

**THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION B
COMMITTEE MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, PARLIAMENT HOUSE ON
TUESDAY 25 SEPTEMBER 2012**

**OPERATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE TASMANIAN PARKS AND
WILDLIFE SERVICE INQUIRY**

Mr ANDREW COMER, DEPUTY CHIEF OFFICER AND **Mr ANDREW
McGUINNESS**, ACTING DISTRICT OFFICER, STATE OPERATIONS, WERE
CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Ms Rattray) - Thank you very much, gentlemen. If there is anything you would like to say that you consider might be sensitive or needs some confidentiality, we are happy to take it on board, make an assessment and go into an enclosed environment. If there is something you feel you would like to say but you don't feel that the public record is ready for it at this time, feel free to ask.

Thank you very much for putting together your submission - Andrew, this is obviously your work?

Mr COMER - It is my work, and I apologise for the lateness.

CHAIR - Not at all. When we started to put together our report, the committee felt we were lacking in information about the roles of Tas Fire Service and how any potential movements on additional acreage or responsibilities might impact on your organisation and hence on the wider community. We thought it would be valuable to hear from you and thank you for putting that together.

Andrew, is there anything you would like to highlight in the report?

Mr COMER - Not particularly. I have tried to cover the main bits that I thought were relevant to the nature of this inquiry insofar as we are not overly familiar with the absolute operations, workings and administration of Parks and Wildlife and/or Forestry. We weren't quite sure of the implications if lands were taken off Forestry and placed into Parks' hands and there was a reduction in Forestry's resources, and what impact that would have on us. That was our main focus. We were not very clear on what lands were being discussed and what lands were being considered for transfer so we were kind of flying in the dark.

CHAIR - I don't think you are on your own there, if you don't mind my saying. I apologise, I haven't introduced the members of the committee.

Mr COMER - Do you want me to speak -

CHAIR - That would be good - to get out the main points you feel it is important that the committee understands.

Mr COMER - My opening comment is about the nature of the working relationship between the Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Tasmania and Tas Fire Service in dealing with bushfires. We have an interagency protocol. I am not sure whether the members are familiar with that protocol but we have had it for well over a decade now, where we cooperate with each other in training, sharing resources applied to bushfires and managing periods in between bushfires to mitigate the risks. We have a really good working relationship and I sense that there could be a threat to the integrity of that relationship if one or other of the parties have resources removed or whatever. I really want to emphasise in opening that we have an excellent working relationship and as much as it is practical and reasonable we would like to see that continue.

I can provide some information regarding the number of bushfires and those that relate to Parks and Forestry separately and then I will highlight what I consider to be the main issues that might impact on that - and I say 'might' judiciously because we really do not know what the decision is going to be.

The first and probably one of the more important issues was the potential loss of experience and skill in incident management and in fire fighting resources. It takes a long time to gain experience and skills in managing fires at the strategic level. It does not happen overnight - it can take years to give people that opportunity for training and experience. With that are the issues regarding loss of equipment and contractors, who might dissipate should one or other of the agencies diminish in size. So I have highlighted that in the first dot point and indicated as well that if lands are transferred to Parks and Wildlife - I am not certain but it might extend their capacity as an individual agency to cope with management, but I really do not know. I am not familiar with the set-up for managing extended lands.

The second dot point - if one or other of the agencies is reduced in capacity it has an effect on the remaining partnership agencies, and could increase the workload and responsibilities of the other agencies - either ourselves or Parks or Forestry - depending on what might happen with decision-making.

Mrs TAYLOR - Someone will have to pick up the shortfall won't they?

Mr COMER - Yes and if we can minimise a loss from one agency then it makes it easier for the other two to pick it up. I guess that's the logic of it.

The third dot point - if we lose capacity individually or collectively between those three agencies our only fallback is outside the state. In other words, you would have to call in resources from the mainland - Victoria, New South Wales perhaps or maybe even South Australia. Almost every season we have provided some assistance back to the mainland from this state. Fortuitously, our high season tends to run a little bit later than theirs so we can often provide that resource in the early part of the season but as the season comes to fruition for us it is less likely that we can provide that resource. If the exchange went the other way - in other words, if we were under the pump and we did not have the resources locally - we have no other option than to buy it in from the mainland, and that can be quite expensive.

CHAIR - You indicated that it is quite expensive.

Mr COMER - I couldn't give you figures.

CHAIR - You couldn't let us know?

Mrs TAYLOR - Who would pay that?

