

Verbal response to Waroona Fire inquiry

Head of Inquiry: Mr Euan Ferguson AFSM

Date of Hearing for SESVA: 9 March 2016

SESVA Witnesses: SESVA President, Gordon Hall
SESVA Secretary, Lin Booth
SESVA Committee Member. Phillip Petersen

Location: 20 Southport St, Leederville

Time: 0950 started – finished 1120am

Opening address by SESVA President Gordon Hall

Good morning Mr Ferguson and panel

Thank you for giving the SESVA the opportunity today to come and speak with you

My name is Gordon Hall, President of the SES Volunteers Association and I have with me today Phillip Petersen ESM, and Secretary Lin Booth

Phillip is an SESVA Committee member, Past President of the SESVA and has over 30 years as an SES Volunteer at a number of locations including Mandurah, Karratha and Gosnells.

Lin Booth is the SESVA Secretary, sits on a number of DFES sub-committees and has over 20 years' experience as an SES Volunteer in Mundaring and Northam, including over 18 years in SES Unit management roles.

My background with the SES commenced in 1993 as a Volunteer and includes a period on the first FESA Board, 13 years as a Regional Director and Director of FESA and today I am still an SES Volunteer. During this period I have been involved in many responses both as an SES Volunteer and as a Regional Director. My roles were varied and included many operations both as a Volunteer and a staff member of FESA. This included working with communities and government agencies during floods and cyclones at a number of locations across the state and a key person in the national tsunami project.

Today we will be giving three presentations addressing a number of the ToRs and focussing on the State Emergency Service Volunteer's role in bushfire support.

Phillip will be addressing terms of reference 1b and 1d

The response to the January 2016 Waroona Fire

- (b) The effectiveness of emergency management plans and procedures;
- (d) The effectiveness of incident management;

I will be addressing 2a(v) and 2b

Lessons learned from previous bushfire emergencies

- (v) O’Sullivan and Lower Hotham Bushfires Review (SEMC, 2016); and
- (b) The effectiveness of reforms implemented by the State since 2011

Lin will be addressing TOR 3

- The need for further reform

I will finish by with a summary of our submission

I will now hand over to Phillip

HANDOVER TO PHILLIP

Phillip Petersen

Good morning Mr Ferguson and panel, also thanks to Gordon for the introduction.

I will be presenting information which is addressing the Term of Reference 1(b) and 1(d). All of this is in the written submission, but I will speak to some of the key issues that we have identified.

To ensure that the SES VA is adding value to this inquiry, we attempt to ensure that our evidence is based on observations of “experienced” SES Volunteers.

Whilst some of what I have to report is from some senior SES Volunteers who have other professional careers, one of these has an extended career in WA Bush Fire Management including being active past IMTs that were made up of what is now known as DPAW and DFES, his area of local knowledge was in the area of the Waroona Fires.

From these observations, when collated by the SESVA, it became clear to us that major emergencies are receiving dysfunctional responses.

Many of the systemic issues are also reflected in the response to tropical cyclone threats, flood and land searches.

The data we have collected demonstrates that the problems are not new, but have become worse in recent years.

It is a shame that the bravery and lives of our on the ground fire fighters and fire support, such as the SES Volunteers, is being jeopardised in this way.

The first topic I am addressing is DFES Operational Resourcing

DFES request resources from SES Units by a number of sources concurrently during an operation.

These competing requests come from the State Operations Centre (SOC), Regional Operations Centre (ROC) and DFES Communications Centre (Comcen) and they are not being coordinated in any manner.

At the same time the SES units have an allegiance to their community and therefore are often providing resources to local government for their local emergency response, including fire.

This is resulting in occasions when SES resources are required for non-fire operations; the SES has not had the resources to meet the request in their traditional HMA roles.

Consequently, SES Local Managers are losing operational and safety management of their unit's resources.

I am now going to discuss how do we Measure the Success in the Conduct of an Operation

Currently there appears to be no measure of how successful an operation was.

The Association (SESVA) believes there needs to be some form of accountability relating to the conduct of Operations.

DFES needs to be willing for this to be done for all operations at Levels 2 and 3 to ensure we can all see what went well and what needs improving.

