to expand on that—sorry, Bec, if I could come back to you—in regard to the different vegetation we see coming back when we do slower, cooler prescribed burns. It might be helpful for the committee.

THE CHAIR: Mr Gentleman, there are so many questions to get through, let us get a little bit of info on that and then move on to the next question. Mr Foley.

Mr Foley: I think the point the minister makes is very valuable. You have to be very careful with your prescribed burning. There are certain conditions—a narrow band of conditions—in which you can conduct prescribed burning such that it does not have a negative impact—that it burns cool, if you like, and we get the fuel reduction and the ecological benefit. We do not want hot fires that cause either significant regrowth or unintended—

THE CHAIR: Yes, which is why we only have some days in the year that they can be done on. Correct?

MS CODY: I guess that leads into the second part of my question, Mr Foley. And that is about the current metric used to help reduce fuel load. I guess, for example, there are X number of hectares so to help slow the fire you would use prescribed burns plus slashing plus grazing, and you would work that out in a matrix-type form. Is there another way to do it? I think Victoria uses a risk matrix—something like a “risk reduction target” I think they call it.

Mr Foley: Okay. Effectively what we do at the moment is use an expert and modelled approach to identify where the best possible mix of measures are to be taken in the landscape to deliver on the environmental, heritage and risk to community. So we use an expert-based approach. The capability I think you are referring is looking at exploiting a modelling capability that allows us to model across the landscape what the best interventions will be.

MS CODY: Correct.

Mr Foley: So you effectively just use a slightly different approach to organising the activities that you will employ to manage risk. And this modelling capability allows you to do that. We are working closely with ESA at the moment to explore how that methodology might roll out in the ACT.

MS CODY: Right.

Mr Foley: Yes. And we are hoping that in future bushfire operation plans we will

start to use that methodology.

THE CHAIR: Could that also involving mulching—something that has been discussed that is used in Europe?

Mr Foley: I think you have to be careful of mulching. It is not a practice that we employ.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Foley: I think you would want to be very careful that you were not creating fuel in a park and forest environment that might actually see fire carry. So, yes, it is an option we may consider into the future, but it is not one we employ at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Okay.

MR GUPTA: Mr Foley, just following up on Ms Cody's question, this time I think you used some air appliances as well, in the 2019-20 bushfire season. Do you think it was effective in being able to control or put it out?

Mr Foley: With respect, I do not think that is a question that should be directed at me.

MR GUPTA: Okay; that is fine. I will ask it later on. Just for you, you touched base on the training side of things. How do you maintain the currency of the training, considering that there has been a bit of a lack of RTO service providers? Do you ever track who needs to attend a course or to go back to training?

Mr Foley: Sorry, is that a question about how we identify who—

MR GUPTA: The currency of the people who were trained and—

THE CHAIR: How do you keep up with currency of people through their training?

MR GUPTA: Yes.

Mr Foley: I will take questions on detail on notice, but we have a training officer who manages to keep track of all of the staff and makes sure that their qualifications are current, as required by us as the land manager, to deliver on the raft of activities we do each year. Of course, we are always in consultation with our colleagues in ESA. They are in training when feasible, and where skills and training are required that are unique to land management we will just do those as an agency.

MR GUPTA: Is there any external auditor that comes and checks that register of the people who are being trained or who have lapsed their training or required refresher training?

Mr Foley: We monitor that internally.

MR GUPTA: Okay. And it is reported?

Mr Foley: We declare our program through the bushfire operation plan. We identify the areas of training that we will be undertaking.

MR GUPTA: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Great. Fantastic. I just want to go first of all to a topic I have been covering off with a number of people. I think the commissioner may be the best person to start with on this. The number of people who are ready and prepared to be controllers in our IMT, and how the IMT is set up, is something that has been raised with us by a number of different people in some submissions, in some private conversations and in a number of things. One of the things that we are keen to do is to make recommendations that are constructive, that can see the pool of people that you, as the commissioner, have to draw on, increased. Have you started doing some work on that and what can you do to train more IMT controllers and members so that you have exactly what you need come the next season, so that it does not fall quite as much on your shoulders?

Ms Whelan: Good afternoon, chair. I would like to acknowledge the privilege conditions before I start.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms Whelan: Thank you very much for the question. The Emergency Services Agency has a deliberate approach to training, both in terms of the delivery of their own RTO-recognised training packages and also partnering, as it did last year, with Parks and Conservation to share the resources that are required to facilitate training, which was delivered by NSW Parks and Wildlife Service, in concert with other expert instructors.

Over the last three years in particular, the previous commissioner, Mr Dominic Lane, instituted a very detailed program—not only a training program but the start of the recognised accreditation program for level 2 and level 3 incident controllers. The program in the ESA is not dissimilar to that run by Parks and Conservation, nor, in fact, the program run nationally by the various jurisdictions. The number of staff that we train is also linked to the number of staff that can gain experience in maintaining their skills across the levels and the disciplines. In the last two years, because of the absence of major bushfire events in the ACT, we have deployed our staff interstate in support of Queensland and New South Wales, for example, in order to maintain their skills, supplemented by exercises.

If I may, in my reading and reviewing of the comments that have been made or offered, or observations offered by the community and, in particular, our Rural Fire Service volunteers, my understanding is that our Rural Fire Service volunteers would like to see further roles for them to participate in our incident management capability. The practice across ACT government has been that we combine with Parks and Conservation and we factor Parks and Conservation staff into our readiness matrix. We are now looking at offering additional opportunity for our Rural Fire Service volunteers to undertake that training and also maintain their skills, as appropriate. We have had great success in that with the SES. We will offer that to the Rural Fire Service.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Whelan: That is not to say that we do not have Rural Fire Service staff, volunteers, who were qualified and, in fact, were offered an opportunity to join the IMT over summer.