Mr COMER - I'm not sure.

Mrs TAYLOR - Do you have a budget to pay that?

Mr COMER - No. It would go under wildfire fighting costs and it would probably revert back to government, depending on the nature of the land tenure that was under threat. I can't give you an answer to that question.

Mr FINCH - Andrew, what happens with the arrangement now - like with us, sending troops to Victoria, South Australia or Queensland? How does that work out financially?

Mr COMER - As far as I am aware, and I don't know all the detail, our people go voluntarily. So there is no wages cost associated with it that I am aware of, but I would have to refer that to the chief to find out the detail. Obviously, when we are over there, the costs of us being looked after - accommodation, meals and things like that - would be picked up by the relevant state or fire authority. But beyond that, I don't have the knowledge.

CHAIR - Would it be possible for you to glean that information from someone else?

Mr COMER - Yes.

CHAIR - Can you give some indication to the committee about how that actually works?

Mr COMER - Works in terms of us going over there? Perhaps the likely costs of what it might cost to get crews into here?

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr FINCH - And claims that we might have made in the past, or how that was sorted out. How you come to an agreement as to what you can charge against the other states, and who that money comes to. Who it is paid by and who it comes to.

CHAIR - Does it come back to the Tasmania Fire Service or does it effectively go to the government?

Mr COMER - I will find that out. I will take that question on notice.

Mrs TAYLOR - Is the relationship different if we go over there? You said we would have to buy services from them. Do they buy services from us? You said our people go as volunteers.

Mr COMER - I'm not sure, I'll have to find out.

Our volunteers go as volunteers and our career staff presently are asked to volunteer their services, so they go over without payment and their wages are paid while they are away, as they would have been if they were here, but they are not paid additional moneys for going over.

As I said earlier, I don't know the nature of the land that is being proposed to transfer across but if it's fairly remote land, we would need to identify how much fire activity occurred on those lands. The likelihood is that they will possibly be remote lands and the type of firefighting operations we do in those areas - what we call remote area firefighting - are significantly more challenging in terms of logistics and general operations. We don't do the normal firefighting we do on land where we have available roads and things like that. We get remote area teams in and they work fairly independently and self-contained. It's fairly demanding work - it's obviously in arduous country, and therefore a high level of skill is required.

Andrew has figures on the number of teams and people we have, so I will get him to refer to that now.

Mr McGuinness - Within Tasmania Fire Service we have 84 remote area team members across the three regions of the state, which equates to approximately six teams. Usually at any one time we can only deploy four of those teams across the state because it would reduce the resources of the respective career brigades significantly and they still need to maintain their capacity to supply services to the communities in their respective areas. It is possible to deploy four teams, but it would put us at the point of not being able to supply some services outside emergency response.

CHAIR - What level of volunteerism do you add to the number you have given us?

Mr McGuinness - That's only career firefighters. It's a specialised type of firefighting. It requires a lot of training and a lot of specialised equipment. Their equipment is either carried in on their backs or is airlifted in via helicopters with sling loads. That's dependent on the aircraft's capacity to be able to long-line in. If the timber is tall and they can't long-line in then they have to walk everything in. So, it is a very specialist field. They need to be fit and healthy and be able to work in arduous conditions for long periods of time. It is only career firefighters that do that type of work. In addition to that, the Parks and Wildlife Service also specialises in remote area firefighting. The teams they have available do similar types of work. Our teams are modelled on that type of firefighting. In fact, across Australia, there are a number of organisations. Perhaps a good example is DSE in Victoria - they also do a similar type of firefighting.

CHAIR - DSE?

Mr McGuinness - The Department of Sustainability and Environment.

They usually consist of about six or seven members plus a team leader. They may be required to walk in and walk out, or they may walk in, camp overnight or camp over a period of time and then relocate, or they might be flown in and flown out, depending on access to the area.

Mr FINCH - Andrew, did you say four teams would likely come out of the 85 firefighters available?

Mr McGuinness - Yes. At any one period of time, that would be the maximum we could put on the ground. We could put six teams out there but it would significantly reduce the resources within the brigades, and it would impair our capacity to supply services to the community. That is, of course, from a career brigade perspective.

Mr FINCH - Is it six teams of about six each?

Mr McGuinness - Of about seven or eight. It depends on the type of work that they're doing as to how many team members would be involved.

Mr FINCH - Let's say you've got a big wildfire and you need to send the teams in. Do you send them all as one job lot or do you have to roster them to share the load? How does it work?