The lack of adequate IT hardware and operation systems also diminishes our efficiency.

DFES is naturally NOT willing to adopt a continuous improvement ethic.

Auditing measures would also form the basis of required training to assist in the efficiency and safety of SES Volunteers, as well as how well we have served our customer agencies and communities of Western Australia.

Which leads me into the next point which is about Operational Debriefs

The same issues are arising again and again from all type of operations that SES Volunteers are involved in, resulting issues not being fixed or improved. Not just fires.

Debriefs conducted immediately after an operation are generally flawed as many staff do not appreciate Volunteerism and how people think and react. Many staff and Volunteers may not even be in attendance and hence never have an opportunity to contribute.

Many of the points raised during these Hot debriefs tend to be explained away at the time and no further action taken with no apparent DFES willingness to record and investigate.

Many Volunteers do not bring up any matters as they are tired and just want to return home, rest and return to their employment.

Some Volunteers will not raise issues as they fear reprisals or marginalisation from career staff. They have witnessed instances where Volunteers are made to feel their input is not of any worth.

Many of the points that need to come out will best appear 4-8 weeks later, after the Volunteers have returned home and normalised their family, employer arrangements and have had time to rationalise their experience and thoughts via an independent and object review team.

Fifteen years and more ago, the SES formal debriefs and Post Incident Analyses (PIAs) generally happened about 4 weeks after an operation.

These were done in a structured manner that allowed a list of priorities to be set and the required action to be taken with plans and procedures amended.

The next point is about the observed Disconnect Between Agencies During the Waroona Fire Operation

During the Waroona fires the DFES and DPAW IMTs were operating in the same area, but located apart and operating independently.

A suggestion of collocating the agency's IMTs together was actioned.

However, they were still agency based teams and did not appear to be working together for mutual benefit and thus demonstrating no confidence or mutual trust in each other.

This only comes from exposure to each other in similar environments and through training.

This disconnect between agencies is affecting the smooth, effective and safe conduct of the emergency response.

In the past, DFES and DPAW had shared pre-formed team experience and operational exposure, which gave the opportunity to develop mutual respect for competence and experience.

Further to this, these roles were allocated on experience and competency levels, rather than the apparent DFES preference for a DFES career person's rank.

It was also observed that the IMTs were not strictly following the AIIMS structure.

There was some reticence to adhere to the 'Unity of Command' philosophy.

Whilst we can't comment on how that effected the fire response, we know this caused confusion to SES Volunteers attempting to complete their allocated roles.

The Rank Structure Has Overridden the Competency Based Performance during an Operation

DFES has been utilising a career Rank Structure to oversee major fire and other natural emergencies.

It would be reasonable to believe that over several generations of emergency management in WA, various organisations have morphed skills and competencies based upon exposure to their allocated hazard response responsibilities.

However, there now appears to be an organisational mindset that any Career Fire and Rescue Officer can be applied to any task by virtue of their rank, forsaking the discreet learnings, local knowledge and experience that has been accrued and then passed down through mentoring of junior officers from bushfire and natural hazards.

Career Fire and Rescue Officer are over riding regional staff and Volunteers who often have relevant competencies and local knowledge.

This has been an organisationally evaded issue for many years in fire and natural emergencies (eg Cyclones & floods) where some unsound decisions have narrowly missed becoming a political, community business or physical disasters.

Instead of working with competency based staff and Volunteers, it has been a practice to seize operational control according to career rank instead of assisting with coordinating and providing the steady guiding hand.

Now to talk about Working Shifts, Welfare, and Safety

Volunteer shift hours appear to be based on career fire rosters which is not realistic for volunteer hours. This problem existed during the Waroona and Lower Hotham Fires.

It should be noted, the comment made by ***Office of the Auditor General West Australian, report August 2015, key point 6, "Existing DFES Policies do not address Volunteer fatigue"***.

It has been reported by Volunteer radio operators in a Incident Control Vehicle (ICV) that after a period of six hours and due to the level of intensity, they begin to lose concentration and make mistakes. Twelve hour shifts for this role, especially without any rotation, is high risk in relation to the operation.

Welfare breaks and meal times are often not aligned, causing many SES Volunteers to miss out on breaks and appropriate meals.