THE CHAIR: No, absolutely. There is no accusation or anything like that. It is simply a matter of how we can get more, and how we can have more people available to you. I know there are historical reasons why some people were not taking up that opportunity and what have you, but we really are focused on what can be done for the future.

I did have one question of clarification that was raised with me with regard to the start of the Orroral Valley fire that I just wonder if I can ask you. Commissioner, who was, in fact, responsible and in command of the helicopter at the time that the spark was lit for the Orroral Valley fire?

Ms Whelan: Chair, the Orroral Valley fire, or the ignition, is under investigation by the commonwealth.

THE CHAIR: Is it?

Ms Whelan: Yes. And we have yet to see the report on that.

THE CHAIR: Did we put information into that?

Ms Whelan: Yes, we will when we are interviewed by the commonwealth in relation to that. Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: And what is the agency that the commonwealth is using to investigate that?

Ms Whelan: The Department of Defence, in concert with the relevant aviation authorities.

THE CHAIR: Okay. When are you expecting a conclusion to be reached?

Ms Whelan: We have not received an update on that from Defence. It could be some time.

THE CHAIR: Okay. And you do not know—

Ms Whelan: I am not avoiding the question.

THE CHAIR: No; I understand that. What information can you give to the people in the ACT about the helicopter that is not part of that investigation? Are you able to expand at all on the occurrence on the day or are you shutting down entirely on that topic?

Ms Whelan: It would not be appropriate for us to respond while it is under investigation, but I am happy to discuss once we have that detail.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Can we ask that the JACS committee be updated—be it in this term of the government or the next—about outcomes of that investigation and how it is proceeding, because I think that is good for transparency for the community.

Ms Whelan: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: My main question is with regard to the relationship with the Rural Fire Service. As you can see, both through your internal investigations and through our committee's public investigations, there is a feeling of some disappointment amongst RFS personnel. This quite possibly stretches back to long before you arrived as commissioner, but I am really keen to hear from you about how that might be improved.

One message we have been getting very clearly is that it is not about pats on the back and in many ways it is not about money; it is about feeling valued. Our last submitter, Mr Mark Gunning from Victoria, is a bit of an expert in IMTs in the Victorian scene, and AIIMS training. He spoke about having people who have an understanding of volunteers and their special needs, their perspective on shifts and how they are deployed and how it could be useful for our IMT people to understand and know that better. Do you have something planned to attack that situation and get everything on a better footing? I am assuming you will back the RFS in its existence? Do you want to comment on those things a little, please?

Ms Whelan: Absolutely, chair, and thank you very much for the question. Both I, as the commissioner, and the agency are extremely proud of our volunteers across all of our service. To say that we are in awe of our volunteers is an understatement, but that should not distract us from the fact that we have some volunteers who were disappointed across a number of areas. We have worked extremely hard to not only acknowledge their concerns but also demonstrate that we are receptive to their feedback and proactive in the manner in which we are seeking to address those concerns.

Last night we met with all of the Rural Fire Service captains and the commanders of the SES units to do a touch base, as a consequence of the reports being tabled last week. That was the first of what will be quarterly meetings where we can work with our volunteers not just to discuss the reports but to talk through the actions we are taking to address the concerns and to continue to enhance the capability.

THE CHAIR: Who was involved with that?

Ms Whelan: The Rural Fire Service captains, the brigade captains and the acting chief of the Rural Fire Service. There has been and continues to be very open dialogue with regard to the concerns they have raised.

There is no doubt that there is area for improvement, and we have already started to action that in two areas. The first one is in how we look after our volunteers, and the comment by our colleagues in Victoria is spot on. You need to appreciate volunteers.

You need to understand what motivates a volunteer and then how you can best support them. Our chief of the Rural Fire Service has been working with the captains in what we have been calling our reset series of meetings to re-engage and reset the relationship and to create that open dialogue so that we can move forward. As you did say, chair, a number of these issues have been ongoing for some time.

The second area is to facilitate more opportunity for our volunteers to undertake the training and participate in the operational and leadership roles that they would like to see themselves undertake both in terms of our incident management and also how we communicate with our Rural Fire Service on the fireground. They are areas that we are continuing to work with our volunteers on.

THE CHAIR: This goes to the heart of a lot of what we have received and been listening to in this committee. It is part of a healthy process that people say what they are thinking so that some response can be made, and I know you have also been engaged in that.

A couple of things that have come to light include that, in the directory of RFS personnel for the ESA, eight out of the 13 positions are stated as being non-permanent staff. I do not know if you are aware of that, but it leaves people with a feeling that their service is not set and being worked on quite as hard as it could be. That is not an accusation; that is just an experience some have had.

Another concern is that people have trouble in the RFS planning out their pathway to being fully qualified and at the top of their game over a period of years. As Mr Gupta mentioned before, training is not always predictable and able to be planned for, especially in the unsocial hours that the volunteers make themselves available for after normal work hours.

Catering and the cost of meals is something that makes them feel a bit like they are second rate because at the same fire and at the same ground paid staff are catered for. All the volunteers need is to have their expenses reimbursed or something, as sometimes they are there for a very long period of time.

The final thing that was raised a lot with me is the decision-making on the ground. Mr Gunning explained to me in a conversation that I had with him that when an IMT and the personnel on the ground are functioning really well together under the AIIMS system the decision-making on the ground is not going through the strategic IMT; it is being made at the lowest level possible. There was a bit of frustration during last summer's fires about waiting for decisions to be made by the IMT which perhaps could have been made on the ground. That is a very broad scope of things, but can you comment on the specifics of the temporary staff, the training trajectory, the catering and cost of meals, and decision-making on the ground?