Mr McGuinness - Generally, you have to roster them. Because it is very arduous work, they can only work perhaps a maximum of four days. Once they've worked that four-day period, they then need to be extracted and another team sent in. That's why you have to be very careful with where you deploy them, how often you deploy them and what type of incident you deploy them on.

For example, where you could get access for vehicles and do what we call a hose lay - a long hose lay into the bush which could be up to 500 metres for example - it might be more viable to do that rather than insert a remote area team. There are areas within the state, as you would all be aware, that you simply can't get vehicles into and, in fact, you can't even get aircraft into. So, you need to insert a remote area team that might be remote to that fire and they have to walk in to establish a base and then work from that base to create a containment line around that fire.

Mr FINCH - In recent times, can you give us an example or two of a real circumstance where your remote teams have been used?

Mr Comer - You're testing my memory.

Mr FINCH - The east coast fires?

Mr McGuinness - No. There was a fire at the Pieman River -

Mr Comer - If you can drive to it or even walk a little bit, you don't worry about it, but if you're on the west coast -

Mr McGuinness - Yes, there've been a lot on the west coast. In fact, there have been fires on the west coast where remote area teams have had to boat in - up the Pieman River to a location and then walk in from there. There have been numerous fires where our remote area teams have worked together - PWS and TFS remote area teams have worked very closely together.

Mr COMER - Off the top of my head, I can't tell you, but we could find out and give you a couple of examples in due course.

Mr FINCH - Yes.

Mr COMER - We have had a couple of fire seasons where they probably haven't been used.

Mr FINCH - I think this will be relevant to our report because if we are talking about taking over some of the areas that Forestry Tasmania once had, it might be that the topography means you are going to have to have your remote teams ready to go -

Mr COMER - That's right, yes.

Mr FINCH - and with the experience of being involved in stuff like that.

Mr McGUINNESS - They're generally not stood up as a team per se. It's not like there is a team sitting in a room somewhere ready to go.

Mr FINCH - But, people with skills are there?

Mr COMER - You just point them out, whoever is available, and you combine them up and send them off. One of the particular skills that the team has is that they go over an area thoroughly. The average crews will go in and wet it all down and generally get it under control and then spend days mopping up and blacking out, as we call it, and might rotate through several days. A remote area team goes in and thoroughly blackens an area out. They turn over every log, every stump, dig up holes in the ground, which our average crew will not do. It is the nature of what they do and the work is quite arduous.

CHAIR - More methodical.

Mr COMER - Very methodical. If you send a remote area team in and they have come out of an area you know it is black. You know it is out and done with. Whereas you cannot necessarily guarantee that, as good as we are, in normal fire fighting. With large tracts of land on road edges it takes a long time to do that, but remote area teams are absolutely thorough.

CHAIR - Thanks Andrew.

Mr COMER - The other one is there might be more use of aerial fire fighting resources, which I think speaks for itself. They are expensive to use.

CHAIR - Does the Tas Fire Service own a chopper?

Mr COMER - No, but I will let Andrew speak on this again because he manages our contracts.

Mr McGUINNESS - None of the fire fighting agencies own any of the aircraft, it is all contracted. Within the state in the last bushfire season, and the bushfire season before, we had five contracted aircraft specifically sitting on the tarmac to use for fire fighting. Within those five contracts there are three medium aircraft, which are predominantly

used for water bombing and there are two other smaller aircraft for incident control, incident command, reconnaissance, mapping and intelligence gathering. They are smaller aircraft, more manoeuvrable and able to set up base in smaller areas. Those aircraft are subsidised in their contract for their standby rates by the National Aerial Firefighting Centre in Melbourne - a federally funded program that pays a percentage of the contract cost. The fire-fighting component of the cost is borne by the state government.

CHAIR - Do they do any fire spotting at all?

Mr McGuinness - No, they do not, not actively. Two of them are contracted primarily to protect the urban interface areas, which are our high-risk areas and the other one is contracted primarily to the Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Tasmania. They use that for their fire fighting in more remote areas, or if they have a large fire developing they will use it to complement their ground crews. The other two aircraft could be used for that, but it is an extremely expensive way to utilise the aircraft. I know Forestry Tasmania use spotter aircraft after lightning events and that is a much cheaper way to utilise aircraft for that sort of purpose.

Aircraft are inherently very resource hungry, so they need a lot of logistical support to be able to fly - fuel, people maintaining a watch over the aircraft, and a number of other operational issues.