It would appear agencies contracted by DFES are struggling or are not informed of the needs of the responders during incidents of the size and length of Waroona Fires.

Media reports also indicate this was not limited to SES Volunteers at the Waroona fires.

For the safety of the SES Volunteers this needs to be urgently fixed as they are still at risk.

There are several more points I would like to make, but I appreciate our time here today is limited. There are other points of concern, which include:

- Lack of situational awareness that was putting SES Volunteers in fire danger;
- Lack of access to functioning IT systems;
- Training for SES Volunteers;
- Volunteer Liaison officers (VLOs);
- Lack of field Peer Support;
- Poor operational logging on/off procedures;
- And Lack of Operational briefings.

These points are covered in the SES Volunteer Associations written submission.

Thank you, for listening to me and I will now hand over to SESVA President, Gordon Hall, to address the next terms of reference.

Gordon Hall

Addressing of TOR 2a (v) and 2b by SESVA President Gordon Hall

(O'Sullivan and Lower Hotham Bushfires review)

Mr Ferguson and panel, as per the previous speaker I will be addressing the support role of the SES and not the strategies used in relation to bushfire.

We had not had the opportunity to study the O'Sullivan and Lower Hotham Bushfires Review (SEMC, 2016) in depth until the past weeks however I must make a few points about those operations.

The SESVA received quite a number of written submissions of serious issues about the Lower Hotham bushfires which in fact put the SES Volunteers in danger and caused a lot of anxiety amongst them.

Mr Ferguson, the real issue we have here is that many of the issues out of the Lower Hotham (aka Boddington) fires have repeated themselves again at Waroona. In fact many of the issues were operational matters at the TC Olwyn response earlier last year and the Carnarvon fires in 2012

Many times DFES will advise us that there were no issues as either they were bought up at the on sight debrief and explained why or there was nothing of substance

Unfortunately this is flawed as it generally takes Volunteers 4 – 8 weeks after an event for Volunteers to gather their thoughts and put pen to paper – this is after their family, living arrangements and employment situations have been normalised and they can think clearly.

The anecdotal and written information at this stage includes;

As can be seen from the evidence and in our written submission that the issues that have not changed include;

Shifts lengths and times that are not suited to the support function;

As detailed in our written submission and mentioned by the speaker before me, we have radio operators in the ICV working 12 hours and reporting to us that the shifts should only be 6 hours as the level of concentration is such that mistakes are being made after the 6 hour mark.

Drivers falling asleep at the wheel because a 12 hr shift ends up being at least 15 hours including travel time.

It is urgent that these issues need to be addressed in an appropriate manner for the safety of the SES Volunteers and those that work around them.

A lack of situational awareness by the IC/IMT in relation to what is happening;

We are aware of this and it includes examples at Waroona where the ICV was in the path of the fire and the IMT was unaware of this, as detailed in our written submission.

There are other examples at the Lower Hotham fires, Carnarvon fires and TC Olwyn at Carnarvon.

Once again this is high unnecessary risk for the SES Volunteers

Incorrect instructions on where to drop off firefighters from LG (given to them by others)

There are many examples where the instructions given are incorrect or vague. This has happened at a number of operations since 2011.

As detailed in our written submission one of the SES roles is to transport firefighters and IMT members into the Control points and drop them off and pick up the retiring crews. There are many examples, including myself, where the instructions given on where to drop off bushfire fighters was incorrect and many kilometres away from the location where they are required.

It is our opinion that nothing has changed in the past five years since FESA was abolished and in fact it has become worse and coordination is very poor.

We have the DFES SOC doing some of the coordination and resourcing, the same by the DFES Comcen, others by the DFES ROC, or by local government or DPaW.

There is no coordination between them and nobody really knows what is going on and who is doing what.

DPaW have tasked SES Volunteers to go onto the fire ground!!!

We are waiting for the official report on this as DFES has been sent a copy by the SES unit member involved

The SES units are generally tasked by their local government in relation to the bushfire crews and DFES on the fire and rescue crews. Local Government, in general terms, appear more organised than DFES.

In summary, it is our opinion that nothing appears to have changed, and in fact appears to be getting worse and placing our SES Volunteers at risk by lack of effective coordination.