Ms Whelan: I would be delighted to comment on all of those questions, chair. We will start off with the personnel. We are just finalising what is the last of the permanent appointments in the RFS. In fact, I think the chief of the Rural Fire Service interviewed for the last of the positions today, believe it or not. There were temporary positions, and some of that is linked to the nature of public service appointments when people are absent on extended periods of leave and then there are temporary

employment opportunities that are created. So balancing the public service protocols and conditions of employment is part and parcel of it.

Having said that, there has also been a refresh of elements of the RFS paid staff. Some staff have chosen to move on to other opportunities across the public service. The acting chief has been working diligently for the last six months in setting a more permanent status to the workforce, and I am very pleased to see that is continuing.

In addition, we have added three positions to the RFS workforce to increase the subspecialisation of the RFS staff, which, in turn, will support the ongoing professional development and training and support provided to our Rural Fire Service volunteers.

In terms of training pathways, the chief of the Rural Fire Service was supported in finalising his strategic workforce and business plan earlier this year. Mr Scott is now working with his training officers on rolling out what is a very detailed and planned training continuum that goes over a 12 to 18-month cycle.

What we are trying to do, however, chair, I will point out, is balance the autonomy of the brigades themselves. The culture of the Rural Fire Service is that the brigades work fairly autonomously, and also with the more deliberate planning associated with collective training. The feedback we have received from the Rural Fire Service captains, particularly in the last three months, is that they are very pleased with the progress that we have been making in that area.

One particular area of concern was urgent duty driver training. We have worked very hard with the volunteer captains and their staff and we will be rolling out the first of that training this weekend out at the Hume training centre.

As to the payment of meals, there has been a policy within the RFS in terms of what we call self-sustainment, where RFS policy was that, when you deploy, for the first 24 hours you undertake self-catering, so you take with you your rations and then we ration from then on in as part of our logistic support cycle. Given the rate of effort and the sustainment of our staff during the entire experience, we actually introduced and brought forward the catering support for our staff and our volunteers throughout the season.

I acknowledge that there were some occasions where we missed staff, and that was because, quite frankly, the magnitude and the breadth of the staging area was nothing the ACT had ever experienced in the past. So whilst there were some shortcomings, in the main the support we provided to our volunteers, I would say, in comparison with other states was very, very good.

THE CHAIR: Can that be supplemented with ration packs or something like that where—

Ms Whelan: Yes. In fact, we were handing out ration packs and also self-catering packs. In our staging areas both at Calwell and then the major staging area we had at Hume we had both takeaway packs, as we call them, as well as hot meals on their return from the fireground.

I am not aware of any situation where paid staff would be eating a hot meal in front of a volunteer. That is very disappointing for me to hear that that would occur, and certainly it is something I will look into. But it would not be the practice of this agency to undertake that kind of behaviour, chair.

THE CHAIR: I am sure nobody is making any undue accusations, but even before the current fire season it was raised as something that we could work on. The brigades have their independence, obviously, and they are keen to do whatever they can, but there comes a point, as you say, where perhaps we can just do it better next season.

Ms Whelan: We have also introduced the extended logistics support, which is the additional washing machines into the stations.

THE CHAIR: Evidence we have received is that they have not been installed yet. Have you had that checked?

Ms Whelan: I saw one myself two Thursday nights ago. I will just get the chief of the Rural Fire Service to comment on that. But they were being rolled out and the plumbing was being adjusted to support those.

Mr Scott: They are all at the stations. A couple of them just need to be finally installed.

THE CHAIR: Can you please take on notice exactly how many have been installed and are functional now, as of today?

Ms Whelan: In terms of the strategic IMT, if I may, I would like to separate the different roles and functions in relation to the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System. As you are aware, the incident controller has an operations team and a planning team. That operations team has its communications direct with the divisional commanders and with the sector commanders on the fireground, where the intent is for a continuous loop of communication both in and out of the fireground.

There was never a point during the incident where an incident controller was directed or delayed in decision-making as a consequence of the strategic framework that was over and above what is the normal IMT. I am not sure whether, when you talk about strategic IMT, that is what you are referring to. In terms of the relationship with the incident controller, that works down through our operations room into the IMT. Certainly there are areas where we continue to learn and to enhance our capability, as does any institution that is in five-week, seven-week-long campaign firefighting.

Mr Gentleman: Chair, I will just add to the comments in regard to catering, because I got to visit the staging areas as well in the middle of the fire season. What I witnessed was quite strong catering, not just from ESA and the staff but also from the residents. You will see there some photos I took where residents provided some catering services to our volunteers and thankyou notes that were with the catering as well.

THE CHAIR: The community, of course, are incredible at coming in behind people.

I have just had feedback that it certainly occurs that people are being fed catered food and eating that in front of the volunteers. But it is not that someone is having a big gripe; it is just about whether we can improve this over time. No-one is saying that the intention is not good, but the message is that we can do better.

MS CODY: I want to ask a little bit about reflections from the current season. I acknowledge that it is relatively common to perceive after an incident that the sequence of events was more predictable than they really unfolded to be. However, on reflection, what are some of the key learnings that you have identified and what might you do differently in the future?

Ms Whelan: Thank you, Ms Cody. One of the things we would look to do much better or continue to improve into the future is the way we are communicating to our brigades as to the broader intent both from a strategic perspective as well as a tactical perspective. Appreciating that there is communication between the incident controller and the divisional commanders on the fireground, we also need to do work on ensuring that effectiveness.

Many of our brigade captains were briefed on a regular basis in the incident management area of ESA. I will ensure that we work harder to enhance and make effective those continued briefings.