CHAIR - Before I move to Mr Mulder I want to ask does Tas Fire Service have any spotters? Do you use spotters at all?

Mr COMER - No. I understand that Forestry Tasmania run flights every now and again when required.

CHAIR - They have spotters?

Mr COMER - Not necessarily daily, but when they believe there is a need to run a flight they do that.

CHAIR - But they have people who are spotters.

Mr COMER - In the fire towers, yes.

CHAIR - They have real live people who sit up and spot.

Mr COMER - In towers and I can tell you exactly where those towers are for the record. There are five in Bass. The Bass district for forestry is the north-east. You have Dazzler Range, Mt. Horror, Tower Hill, Branxholm and Mt Arthur - do you want all this or not?

CHAIR - No, that is good. They are all contracted to Forestry Tasmania - they are not yours?

Mr COMER - That is correct. We do not have any towers.

Mr MULDER - You could table them into the record rather than read them into *Hansard*.

CHAIR - Yes, thank you.

Mr COMER - Essentially there are 12 towers around the state, predominantly in the north and south. There are two disused - one is in the north-west. They are manned, if that is the right word, or peopled, from about 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning through until about 5 in the afternoon on certain days - not every day, necessarily, but probably in the summer season.

CHAIR - High-risk days.

Mr MULDER - In your submission you talk about Forestry Tasmania having a lightning strike and an issue about reduced capacity - you can end up with a late called-in fire rather than an early called-in fire. In terms of fire fighting capability across the various agencies, what is the real difference in what you have to do with a fire if it is late called in, versus early called in?

Mr COMER - The earlier the better, because the fire is fairly small. You can get a number of local brigades to it fairly quickly, round it up, put it out and you are back home again. The longer you take to do that - it could be minutes, a quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour - and the fire can literally quadruple exponentially in size.

It gets a head of steam up, so to speak, and it can turn from a single one hectare fire to a fire that is 10 or 20 hectares in a matter of half an hour or so and then it begins to ramp up. You get a huge front, like a head of fire, and if there are wind changes occurring, what was once a flank fire is running along this way, so it becomes the head fire, a wind change, and then instead of having perhaps 100 metres or 200 metres of fire to deal with you have maybe a kilometre, or two and a half or two kilometres, of fire. Timeliness of getting to the fire is really important.

Mr MULDER - If you have a large fire out of control, stuck in the west coast somewhere in wet rainforests, and clowning around, what happens? Do you go in there and fight it or is it a question of manning the roadways and trying to stop it jumping natural firebreaks?

Mr COMER - The larger the fire the more indirect our attack becomes. If it is a small fire we do what we call a direct attack so our crews get off trucks, go in with hose lines and wet down the fire and put it out.

Mr MULDER - You back-burn in front of it?

Mr COMER - Yes. If it is larger than that they will drop back some distance from it and do some back-burning and take out the fuel between the fire and a designated control line - probably one they have created or a road edge or a river - take out that length of fuel between the fire front and the control line. That is the standard approach used throughout this country to manage large fires.

Mr MULDER - In terms of resources is there much difference between a -

Mr COMER - The larger the fire the more resources. They are directly related because as you let the fire grow, the edge you have to control is longer. I could not give you a

definitive answer, say, for every 100 metres, you need a crew, but it would be something akin to that. The larger the fire, there is a direct proportional relationship with the number of crews you need to put on it.

Mr MULDER - From my own experience, and we are going back a few years now in terms of contemporary practice, but I know there were many fires, particularly on the west coast, where the most you would do is fly over every day and see what was doing.

Mr COMER - Yes.

Mr MULDER - That was the sum total of it because the bottom line is there is nothing else you could do.

Mr COMER - No. If you cannot get in and it is not threatening anything of particular value you will probably let it burn but you have to look further on at what is happening down the line - if we do not put it out now where can it go? What is it likely to do? What is the weather forecast?

Mr MULDER - This gets to the related issue of the maintenance of Forestry Tasmania's current infrastructure, which may or may not head off to the Parks and Wildlife Service. In any event, whoever has it, without that infrastructure the number of fires you cannot get to is going to exponentially increase, isn't it?

Mr COMER - You would think so, yes.

Mr MULDER - If you could reach a fire with an early call out but the bridge is rotted down or washed away and not replaced, suddenly you have a huge risk in relation to the number of fires you can get to.

Mr COMER - Yes. In terms of -

Mr MULDER - And the ones you have to let burn until they get to a control line you can access.