2b

Effective Reforms since 2011

Since the above date we have had serious feedback about the;

2012 Carnarvon fires which put a number of the SES Volunteers at serious risk. Was there an MIR? We do not know!

2015 TC Olwyn – the reports show that nothing has changed in the control and coordination of an operation and SES Volunteers were put at risk. No Post incident Analyses has been conducted

2015 Lower Hotham (aka Boddington) fires – no improvements from previous operations which from a number of areas not only caused frustration with our Volunteers, but placed many of them at risk, including fatigue

2015 Sandstone search – the reports, written and anecdotal, show a number of serious matters that put the SES Volunteers at risk – No post incident analyses done

From an SES point of view the situation at Waroona is the same as previous years.

There has been no improvement and many important matters only happen on the run if it is brought to DFES attention.

No daily briefings

For example a number of years ago, during an operation the SES would get a 8/9am briefing on the current and possible situation and required resources, followed by a 5/6pm briefing which would give the current status and possible scenarios for the next day. This allowed the SES Local Managers and their deputies to plan their support for the next day. This did not happen for the Waroona fires and only happened in the past if pushed. It is my strong view that we have a cultural issue here and fire and rescue personnel do not understand the forward planning of operations and the necessity to inform people of the situation so SES Volunteers can plan resourcing for the next day.

Use of extensive SES Resource for fire support

Another example is the use of the SES resources by DFES left parts of the state vulnerable to responses if there was an event that the community expects the SES to respond to immediately.

In fact on the Friday there was an urgent search initiated in the south west for a person who may self-harm. As many of the SES Volunteers were involved in the Waroona fires

they were only able to find three available (3) SES Volunteers from the local area for that search.

No Demobilisation formalised Process

Over the past few years we have moved to ad-hoc arrangements in the operations that the SES are involved in, instead of a structured operation. This includes both during an operation and the de-mobilisation process. Over the past operations a lot of the SES resources were returned and required refurbishment, repair or servicing before the assets were ready to be used. This was always left for the SES Volunteers to arrange and on many occasions pay out of their fund raising monies.

Demobilisation only improved after the Esperance fires because of the strong advocacy by the SESVA. It is only verbal and there is no written process for the SES Volunteers to follow – it is word of mouth and left for the District Officer to decide if and when.

Culture

It is our opinion that the application of fire and rescue methods for the involvement of the SES Volunteers in support of fire is not working.

The same applies to response to natural hazards

I refer to Page 62 of the written submission about TC Olwyn. The feedback by DFES was very interesting and I draw your attention to no 2 on that page. Trying to run an operation a 1000kms away from Cockburn and telling them what they need on the ground is fraught with danger.

No 4 – All SES Volunteers were assembled in Perth and bussed to the airport. Did they not check they had appropriate PPC?

Although some of the answers are flippant (no 16 of TC Olwyn) a number of the answers show disorganisation or control from the SOC in Perth.

There is a whole different skills set and methodology required for effective support by the SES Volunteers.

The abolition of the SES training group and moving away from competency based training and using DFES, designed by FRS, courses for SES Volunteers, has turned into a mess and is not congruent with or take into account the SES role and culture.

I spent time in a different Volunteer group in Harvey in February pulling burnt fence posts out and rolling up burnt barbed wire. It was very interesting listening to the locals on how they had done their preparation at their farms, however when DFES arrived they would not listen to them

and accept their local knowledge on a range of matters including where you could get mobile phone range or where the phone service is unreliable.

The SES Culture worked very effectively in the West Australian communities for many years, however using a fire and rescue culture does not work for the natural hazards

I refer to the Volunteer Opinion Survey – pages 94, 95, 96 of the submission where 100 senior or active Volunteers in leadership roles gave their feedback.

The feedback shows that DFES has a long way to go on effective communication, operational support, their IT is inadequate and the service delivery culture is very poor.

In summary there needs to be effective reform and please remember that culture can only be changed from within and not from outside.

The State Emergency Service in WA requires its own Chief Officer with an SES background to achieve this, so their issues can be represented at the highest level within DFES or any future organisation.