Given the rate of effort and how challenging and intense the season was, we cannot necessarily rely on that timely communication to be handed down verbally from the chain of command. So we would certainly look at enhancing that through email traffic from the chief of the Rural Fire Service right out to the rank and file, during what are very complex, dynamic and challenging seasons.

We have mentioned that, as the fire went for five weeks, there was an opportunity to really do a deep dive into our operational capability. Whilst that was not something we welcomed in terms of the fire, in terms of the learning and the opportunities to really understand the capability and how we can continue to enhance that we would look at how we would deploy more effectively a forward operating base, particularly when we have an incident that stretches over a 197-kilometre perimeter and extends for over a five-week period.

The third thing we would look to do is welcome our Rural Fire Service to undertake the additional training they have highlighted to us this year that they are keen to undertake, which links to pathways. For us, of course, we will need to look at how we can deliver that training to a volunteer workforce. The incident management training is block training; it goes for an extended period of time and requires many hours of on-the-job training to receive the certification. That is something we do over many years with our paid staff. We will look to work with the Australasian fire and emergency services community as to how we can roll that training out for our volunteer workforce.

THE CHAIR: Our previous witness talked about how that has been done in Victoria and how it has been broken down into smaller units of competency and delivered over weekends as well.

Ms Whelan: Yes. We have been looking at the Victorian model of training, and there are some certain benefits. In fact, we have added an additional staff member on to our training team at ESA training who is focused on enhancing that capability for our volunteers.

MS CODY: I want to ask about resourcing and equipment for volunteers. I think you mentioned in your answer to Mrs Jones a moment ago that you are paying close attention to the royal commission. I understand that one of the focuses of the royal commission has been on resourcing and equipment for volunteer firefighters. How does the ACT compare to other states and what are you looking at that might be innovative to introduce into the volunteer fire service?

Ms Whelan: Thank you, Ms Cody. I am actually very proud to say that the quality of the equipment, the quality of the uniforms and also the additional vehicles that we provide our volunteers in the ACT is as good as, if not better than, a number of other jurisdictions. You only had to look out the window of the Emergency Services Agency headquarters in summer to see hundreds of firefighting vehicles lined up, and to see the quality of our vehicles in comparison to others was very positive.

In terms of uniforms, we maintain a very contemporary approach to the currency and quality of the uniforms we provide to our firefighters. In fact, what we are looking to do across the entire Emergency Services Agency is to rein in the office attire so that we can focus on continuing to provide high quality personal protective equipment for our volunteer firefighters.

Some very good feedback from our volunteers was about how they can access the technology we have in our incident management team and headquarters on the fireground. So we will be rolling out additional ICT capability for the command vehicles across the RFS so that we can download electronically not only the maps but also the incident action plans and keep those up to date. That will give your traditional controllers and our sector commanders almost instantaneous information, which will certainly value add to their capability on the fireground.

MR GUPTA: Acknowledging that the RFS has both paid and volunteer workforces, how does the ESA prioritise the use of firefighters in operations and then monitor and manage them in regard to fatigue?

Ms Whelan: Thank you, Mr Gupta. Within the incident management team we have a resource officer who monitors the rostering per service. There are four resource services for each of the four services feeding into a centralised workforce management system. At the moment that system is manual, but we are currently introducing the electronic system that has been effectively utilised by Parks and Conservation over the last season.

In addition, we have a fatigue management policy. An area that our chief of the Rural Fire Service is very focused on now is working with our volunteers so that we have full visibility of their fatigue levels as a consequence of their employment or their personal lives to ensure that we complement our own internal fatigue management policy, based on the hours we have deployed them on to the fireground, with whatever may be additional factors that impact their fatigue. That is something I am very

pleased we will be able to factor into the program, which has been effectively used by Parks and Conservation. Of course, that relies on our volunteers to furnish that information to us so that we are very clear on the risks we are taking with regard to firefighter fatigue.

The other area of prioritisation that is really important to understand is that we make decisions about deploying firefighters into other jurisdictions in terms of our cross-border relationships. Of course there is the need always, first and foremost, to focus on the health, wellbeing and the safety of our own community—that is my role and mandate as a commissioner of the Emergency Services Agency—and then to look at what we can afford to offer up to the National Resource Sharing Centre as available firefighters for when the jurisdictions themselves put bids in for firefighter support.

Whilst we have a strong desire from both our paid staff and our volunteers to do as much as they can for as many people as possible, both within our own jurisdiction and interstate, very deliberate decisions are made not to deploy volunteers on occasion because we are managing the risk associated with their fatigue or simply because the jurisdictions themselves have not asked for firefighter support to cross the border.

MR GUPTA: The previous witness did say the volunteers were looked after very well, so thank you so much. I have been hearing a lot about the fire controller, and I understand that this is the first time after 2003 that we have had an emergency controller and an incident controller. To extend my knowledge, can you, commissioner, define the difference between these two?

Ms Whelan: In my role as the emergency controller my responsibilities were to advise the minister and the Chief Minister about the emergency as it played out across our jurisdiction. My role was also to coordinate the disposition of our resources—that is, to be the authority to make a decision on whether we would allow our resources to leave our jurisdiction in support of other jurisdictions.

I was also to coordinate the disposition of the broader ACT government resource availability to support the hazards we were addressing, which were not only bushfire but also smoke, storm, flood and heat. Finally, I was also responsible for the overall deployment of the agency's response to the plethora of hazards we faced throughout the summer.

The incident controller was focused on the tactical level operations—the actual response to the bushfire—and overseeing the response and the management of the incident management team itself. Incident controllers work on a four to five-day roster—incident controllers for the morning, incident controllers for the evening, with a handover-takeover coordinated path. The incident controller position was filled by several staff from the Rural Fire Service, from ACT Fire & Rescue and also from Parks and Conservation and was supplemented by staff from interstate incident management capability teams, as we would deploy our own people interstate in support as well.