CHAIR - It is covered fairly well in that last dot point on the second page.

Mr MULDER - I wanted to raise that connection issue, between the impact of not -

Mr COMER - Not maintaining the equipment, the roads and water points, the bridges - all that would have an impact.

Mr MULDER - Your first line of prevention is the response -

Mr COMER - Yes.

Mr MULDER - but that has to be backed up by your capacity to do something about the response?

Mr COMER - That is correct.

Mr MULDER - I thought I would make that particular point. The other point you mentioned quite strongly is the fact that 50 per cent of the resources are not Forestry Tasmania resources, they are private contractor resources.

Mr COMER - Yes.

Mr MULDER - Fifty per cent of that has already disappeared and more of it is disappearing, not only equipment but also the skill sets that used to drive it. It seems to me that somewhere in your plan we need to factor in our capacity to respond. There is no point in having a wonderful steel bridge across the Arthur River at Canungra when you cannot get a low loader across it or a dozer.

Mr COMER - That is correct.

Mr MULDER - Not because of the bridge, but because there is not a large loader or a dozer.

Mr COMER - That is correct.

Mr MULDER - So it seems to me that the fire fighting capacity is being severely impacted by the loss of the skills and equipment -

Mr COMER - That is correct.

Mr MULDER - from the forest industry.

CHAIR - Is that something that the organisations have addressed their minds to at all, Andrew? Obviously the talk about what may or may not happen has been around for some time now in relation to the IGA and any potential changes to Forestry Tasmania. Has that been discussed at management level?

Mr COMER - We have discussed the potential loss of equipment or the possible reduction in available contractors. At the end of the day it is a business decision on their part. If they do not have the work, they cannot retain their business and they just fall by the wayside. We cannot prop them up in that sense.

Mr MULDER - The reality is, and I think you mentioned it in your submission, if you do not have it here but it exists on the mainland, then you have to bring it in. There is a time factor involved in bringing equipment in. These are some of the issues that need to be thought out very carefully. The decline in the forest industry has affected our capacity and the time taken to do things - we have to bring assistance in, and who is going to provide the money for that?

Mr COMER - I do not have any direct answers but I am aware that there has been a reduction of older resources. It means that the three agencies compete for the same resources during the fire season. Forestry would take the bulk of them and we have whatever is left. Obviously if there is a significant event somewhere we will deal with that issue, but if we had four or five significant events and there were competing demands, we would have to make priority decisions.

Mr MULDER - Is there any parallel to the urban search and rescue capabilities? I remember at one stage they were going to stick all of this stuff under counter terrorism. All the urban search and rescue stuff was going to be spread out but eventually they woke up to themselves and went for three or four main bases, with an agreement about where equipment was located, and how it was accessed.

Mr COMER - A similar arrangement.

Mr MULDER - Has the Fire Authorities Council given any thought to that, in terms of fire fighting?

Mr COMER - The USAR caches are documented, we know where they are, we know where we can get access to them and we know our responsibilities for interstate deployment - that goes without saying. In terms of what contract machinery is available, every region and therefore the state collectively would know where all the contractors are and what equipment they had and it would be -

Mr MULDER - Sounds like we need to know what Victoria has?

Mr COMER - Possibly.

Mr MULDER - That is what I am pushing at. If you are not doing that, maybe it is time, from a fire fighting capacity perspective.

Mr COMER - I think it is on the cards. We are considering what Victoria can offer us - the CFA - in a time of need. We have not had to do it yet.

Mr MULDER - We are getting to the stage where we not only need the men, we need the equipment as well.

Mr COMER - And the women, did you say that?

Mr MULDER - Men in the generic sense - as in mankind.

CHAIR - You will probably need the women to feed the men, too.

Mr MULDER - Come on now, that is sexist, and the best chefs are not women.

CHAIR - Let us move on Andrew.

Mrs TAYLOR - To clarify - in fact we have already lost quite a lot of capacity?

Mr COMER - As far as I am aware, anecdotally -

Mrs TAYLOR - Fifty per cent of that?

Mr COMER - Yes, but that is over a number of years, not in the last 12 months. The capacity we had five or six years ago has halved - that is anecdotal. I don't have figures directly on that.

Mrs TAYLOR - So we have two issues, haven't we?

Mr COMER - Yes.

Mrs TAYLOR - One is that it is already -

Mr COMER - Starting to bite.

Mrs TAYLOR - Secondly, if Forestry Tasmania goes out of that field then there is a further problem. Somebody else will have to pick up that workload. It appears to us that nobody has looked at that yet.

