T R A N S C R I P T

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Melbourne — 6 September 2016

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair
Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair
Ms Melina Bath
Mr Richard Dalla-Riva
Ms Samantha Dunn
Mr Khalil Eideh
Mr Cesar Melhem
Mr Daniel Young

Participating Members

Mr Greg Barber
Mr Jeff Bourman
Ms Colleen Hartland
Mr James Purcell
Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Acting Secretary: Mr Joel Hallinan
Research Assistant: Ms Annemarie Burt

Witnesses

Ms Julia Oxley (affirmed), Chief Executive Officer,
Mr Ben Piper (affirmed), Chief Operations Officer, and
Mr Howard Ronaldson (affirmed), Chair, Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority.

The CHAIR — If I can welcome ESTA staff to the table and ask them to be sworn in, please. Can I ask perhaps Mr Ronaldson — or is it Ms Oxley who wants to lead off? — for a brief presentation, and then we will follow with some questions.

Mr RONALDSON — Thanks, Chair. I am starting, and when it becomes more operational certainly Julia will take over.

Visual presentation.

Mr RONALDSON — This slide really says two or three things. It says that ESTA has a function of taking 000 calls. The essence of that, really, is it tries to find out where a person is and indeed what is wrong with them or the circumstances in which they face themselves. The second function is dispatch, which means that the information is passed from a call taker to a separate dispatch function, and the dispatcher, with the help of quite a big system called a CAD, the computer-aided dispatch system, tries to find the appropriate emergency service and send them to the person who is in need. The third major function is that at the heart of the communications networks of all emergency services is an extensive radio or series of radio networks, and ESTA has the responsibility for day-to-day management of the contracts for those networks.

The second thing I wanted to say to impress upon members of the committee is indeed it is a very active environment within ESTA. ESTA receives two and a half million calls per annum for 000 assistance — that is one every 12 seconds — and indeed dispatches 2.1 million emergency services, which is a dispatch every 15 seconds. The point about this is that it is a very lively environment. A lot of these calls have a lot of distress around them and put into a particular context the issue of change. If you want to change the nature of the environment inside ESTA, which has implications for the broader emergency services sector, you certainly have to keep in mind that you are doing it against a very lively and sometimes fraught environment. Interestingly, the demand for these core services is growing far, far higher than population — in the order of 6 to 8 per cent per annum, with no sign of them slowing down.

The last point I want to make is, by volume, certainly police are the dominant emergency service. They have just over 62 per cent of all action — we are talking broadly — followed by ambulances, which have about 32 per cent. If you do the arithmetic, the fire services — the MFB, the CFA and the SES — share 5 per cent of all that action. Having said that, it is very unpredictable. Obviously 5 per cent, from time to time, and certainly services for the CFA in particular, can dominate on a particular day. The last thing I might say about the unpredictability is that ESTA faces two levels, if you like. First of all, there is the very big level of what will happen on a bushfire day — the nature and extent of the fire phenomena on the day, which is hard to predict itself. But the second thing that is very hard to predict is the nature of the 000 action that will come out of it. To use a very quick example, you might get a relatively minor fire — say, Craigieburn beside the Hume — which might elicit a lot of 000 response simply because of the traffic going up and down on the Hume as opposed to a more strategically important fire that might elicit far less 000 action. So you have the twin layers of unpredictability around at least significant fire events.

Ms OXLEY — I wanted to talk to you about ESTA's approach to preparing for the fire season, and we really do see it through a range of interconnected lenses. Most importantly is seasonal readiness. We do that in close collaboration with all agencies, and I will speak to that in more detail shortly. We also give close consideration to operational capacity, which includes understanding the works that are required by the agencies throughout the year to actually improve the service year on year, and we do have some examples of that as well, particularly in relation to fire services. We will also address workforce management, and we put a lot of focus — detailed focus — on forecasting and scheduling and the forecasting of demand. Very much related to that also is making sure of our people readiness — that we actually have the preseason learning and training specifically for the kinds of weather and events that can be expected. We also throughout the year prepare for what might go wrong, and we will provide some detail around our incident management preparations and planning for the committee.