As the tactical emergency controller, I was keeping an eye on the tactical, understanding what was happening on the fireground but also looking at the broader issues at play over the duration of the season.

MR GUPTA: So we are assessing the bushfire risk, and as a result of that you respond to other emergencies at the same time?

Ms Whelan: Yes, as well as evacuation plans, heat plans, storm and flood response and also the management of the displaced persons who moved into the ACT from Victoria and New South Wales as a consequence of the smoke and the fires.

THE CHAIR: How many of the RFS staff will be permanent by the start of the bushfire season, which is usually around 1 October 2020?

Ms Whelan: If you give me one moment—

THE CHAIR: In the meantime, there are a couple of issues which the minister will be very aware of because I raised them with him long before you were in your current role—that is, the deployment of portaloos and the women’s bathroom facilities at RFS sheds. Can you update us on the use of portaloos over the summer and whether you have had a look at the state of women’s facilities at the RFS sheds?

Also, there is a lot of interest in vehicle maintenance for the RFS. We know they come through ESA headquarters maintenance, but has it ever been considered to allow them to be serviced locally, through local mechanic facilities, given that there is a lot to do at the ESA headquarters? Can you also update us on the masks trial, because there are some considerations that masks for the RFS have been quite slow to change?

Ms Whelan: Thank you, chair. Throughout the summer season portaloos were deployed through various areas of the fireground and the two staging areas. In terms of the specific locations, I would have to take that on notice, chair, and provide that to you. I can say that our director of logistics at the Emergency Services Agency was very alive to the issue of portaloos and access to them for both genders throughout the summer period.

In terms of vehicle maintenance, we have a very comprehensive vehicle maintenance program managed by the ESA. Outsourcing has been used on occasion, as required. However, we have a very comprehensive vehicle maintenance and vehicle replacement program across the agency. There is no doubt that the high usage of our vehicles over summer drove a considerable turnaround on the vehicles. I will check to see if there were any significant delays, but there is nothing that I am aware.

THE CHAIR: When the season starts and the vehicles are not quite ready for the season, that is a continual complaint that I have heard many times, not just this season.

Ms Whelan: To my knowledge, there may have been one or two vehicles that were delayed for our own season because they were used by our rural firefighters when we deployed them interstate to get experience and they were damaged and, as a consequence of that, required repair. But in terms of preparedness of our vehicles for the summer, I would be interested in—

THE CHAIR: More detail.

Ms Whelan: Yes, please. Because, to my knowledge, they were very well prepared.

THE CHAIR: We know that you do not sit in every single RFS shed and watch every single logbook, so we will get some more detail on that.

Ms Whelan: Whilst I may not sit in the sheds, I have a director of logistics that spends a lot of time showing me very detailed spreadsheets, based on my very strong desire to know where all the vehicles are, when they are being replaced and where they are in terms of maintenance, because it is a very significant issue for the volunteers and it is something I am very mindful of.

In terms of preparedness for this season, based on the booking system and the schedule, we expect all vehicles to be serviced by the start of this season, and all of the major repairs are underway.

In terms of the toilets, I have been to several sheds in the last couple of months. Of course, my shed visit was slightly delayed because of a very busy bushfire season. I can say that all of our sheds have male and female toilets. Two stations have a joint female/disability facility as well. I have inspected a number of the locker rooms and, based on the current infrastructure, they are reasonable.

As we roll out our newer facilities we are certainly seeing a significant improvement. As the number of female volunteers—which we are very proud of—increases, both RFS and SES, we are very mindful to ensure that we have the amenities. It is something that we are very focused on as part of our station upgrade program. In fact, Molonglo station four weeks ago took me through a very detailed tour and demonstrated to me the significant improvements we have made in the facilities.

I will go to our chief of the Rural Fire Service, who has been intimately involved in running the masks trial.

Mr Scott: Good afternoon, and I acknowledge the privilege conditions. We have had input from all brigades on the masks trial. We did some trials during the past season and we have also conducted some controlled experiments, if you want to call it that, in the smoke house down at the ESA training facility, where we were trialling different types of masks—full face and half face. We have also been working with New South Wales RFS on their working group to see what they are doing in the same context of better respiratory protection for their members.

It is very complex part of PPC to give our members. It is not just a case of issuing a mask. Full face, half face, there are different considerations for each type of those. There are different filtration types. We need to look at ongoing stock supplies, particularly with the COVID situation. We also have to look at the metabolic rate and the fitness levels of our members, because they do restrict them quite considerably.

So what seems to be quite a simple project of issuing a mask has a lot of complexity to it. New South Wales think theirs may take up to two years, if not more, to implement. Being the small jurisdiction that we are, we are a little bit ahead of the curve, but we still need to—

THE CHAIR: I dare say that there are members of the RFS who are in possession of documents that are over 10 years old asking for improvements to these masks. I would not go so far as to say you are ahead of the curve, but certainly working on it is something we can accept.

Mr Scott: We give them a P2 filter, which is the same as what a half-face or a full-face P2 gives. It is the same filtration rate.

THE CHAIR: Only the actual masks being used at the moment are combustible.

Mr Scott: There may be some evidence of that. I have not seen that myself, no. It is just that they fit better with a silicone or a medical-grade rubber, so the fit and the seal is better than the disposable masks but the filtration rate is still the same.

THE CHAIR: We are very keen to have the best we can for our volunteers so that they can go on being healthy for as long as they possibly can.

Ms Whelan: We will now go to staffing.