Mr COMER - I wouldn't say it's not being looked at -

Mrs TAYLOR - Good.

Mr COMER - but no answers have been forthcoming on what we do about it. In a business sense, you can imagine remaining contractors will put their prices up, because they can. They've got the machinery that people need - if you're the only one in the market then you quote your own price. Even if we don't lose any more machinery, which is not likely - we are likely to lose more - the chances are high that the costs associated with what is remaining will increase. That's just a flag from me - that could also occur.

Mr FINCH - A question about those big super Elvis Presley's or whatever they are. Are they in Australia, or did they only come here for a certain season?

Mr COMER - I don't know whether they are in Australia at the moment. We couldn't afford one in this state - they are horrendously expensive.

Mr FINCH - I am not thinking about basing one here, but let's say there was one in Melbourne.

Mr COMER - I think there's -

Mr McGUINNESS - There are three based in Australia. One is shared between Western Australia and South Australia. There is one in Victoria and the third one is in New South Wales. As Mr Comer mentioned, the costs of those aircraft are significant and the logistical support that they need to operate would overwhelm the fire agencies here. It's a specialist field and they have teams of engineers and support people to go along with those aircraft.

Our topography and the risks that we are exposed to here in Tasmania are more suited to the medium style aircraft because they're more manoeuvrable, they have quicker turnaround times and they don't need as much operational or logistical support to operate.

Mr FINCH - Have we never had a circumstance where we've needed to call on one of those? Or where one of those could have been handy?

Mr McGuinness - Perhaps the St Marys' fires would have been a circumstance where one would have been very useful. Our capacity to support it wouldn't be able to justify it.

Mr Comer - There's a bit of media hype around helicopter use, where helicopters come in like a knight in shining armour, but it's not a silver bullet. Helicopters help you control it, but you've got to have ground crews to do the work, otherwise you're wasting your time and a lot of money is pouring out.

The medium aircraft we use are much better for that type of work - there is one in the north and one in the south. I don't know if it's picked up in my document, but the medium that we assign in the north remains within about a 40 kilometre radius of Launceston, unless the regional chiefs give approval for it to go beyond that. They are substantially there for that urban interface. If we get a fire starting up in the suburbs, they are there to protect people -

Mr Mulder - We can drench the back fences.

Mr Comer - I won't say any more.

Chair - Not even in a closed hearing?

Mr Comer - No.

Chair [laughing] - I was just making the offer.

Andrew, the State Fire Management Council - you, FT, and PWS are members of that. Has there been any discussion about how that council might work in the future?

Mr Comer - I distinguish between the State Fire Commission, which runs the organisation and the State Fire Management Council, which is a body that reports to the State Fire Commission. The State Fire Management Council is purely about fuel management. It is made up of a number of different representative groups such as the TFGA, the Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Tasmania, us and others. The changes that went through with the Fire Service Amendment Bill a few weeks back reflected the kind of focus that the State Fire Management Council will have in the future. It will be coordinating what we call fire management area councils or committees. They are changing the numbers of them - there are about 20, but I think they are going to rearrange the numbers and there will be fire management area committees dotted around the state, but only in a limited number, probably half a dozen or so.

Mr McGuinness - There are 10 at the moment.

Chair - And they're looking to be reduced, Andrew?

Mr McGuinness - There are 29 at the moment and we are looking at reducing them to 10.

Mr Comer - Those committees are very much more at the local level. They will look at developing a fire protection plan or a fire management plan for the geographic area for which they are responsible - identifying the hazards, the type of work that needs to be done and things like that, identifying the threats and risks that exist. They will develop

plans and they will be sent up to the State Fire Management Council for approval and sign-off. Having identified the works that need to be done, the issue is really about who is going to pay for the resources that need to be applied to have those risks mitigated.

CHAIR - That is the sticking point.

Mr COMER - It is. The Tasmania Fire Service in their cabinet submission requested changes to the Fire Service Act, which have just gone through, and a number of other things, one of which -

CHAIR - Some funding.

Mr COMER - Yes, some funding and some physical human resource. For the position known as manager of the State Fire Management Council, the statement of duties, as we call it, has been prepared and will be tabled on Thursday afternoon. That's not far away. Hopefully that gets approval, and we will go out to advertise that. The position is being funded for one year from Tas Fire Service. One of the key functions of that position will be to do a cost-benefit analysis of how we deal with fuel management into the future.