HANDOVER TO LIN

Lin Booth

Addressing of TOR 3

The Need for Further Reform

The need for further functional reforms for emergency management and review processes

The Support Role the SES Provides to DFES

At the present time, DFES is gradually changing the roles of the SES from those it is known for doing well (such as earthquake, vertical rescue, road crash rescue etc), to just being a labour force for control by DFES Structural Fire Personnel.

Before the formation of DFES, the SES were the HMA for the Earthquake, Flood, Storm, Cyclone and Tsunami roles and a number of combat roles.

The SES role for fire is a support role where SES Volunteers provide all support of support in areas of transport, IMT members and others where required.

While we acknowledge DFES is the overall body now charged with these roles, and the SES is a service within DFES, it is becoming increasingly apparent the career fire service now feels they can manage these roles, and immediately take over when they arrive on site.

What is becoming also increasingly apparent to SES Volunteers is the DFES staff have no training in the roles they assume, and the events are not managed efficiently, with many problems occurring, a few of which have been highlighted by my colleagues today.

DFES very often call upon SES to do a “scribes” role and this is a real issue in a number of areas. There is no training or support for this role and the push back is usually centred around the fact that if something is written down it will be challenged in an inquiry or court of law if someone challenges what they said. This is a real worry to a number of Volunteers and this Association.

As we would all be aware, some services are more skilled in specific roles than others (eg Fire Service for structural fires, VMRS for water rescue, SES for Natural Hazard, Bush Fire for wild fires). Fire and Rescue Service is gradually eroding the roles of all the other services, and claiming control of all roles. They are not experienced in many of the roles, and this is showing in the management of incidents.

A recent example of this is at an earthquake recovery workshop attended in February 2016, there were two DFES staff there, who believed that after a major earthquake in Perth, they would distribute supplies, equipment, personnel from central points to begin the recovery. They had a lot of trouble understanding if a major earthquake occurred, there would be high rise building collapses blocking roads, roads torn up, bridges down, gas leaks, water leaks, public transport in

chaos, no or very little communications available etc. They also believed the SES Units would not self-activate, as it was against their (DFES Fire Service) rules, until authorised to do so by a Superintendent or COMCEN. SES units are community centred and self-activate in their communities as required by the local community.

SES No Longer has a Chief

With the creation of DFES nearly five years ago, there is no longer a Chief of the SES. This has dramatically affected the quality of service provided to the community, as all management above DO is now from the fire side, and many have no real understanding, training in, or in many cases actual experience in natural hazards, except from a structural fire perspective.

One simple example of this is, a half hour conversation I had with a senior DFES employee discussing the fact SES prioritise and then sectorise their tasks, whereas the Fire Service sectorise immediately.

The reason the SES operate the way we do is to ensure the most important tasks are done first, and as they can be spread over a very wide area, we need to prioritise the tasks.

At the end of half an hour, all I was told is “We sectorise and that is how it will be done”. There was no comprehension of the fact that most fires fought by the Fire Service are structural, and in a relative small area. The SES tasks can cover very large areas, often several Shires or Cities in fact.

If the SES had an SES Chief, and the structure of DFES was something like the old FESA structure, with a Chief for each agency, under a single Commissioner, the majority of the issues created by the difference in cultures and operational methodologies at incidents would go away.

The current proposed legislative changes will dramatically affect the effectiveness of the SES Volunteers, and subsequently the way the SES Volunteers serve their Community.

Definition of Major Incidents and Level 1, 2, 3 Incidents

DFES needs to review its definition of a major incident, as the current one only applies to fire, and when applied to an SES incident has no relation to how the incident should be managed. Also, PIA's need to have a process created, so they actually occur after each incident, so every service can improve with the benefit of the reviews. They are not following the SEMC Policy 4.1 on this and there are examples of DFES staff coming in and pushing SES out of their roles without any discussion.

Post Incident Analyses (PIAs)

At present PIA's never seem to occur unless a major "fuss" occurs by someone, and then only sometimes. There does not appear to be any standard process in place for review of incidents.

For example there has not been a PIA of the Sandstone search, the Carnarvon 2013 fires or TC Olwyn where many SES Volunteers from many SES Units were involved. The SESVA has written feedback on these.