Mr Scott: By the start of this season we will have the majority of our staff filled. I have just completed a selection panel today. We have some additional positions we are also recruiting for, which gives us a better technical basis and skill set within the team. So definitely by that November period we will have every position filled permanently within the RFS except for chief officer's position, which will be at—

THE CHAIR: Where are we at with that, commissioner?

Ms Whelan: Mr Scott was appointed for nine months to get us through this bushfire season for two reasons. We had the position reviewed and resized, given the responsibilities of the chief officer, and that has just been finalised. Secondly, not that we are not very proud of and confident in the performance of Mr Scott to date but, as you can imagine, most jurisdictions are knee-deep in post activity, post-bushfire review so it is actually not the best time to be doing a national recruiting campaign. For that reason we made the conscious decision when we put out the expression of interest to appoint someone we were confident in who would get us through the next bushfire season.

THE CHAIR: So the intention is to continue with Mr Scott until after the next bushfire season?

Ms Whelan: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: Let's hope it is a bit less exciting than the last.

Ms Whelan: Absolutely. And the feedback I have received from the brigade captains is that they are very comfortable and confident with Mr Scott leading them through the next season.

THE CHAIR: Minister, prior to this summer were you aware of the concerns of

volunteers through the RFS that they were struggling to get the appropriate training to advance and plan out their careers?

Mr Gentleman: I visited a number of RFS stations prior to the season and took on board their comments in regard to training and other matters as well, and I continue to visit those stations. I will continue to listen to volunteers. Of course, we have—

THE CHAIR: But were you aware of this—

Mr Gentleman: the only jurisdiction in Australia where the minister meets on a regular basis with volunteers. So I was made aware of concerns, yes. And—

THE CHAIR: What did you do to resolve them ahead of last bushfire season?

Mr Gentleman: I raised them with ESA. I could not see a resolution prior to the season because—

THE CHAIR: Minister, how many years have you been the minister for the Emergency Services Agency?

Mr Gentleman: I think that is public knowledge, chair.

THE CHAIR: Well, how many years, minister?

Mr Gentleman: Since I was first elected, in 2014.

THE CHAIR: So for six years you have been the minister for emergency services and you have not been able to resolve these concerns that the RFS have raised with you when you have visited them?

Mr Gentleman: We are trying to resolve those concerns. There are—

THE CHAIR: But you did not resolve them prior to the current season we are now reviewing.

Mr Gentleman: Chair, there are a number of concerns the RFS raise with us as we visit their stations, and we try and get a resolution as soon as we can.

MS CODY: Can you tell me what the feedback has been from the volunteers to the mask trial? Have you had feedback from them and what has it been?

Mr Scott: Yes, there was a feedback form, an evaluation form, that we gave members that did a trial. Unfortunately there was not 100 per cent compliance with returning those forms, which was disappointing because we ran the trial to benefit the members. Quite a lot of them did not provide the evaluation form back to us. That is why we did a more comprehensive test at the ESA training facility with a controlled smoke environment and every participant then gave us an evaluation sheet on that.

THE CHAIR: Minister, of the many problems that the commissioner has had to overcome during this last summer, were you aware of any of them prior to her

commencement as the ESA commissioner?

Mr Gentleman: Let me first congratulate the commissioner on the work she has done. As you have indicated, it has been, I think, a phenomenal event for the commissioner to attend and go through and also it has been phenomenal for our volunteers and our services—

THE CHAIR: With respect, minister, that is not the question I asked you. I asked you whether you were aware of issues associated with training, with personnel being available for IMTs, with the state of some of the facilities, with matters to do with the catering and matters to do with equipment? Were you aware, ahead of the appointment of Commissioner Whelan?

Mr Gentleman: I challenge your comments there, chair. I do not see deficiencies in training. What I said was that on the visits to those stations these sorts of issues were raised, and I raised them with ESA. We have no deficiencies in training, chair. So let us just make that very clear.

THE CHAIR: Minister, I think you—

Mr Gentleman: And we can go through—

THE CHAIR: Minister, I am the chair of this hearing, and while I am happy for you to challenge factual information, many personnel have brought these concerns to me. Having unpicked them to some extent it is plain that they are not being caused by the current commissioner and are historic issues. Given that you have been the minister for six years, it is reasonable that these concerns are raised: catering; availability of after-hours training for the RFS; the state of some of the sheds; and deployment of various things. I am asking you, as the minister, why you have not addressed them sooner?

Raising them with the commissioner prior to the current commissioner is fantastic. But they were not resolved. Now we have had to deal with a season that has had some significant fallout, particularly for our volunteers. I am asking you why they were not resolved before the commissioner took over her role.

Mr Gentleman: I challenge your comments there too, chair. They were resolved. You have seen—

THE CHAIR: They were clearly not resolved or we would not be sitting here—

Mr Gentleman: You have seen me bring these matters into the Assembly to seek resourcing to support ESA, and you have voted against that money, chair. So let us just put this on the table.

THE CHAIR: That is hilarious, minister.

Mr Gentleman: If you want someone who is going to support the ESA—

THE CHAIR: I know that your general tactic—

Mr Gentleman: you will see—

THE CHAIR: Minister. Order!

Mr Gentleman: You will see us supporting the ESA—

THE CHAIR: Minister, I sit as the chair of this committee. In that capacity I am like the Speaker in this hearing. It is interesting that you constantly raise the idea that the opposition voting against the general budget is blocking supply. That is not blocking supply, as you well know. We have been through this many times in the Assembly.

We started this season with urgent duty driver training not having been completed by so many members of the RFS that the commissioner considered it necessary to stop the practice, which had an impact on the Beard fire, as we well know and as we have canvassed over and over again since the bushfire season. You coming into this place and saying that those things were resolved is a complete nonsense and everybody knows that. I ask you again: why, prior to this season, had you not resolved matters which had been raised with you?