Emergency management seasonal readiness and preparedness is strong in Victoria. We are aware that the inquiry has heard from the EMV and the CFA, and these are the primary agencies with the lead for the fire season readiness, and it probably is not necessary to actually repeat the information already provided by them. Suffice to say we receive detailed briefings and we participate fully in the preseason forums — for example, we will be participating in the annual preparedness briefing, which is planned for 29 September.

We are also fully engaged in the SCRC capability and response committee, the state control team and the joint public information committee, so we are active members of all of those. On top of that, through the season, we are required certainly through key events during the fire season. We also do have a liaison position at the state control centre providing intelligence between our centres and operations and backwards as well.

I was just going to talk quickly about some of the things that we have actually done in relation to some agency examples to bring that to light, and this is really about readiness. During the last fire season we introduced a trial of using a structured call-taking tool for our fire operators — the call-takers. That was specifically for fire processes and procedures. We have worked throughout the year with our staff to actually refine that model. In October a refined model and improved model will be put in place with our operators. We do that in conjunction with our staff, the unions and also with the MFB and CFA. We have put new processes in place for strike teams, which provide a very clear direction to responding crews.

Our CAD maps, which is our computer-aided dispatch tool that our operators use, clearly identify which areas have eventually been declared in a fire danger period so that our operators can actually better follow the appropriate processes of the declaration. Standard operating procedures have also been updated to provide for better response to reports of columns of smoke received during declared fire danger periods and total fire bans. Our latest mapping data from the CFA includes new assignment areas based on the public land area and includes DELWP as part of the response so that it can be notified in a timely matter — so that is new functionality that has been incorporated.

Regional mobile radio has been rolled out across all regional areas of Victoria, and that for us has actually removed the need for our operators, our dispatchers, to patch the analog channels with the digital talk groups, so it streamlines the process for the ESTA staff. It is really important because it can actually get very busy on the channels. Aircraft predetermined dispatch provides automatic dispatch of aircraft based on the type, location and time of the incidents as part of the initial response. Arrangements for the coming fire season are being finalised, but early indications are that the program will be extended further to a number of new air bases across the state.

I just wanted to explain the graph briefly on the screen. This is the forecast map. What this actually shows in blue is what the original forecast for the day was, in red is what our revised forecast was and in green is actually what happened on this particular day. This was a Sunday, and we had gathered information from the CFA earlier in the week that a number of the shires and councils were lifting fire restrictions. The effect of that was that we needed to build in increased burn-offs for the day, because they are going to actually create more volume of calls into ESTA. Our workforce management team used our workforce planning predictive software capability and adjusted staffing levels to receive an additional forecast 264 calls for that particular affected day. We forecast 514, we received 535, so that was fairly close. We used this to actually help us work out the staffing that we required on top of our standard scheduled staffing.

ESTA forecasts demand by actually analysing historical data, and that forms our base forecast. We can do base forecasts up to 18 months out, but we do that for every 24 hour period using factors including seasonality, day of week, the month and growth rates.

Ms SHING — Does that factor in the increased calls that you referenced at the start of your presentation, Mr Ronaldson?

Ms OXLEY — Yes

Ms SHING — I think you referred to a 6 to 8 per cent increase. How does that feature in that forecasting?

Ms OXLEY — So we actually are looking continually at what happened one, two years back, but then we are actually also looking forward and looking at what is happening at the moment; what is the trend.

Ms SHING — As adjusted.

Ms OXLEY — And we are adjusting that through. As we get closer — we are coming to the month, the week that we are actually looking at for those days, because we are looking at what happened last week, this week, next week as a standard process that we have as well as further out planning — we overlay what we call our base forecast with trends unique to the particular season. Then we have special forecasts as well for peak

demand periods, such as holidays and major public events, which can actually overlay that as well. Every day we review actual demand experienced versus the forecast so that we can actually address any unforeseen variations.

The CHAIR — I am just saying that we are conscious of time.

Ms OXLEY — Right; we will move along. Just the final thing on that was that we are also looking at things like grass clearing rates, fire danger ratings, 28-day weather forecasts and population corridors as well, so there are a raft of factors that we are building into our model that we use.