One example is that the SESVA has been requesting a PIA on the TC Olwyn operation (covering two towns) for nearly twelve months. This has been denied. At a meeting late in 2015 the SESVA requested a meeting with the three Operations Command Chiefs to discuss the operational feedback received from SES Volunteers. As was discussed with them there were many common themes that are happening at many operations. On their request we gave them a copy of our report so we could discuss the feedback with them. One of the Chiefs then released this report to the staff involved and subsequently the Volunteers.

This was a complete breach of trust and derails any balanced view of the past and future as staff go into a defensive mode. No names were mentioned anywhere in the document and the feedback comments and statements were put into a readable language. There was feedback on this by the staff and it is attached. Some of the answers are not what would normally be expected. To explain matters away without looking at them constructively is very common in debriefs and internal PIAs.

Rank Based Management of Incidents

DFES needs to remove the culture of rank based management of incidents, and return to the culture of competency based management.

The current process is the highest rank at the incident manages the incident, even if they have no training and/or experience in that type of incident is creating many issues.

All rank insignias should be removed during an operation by DFES staff.

Proposed Legislation

The current proposed legislation will not remove any of the above issues, and in fact will compound them, thus lowering even further, the service provided to the community by the SES Volunteers. They are the community working for their community.

Closing address by SESVA President Gordon Hall

Mr Ferguson I will now formally summarise and wind up our submission.

We heard Phillip talk about

- The effectiveness of emergency management plans and procedures and;
- The effectiveness of incident management;

for the response to the January 2016 Waroona Fire

I then spoke

about lessons learned from previous bushfire emergencies, in particular the O’Sullivan and Lower Hotham Bushfires Review (SEMC, 2016); and the effectiveness of reforms implemented by the State since 2011

Lin finished

by addressing the need for further reform

Many examples were drawn out both in the written submission and at this hearing today

The main points are that the feedback we continually get, the lack of Post Incident Analyses (PIAs) for all operations that the SES Volunteers are involved in, including Tropical Cyclones and Searches, is that nothing has changed over the past 3 to five years.

In fact many SES Volunteers would say it has become worse

And after listening to locals around Harvey 2 weeks after the fires, nobody should have died in those fires.

On page 78 of our submission we include a letter from FESA in 2011 to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, regarding the inadequacies of Communications networks in WA. On page 80 FESA say that these systems have largely proven unreliable and unresponsive to the needs of emergency services in WA. My original background is electronic engineering and apart from working for the OTC in the space industry, and Telstra as a manager nationally, I must say that FESA is correct about the unreliability. However DFES have carried on with the alert systems as though they will reach all and sundry.

I have visited many remote towns in Canada and Alaska as well as the South of North America and the town sirens are still the best way of alerting folk to an emergency situation. I have also experienced this in some North Queensland towns as well.

The alert systems are not being effective and must change to reflect what a community really need.

Another very important point is the lack of logging in points for SES Volunteers arriving at an incident site. A number of years ago the SES had a system whereby all personnel on arriving and departing were logged into and off the site by a person at or near the entry point. This no longer occurs and it is often difficult to find where the people are with T cards. As a consequence very few SES Volunteers get logged in – unless they are working in that area

As in our covering letter I would also like to point out that it is our opinion that;

1. The rank structure is overriding competencies in managing emergency events,
2. A DFES culture exists that is affecting the efficiency of operations and the service delivery by the SES Volunteers to the Communities in Western Australia,
3. There is a lack of measures in place to determine the success, or otherwise, of emergency operations and the associated accountability,
4. As there is no Chief Officer of the State Emergency Service in Western Australia, the SES Volunteers are not being looked after or used within the context of the SES and,
5. Community Centred Emergency Management in Western Australia appears to have disappeared

Before closing, I would like to say that there are many staff in DFES that the SESVA work with on a weekly basis and they are hardworking and great people, however there is something in the culture and operational structure that is not right and this needs to change to what it used to be for the SES.

In closing I would like to thank our team in putting together this presentation today on behalf of the SES Volunteers and their community, and in particular I would like to thank you, Mr Ferguson and the Inquiry team,

for giving us the opportunity to come and present to you.

Thank You for listening to us