Mr Gentleman: Chair, I will ask the commissioner, but I do know that the cessation of UDD by the chief RFS officer was associated with any deficiency in supporting the Beard fire. But I will ask the—

THE CHAIR: Passing over to the ESA commissioner, who was not here when this problem developed, is an unfortunate tactic, minister. Frankly, it has been made clear in public commentary, both by the minister herself and the head of RFS, that the training had not been completed. I find it very difficult to lay that at the feet of a commissioner who had not been in place for 12 months when these problems became apparent. You, minister, have been in charge for six years and I ask you again why you did not resolve this issue earlier.

Mr Gentleman: As I said, chair, it was not the decision of the commissioner; it was the decision of the chief Rural Fire Service officer to cease UDD at the Beard fire because, in his words, they were not trained appropriately for urgent duty driving. And I supported that decision.

THE CHAIR: It is not about the decision, minister; it is about the fact that the training had not been kept up to date. We are going around in circles now. We can move on to the next question.

Ms Whelan: Chair, if I may clarify for you, it is not that we did not deliver training; this is a national problem. It is a national issue that is being considered. The chief of the Rural Fire Service undertook an—

THE CHAIR: Well, urgent duty driving was not cancelled in other places, to be fair—

Ms Whelan: Chair, the risk is very different in other jurisdictions. It is not a one size fits all with regard to urgent duty driving. We have a situation in the ACT where our

rural firefighters are more likely to drive across an urban area with high density traffic than what we see in other regions of Australia. As a consequence, our previous chief of the Rural Fire Service determined that it was a risk, which is why we then—

THE CHAIR: Yes, because they had not been appropriately trained. Thank you very much, commissioner.

Ms Whelan: No, there were—

THE CHAIR: Public statements have been made that the training was not delivered, and I would be very careful about—

Ms Whelan: No, it was that we want to introduce the training to ensure the safety of our rural firefighters and the community.

THE CHAIR: Yes, well, it will be very interesting to have a look back at the evidence from earlier in the season and what was said about that. Mr Gupta.

Mr Gentleman: Chair, can I just correct—

THE CHAIR: I believe it is Mr Gupta's turn.

Mr Gentleman: Yes, I just wanted to correct the record on my time as—

THE CHAIR: We will come back to you in a moment. Mr Gupta.

MR GUPTA: For the training gaps, has funding been identified for future training for the personnel and preparedness?

Ms Whelan: Mr Gupta, just to clarify the question, was it around training gaps?

MR GUPTA: Yes, have we identified the areas and the gaps for the future situation, for preparedness, so that these trainings will be more up to date and enough for the skills required for the firefighters?

Ms Whelan: Mr Gupta, I will clarify and then I will ask my chief of the Rural Fire Service to provide additional information. There are no gaps in the training for the tasks we have given our rural firefighters. The training we have provided is more than sufficient and of very good quality for the tasks that we have allocated them.

What our rural firefighters have fed back is that they would like additional opportunity for training so that they can participate in incident management roles, which we are now working on. But there are no gaps in our incident management capability. We have qualified—

MR GUPTA: Commissioner, what I meant by gaps was that they require that additional training..

Ms Whelan: What they require is further training to enhance volunteer career pathways, but for the roles they currently undertake they do not require additional

training. What they would like to see is that we are more communicative in the skills maintenance programs which, again, is the balance between the autonomy that the brigade captains have a desire for in running their own training programs and then coordinating the nine brigades to undertake collective training, which is underway. But that is very different to a gap in training.

In terms of the skill sets for the incident management teams, yes, they desire that, but that does not suggest that there is a gap in the number of staff we have qualified in those roles across the entirety of the agency—and factoring in, as we always have, our Parks and Conservation staff as well.

THE CHAIR: Commissioner, witnesses have spoken about their desire to do training which is offered but not offered often enough or in the right hours. So while there is not a complaint about the quality of the training, there is a complaint about the frequency and ability of people who work 9 to 5 to access that training. I guess that is not so much a gap in competency but a gap in deliverability.

One submitter explained to us about the time that people at the brigade level put in to preparing and delivering their training and how that is becoming increasingly difficult. To some extent it is about how can we modernise, how can we adapt to the time that volunteers have and how can the ESA support the brigades when and where they are willing to accept it.

Ms Whelan: We are adapting online training, as are a number of colleagues across jurisdictions which are offering a variety of options. We are establishing what we are calling the spine, which is collective training along common lines of skills maintenance for both SES and RFS volunteers. That initiative has been introduced by our two chief officers in the last six months and we have received very positive feedback from that.

It is always challenging to make a service offering of training for the number of volunteers that all have different timetables. I know the chief of the Rural Fire Service is working very hard, but we have always had a practice of offering training after hours and on weekends because we recognise that our volunteers have to work very hard so that they can pay their mortgage and raise their families. We will continue to do that.

MR GUPTA: On-the-job training is happening as well, along with the requirement of the people in the ESA? They have to upskill themselves?

Ms Whelan: There is the opportunity for on-the-job training that can be acquired through interstate deployments, when they are available, and also to come and work in our IMTs. I take the opportunity to highlight that we offered roles to RFS volunteers who were qualified in incident management to undertake shifts in our incident management team over summer, and some of those offers were knocked back. We did not deny opportunities; in fact, we were encouraging them. Unfortunately, some volunteers made an offer initially and then did not take up that offer to be rostered.

THE CHAIR: In the Legislative Assembly on 19 February 2020 the minister said that the direction was to address the fact that the ACT Rural Fire Service does not

provide urgent duty driving training to members and there is no currency or skill to be maintained. He said UDD is a dangerous undertaking. That seems a little different to the statement that has been made here. Has UDD training ever been offered in the RFS?