Mrs TAYLOR - Most of that is out of fire season - fuel management and fuel reduction is mostly done between the bushfire seasons.

Mr COMER - Yes. The academic work, if you like, or the administrative work will be done in the off-season, but any burning that would need to be done obviously needs to be done in the shoulder seasons, the late spring or the early autumn, because that is the only window of opportunity we have. Any other types of work, non-burning type work, that needs to be done can be done at any time. If it's slashing and removal or things like that, that can be done as and when required, but for burning there is a small window.

Mr FINCH - You have a reference here, Andrew, to Forestry Tasmania's current infrastructure - fire-breaks and fire trails are in poor condition and likely to deteriorate further in the future, and there is reduced water storage. Is there any protocol or arrangement now with Forestry Tasmania to work with them, and help with that? Are you part of the maintenance program for that infrastructure?

Mr COMER - No.

Mr FINCH - Not fire trails? They put those in, I suppose, to protect the forests they have planted.

Mr COMER - We can assist with some of the work. Mainly our volunteers will get out and assist if needs be, but it's not necessarily an agreed practice. It just happens on an ad hoc basis.

Mr McGUINNESS - I just wanted to mention it has been tabled in the State Fire Management Council that there is a number of Forestry-managed land tracks around the state and that the infrastructure in those areas is in poor condition. That's essentially because they are not actively operating in those areas and because of the lack of funding and lack of resources. Their focus is on those areas that prove to be financially viable, and so the infrastructure in those other areas deteriorates. The roads deteriorate, the

bridges require repairs and when you need to get heavy machinery over those types of areas to fight fires - we are talking about dozers that weigh 40 tonnes or 50 tonnes - then those bridges need to be in very good condition to carry those sorts of weights - fire trucks and tankers, et cetera. When it's not maintained, that infrastructure deteriorates, and as a result of Forestry not working in those areas, that infrastructure is deteriorating. They simply haven't got the resources or the funding to maintain it and nor have we. That's the simple fact of the matter and that's only going to get worse in the future. I dare say that the Parks and Wildlife Service, if that tenure were to be handed to them, would not have the financial capacity, or the resourcing capacity, to maintain that infrastructure.

We flagged in there, and it was tabled in the State Fire Management Council meeting - and I don't think I'm speaking out of turn here - that some roads were recently blocked off in the Fingal Valley area. Roads around forestry areas that the community could use to escape should a bushfire start. When they did further investigations it was identified that much of that infrastructure was in such poor condition that it wouldn't carry any traffic.

They are the sorts of issues that we've got. Farmers and land managers and people who live in remote communities have used that infrastructure for decades. It's just a normal part of the areas they traverse but a lot of that infrastructure is now in such poor condition that it can't be used.

That's not to say if we were to get to a bridge that couldn't carry a dozer but we couldn't take the dozer off the float, we couldn't push in a ford and continue on. We've always got that capacity but it takes time and when you are already yelling out for a dozer and you've got to take it off the float, push something in and then get it across, then it takes more time to get to the fire.

Mr MULDER - Then again, the prime objective - and you forget this sometimes - is saving human life. The second one is saving property, third is putting out the fire. If you allow that bridge to remain there when it is an escape route and say, 'It's all right, we can work around it', you are actually putting priorities two and three ahead of priority one.

CHAIR - Effectively, your organisation and probably PWS and Forestry Tasmania, in what form we don't know, will have to look at the fire management business in a whole new light? Would that be fair to say?

Mr COMER - No, I think there are elements we will probably still do the same. Managing fires is managing fires. There are probably some issues where we would certainly have to reconsider the way in which we are doing business, but not a whole new light. I wouldn't see it as a whole new light.

CHAIR - But there will need to be some work done on a collaborative approach to attending and managing wildfires in Tasmania in the future?

Mr COMER - How we do business with fires now is pretty good, but if Forestry loses their resources and their personnel and their equipment, then we will have a problem.

CHAIR - I agree.

Mr COMER - It's not a different way of doing business, it's how we get the same resources, but maybe in a different way. Acquiring resources might be done a different way but when we apply them, we apply them in the same way.

For fire management which is not necessarily dealing with fire in a response capacity, but in a mitigation or prevention sense, I think having a well-equipped, well-resourced State Fire Management Council and well-equipped, well-resourced and supported fire management area committees will go a long way to what we probably haven't done a lot of in the past - strategic management of geographic areas collectively and with a common goal, identifying the sorts of things we need to do and setting priorities.