Mr Scott: No. It was offered many, many years ago. It has been very ad hoc. There are no national units of competency that give urgent duty driving. There is the drive under operational conditions training, which we have now strengthened with a very solid driving policy, a standard operational procedure. We will upskill our members with legislation on driver attitude and how to position the vehicle as they go through traffic and intersections.

With the selection of drivers, previously the captains selected who was going to do the urgent duty driving, which then put a very strong onus of risk on to the captains because they have made that decision on behalf of the individuals they have given the powers to drive. We have done is to give our members a very good understanding of their responsibilities and a better selection process for the members.

THE CHAIR: We will be looking forward to seeing the outcomes of that. Will that have an effect within this upcoming season?

Mr Scott: Correct. Off the top of my head, 13 will be going through this weekend, and there will be an additional course towards the end of September. Then we will evaluate the two courses that have gone through, modify it if needed, and then we will offer it to other drivers.

THE CHAIR: Has that been developed in the ACT?

Mr Scott: This is an ACT development with very strong consultation with Fire & Rescue ACT and also ACT Policing. My new operations manager is seconded from ACT Policing, bringing 20 years of experience in urgent duty driving. His input has been invaluable in this policy for the volunteers.

Ms Whelan: Chair, as you know, the Australasian fire and emergency services community is a very strong one and, in fact, our colleagues from other states are looking very closely at what we are doing because it is very contemporary in its approach. It will inform how other states might move in that direction as well.

THE CHAIR: We would like to see all our RFS personnel ready and raring to go for driving across the city, should it be required in an emergency in the upcoming summer.

MS CODY: Minister, you have brought forward the start of the fire season a little bit; is that correct? When does this year's fire season start?

Mr Gentleman: Last year we brought the fire season forward. This year, I will pass over to our new chief to answer.

Mr Scott: The fire season usually runs from 1 October through to the end of March. With the recent weather we have had—significant rain and the snow falls up in the

mountains—our heavier fuels have more moisture and there is likelihood of the season being put back to the start of 1 November this year. There could be some significant grass growth compared to last year, which we will monitor, but that risk will not come into effect until it starts—

THE CHAIR: Until it dries it out.

Mr Scott: Correct. It would be nice to be able to say that I recommend to the minister that we push the season back, but that is in consultation with the jurisdictions around us. If New South Wales does not delay their season it—

THE CHAIR: It would be nice to have some good news in 2020, I can tell you.

MR GUPTA: I asked Mr Foley about the aerial firefighting. Commissioner, how effective was the aerial firefighting for the season?

Ms Whelan: We will talk about it at two levels, Mr Gupta. I will start and then I will hand over to our chief of the Rural Fire Service. Obviously fire suppression methods vary from our ground staff—the tactics, techniques and procedures that we follow—and the aerial firefighting capability that we have in terms of the platforms. Also, a number of factors affect and influence the fire—the fuel loads themselves, the weather conditions, accessibility and also communication. We factored a number of those issues in when determining the utilisation of the aircraft available to us over the bushfire season.

If you have a look at any of the literature on aviation firefighting capability and the utility of attack aircraft, you need to take data over several years to better inform the effectiveness. No one flight or one season will give you the indication you are after. In fact, there is very good research from BNHCRC on that particular issue, and we have been factoring that in in terms of our own decision-making.

I will hand over to Mr Scott to talk about the relationships with the air operations desk and the information we would need to provide before any aircraft would be authorised for aerial firefighting.

Mr Scott: Most of our aerial appliances are available nationally because 90 per cent of the resources used in Australia are actually in Australia for most of the year. We use different platforms. We have our specialised intelligence gathering, which gives us real-time data, including thermal. We have bucketed machines with winches which we insert and can also use for suppression. Then we have the large air tankers and the small-engine air tractors.

Each one of the aerial appliances is given a very distinct task before it is deployed. We consider the options. They are just another tool in our toolbox. They do not actually put the fire out as such; we still need boots on the ground for the majority of the operations.

A lot of the times at the Orroral fire the aircraft were used in the very inaccessible parts of that fire. There were a lot of areas where we could not get appliances in, so the idea of the aerial assets was to slow the movement of the fire and to try to take

some of the intensity out of it. There has been some mapping where it has come across a retardant line and it has slowed progression. That allowed us to reconsider some strategies and maybe redeploy ground troops to assist with the suppression of the fire.

We used helicopters a lot of for getting our remote area fire teams in for identifying hotspots. As a tool they are very effective if used correctly in the way they are intended for. All our taskings are considered—they go through the planning cell and we use them for the correct application.

Ms Whelan: There is no one method that is sufficient; it is a combination of all capabilities applied on the fireground.

THE CHAIR: Minister, was there something you wanted to clarify before I close?

Mr Gentleman: Yes, chair. In regard to my time as MPES, it is from 2016. It feels a bit longer but—

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much. The committee will report after the Assembly has finished sitting, but all members will be able to see a copy of that report on the JACS website. We will make sure that it is publicly known when our report is complete.

I thank all members for their tireless work over the summer season. I know, Commissioner Whelan, there are many Canberrans very grateful for the long hours that you and your team put in. We are very glad to have seen no more damage done than what was done. We all grieve for what has happened to our beautiful parkland but we are thankful for the effort that everyone put in.

Questions that have been taken on notice we need back five days after you receive the proof transcript of *Hansard* when it is sent to you by the committee office. On behalf of the committee, I thank all witnesses who have appeared today and given generously of their time. When available, the proof transcript will give you an opportunity to let us know if we have something wrong. The inquiry hearings on this topic are now complete. I call the conclusion of today's hearing.

The committee adjourned at 5.37 pm.