We can identify the risks, we can identify the work that needs to be done but where are the money and the resources coming from to actually do that work? That's the bit that is missing.

Putting a superstructure in place with the State Fire Management Council and having fire management area committees is a good step in the right direction and I applaud it but there is third step that has to be put in and that's the supply of resources to undertake the works they identify.

CHAIR - Is the state fire service going to be relying more heavily on volunteers in the future?

Mr COMER - That's a difficult question to answer. We rely on them very heavily now. They are a tremendous group - 4 500 to 5 000 people who give their time basically for free, day and night, weekends, public holidays, wet and cold, hot and sweaty, they are there. We have maintained that number of 4 500 to 5 000 for a good many years now. There is a turnover of about 500 a year but we seem to be keeping our levels fairly stable. Ten years from now I can't predict where we will be. We believe we have put strategies in place to maintain that kind of level but if jobs go interstate, if the younger people find opportunities on the mainland or elsewhere, if the ageing workforce we have gets older and can't do that sort of work any more, I don't think you need to be a rocket scientist to work out where it's all going to end up. We are very conscious of that - we work really hard within our own agency to maintain the level of interest, commitment and support for the volunteers but you get to a point where you can't get any more out of them - it's unfair to expect to get any more out of them.

Mrs TAYLOR - I suppose even the fly-in fly-out employment now will make a difference to that because the workers just aren't here.

CHAIR - Andrew, is there anything that you would like to add to that comment that your colleague Andrew has made? I know that was a pretty tough question but that's what I need to know as a member of this committee.

Mr McGUINNESS - In relation to volunteers you mean?

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr McGUINNESS - Having spent a lot of time out in the field as a field officer working alongside the volunteers, their capacity to work continuously for long periods of time -

CHAIR - They usually have jobs for a start.

Mr McGUINNESS - That's exactly right, they have jobs. The family pressures are now much more significant, or appear to be much more significant than they were perhaps two decades ago. Our capacity, certainly in the short term, to maintain crews for campaign-type fires - bushfires that go over long periods of time, perhaps two weeks - is relatively good, but once those fires start to string out to maybe three or four weeks, our capacity to maintain volunteer crews at those incidents is difficult and that is because of the nature of that type of firefighting. It goes from active firefighting to blacking out, control lines and stuff like that which is quite arduous.

I agree with Andrew's sentiments that they do a fantastic job and essentially we couldn't operate without them.

Mrs TAYLOR - They have become much more skilled over the last few years with professional training.

Mr COMER - They go with us, and on interstate deployments and things like that as well. About 800 volunteers attended the east coast fires back in 1986 - that's a fair number.

CHAIR - I know some of those were away from their normal employment for a week at a time, which means that's another large impost on their employer.

Mr COMER - We get good support from all of the employers.

CHAIR - I know.

Mr COMER - The other group is the self-employed. If they are out with us they are not earning a living for themselves. These people who lend a hand are often semi-retired or retired. We've got a great bunch of people. I don't think Tasmanians recognise how fortunate they are to have such a number of good quality people willing to give their time like that.

CHAIR - I am mindful of the time and I know members probably have other obligations so Andrew and Andrew, is there anything that you would like to finish up with? Members have exhausted their questioning but if there is anything you would like to leave the committee with, we would certainly appreciate it on top of the information.

Mr COMER - Just very briefly, I appreciate the pressures you are under to make the decisions you need to make. I guess the main point I tried to make today is the relationship we have with Forestry and with Parks. It's something that's perceived around the rest of the country as one of the best systems in Australia, and I wouldn't like to see that compromised if at all possible. To retain the skill and the knowledge is so important to the future of managing fire in Tasmania - I just can't underline that enough. I appreciate the opportunity we have had to come along and present our views to you in the last hour or so. Thanks.

CHAIR - Andrew, have you anything to add?

Mr McGUINNESS - No, I support Andrew's comments.

CHAIR - As an aside, it was only towards the end of last year, it must have been around school presentation time, that I drove into Fingal and saw all the Forestry Tasmania guys going around and around the recreation ground with packs on and I thought, 'What on earth is going on?'. So I went and found out, of course, as the local member would, and they were training for the firefighting season in early December.

Mr McGUINNESS - For the competition.

Mr COMER - Always something.

CHAIR - Gentlemen, thank you so much and the committee thoroughly appreciates the time and effort taken, under fairly short notice, to put that together and we appreciate the openness and frankness that you have provided to the committee today.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.