In terms of scheduling, so this is where we are scheduling staff, we use the same tool to actually help us look at what our scheduled staff are versus what we actually require based on the forecast. What this shows with the blue is the scheduled staff, the red is showing the net staff, and if you see below the line, effectively that is saying that we are expecting to be short of staff to service a demand at this time. We do a raft of things, from bringing the staff in on overtime to moving their paid breaks — they have paid breaks, so we are able to shift staff around to come back and bring in people over the top — so a raft of things to actually as best we can address the demand for the day.

In terms of pre-season training we have an extensive range of training for our staff. Importantly, ESTA is actually a registered training organisation, and we have just recently regained our five-year reaccreditation. For this coming season in terms of fire we have done training around strike team and incident control centre refresher training. We have also got ongoing monthly training packages that our fire staff actually receive as part of their role and a range of other training as well.

In terms of business resilience, I did speak earlier about the fact that we prepare for what might go wrong. We have got a comprehensive program in place with plans really around our incident management framework, which is saying we need to make sure that we are ready for what is coming our way and to be testing it and to make sure our facilities are robust and the technology that supports it is robust as well as our processes.

In terms of technology preparedness, there are really three key areas and two specific to ESTA that we operate. One is the telephony system by which we receive 000 calls, and the other is the computer-aided dispatch system that we actually use to triage the calls and dispatch events to the emergency services organisations. We have actually got a new telephony system that we put in place in December last year. I am thankful for funding from the government for that, and it really is a modern, state-of-the-art system using the best available technology for the state of Victoria. We also have the CAD system. There were a number of significant issues in the past where we did have some outages in 2011 and 2013, with five separate outages between May and August 2013.

Our final slide provides a little bit of detail on performance today. What you see here in the top graph are the outages that I mentioned before, and there were actually multiple reviews into ESTA and the CAD outages. We have undertaken a range of corrective actions to improve the stability. ESTA has had 100 per cent planned uptime for CAD since November 2013, with the exception of one issue that we had when we were doing the major upgrade to CAD in September 2014. There was a very short outage.

Ms SHING — What is the definition of 'availability' in that table underneath?

Ms OXLEY — So this availability is the uptime, if you like, so that the system is up.

The CHAIR — If you do a subtraction, you will get the downtime.

Ms OXLEY — Yes. So this is the uptime. What you see, for instance, is that for the other systems we have, which are the operational communications, we manage the contracts for those. So we report on those, but we are not actually operating them.

Ms SHING — So that could be an aggregate figure or based on one incident that takes the system down for the amount that it is offline.

Ms OXLEY — That is the aggregate for the year. That is over a 12-month period.

Ms SHING — But that could comprise many incidents of downtime or one?

Ms OXLEY — Yes.

Ms SHING — Thank you.

Ms OXLEY — And what you see here is that for CAD and telephony there have been no unplanned outages. In actual fact, in January we were able to successfully test telephony. We set up three PABXs across our three state emergency communication centres, and we managed to progressively practise. We actually took them down while the others were operating successfully.

The CHAIR — So we might just take that document. Have we got a copy for the secretariat? Thank you. I might just ask two quick questions. I am conscious of the time here. What is the current arrangement for a backup where your system, particularly a CAD system, goes down?

Ms OXLEY — So if the CAD system goes down, then we move to manual operations. That is something that we practise throughout the year, so our operators are familiar with the processes, particularly the call-takers who are dealing directly with the community.

The CHAIR — With digital radios being rolled out in a number of emergency services, have you had any advice about the risks presented with communications to people on the ground?

Ms OXLEY — No.

The CHAIR — So you have sought that advice or you have not sought that advice?

Ms OXLEY — Sorry, in terms of — —

The CHAIR — Digital radio arrangements, so just in terms of the emergency services calling back to your centre and indicating aspects of a particular crisis.

Ms OXLEY — Right. The responders in the field are interacting on an ongoing basis with the ESTA dispatchers, and they are there to provide support and information to them, so that is just part of normal operations.

Mr RONALDSON — So across the radio networks I have not got a figure, but it would be 10 million, 15 million separate communications at least per annum that the radio networks carry. I would assume they are often in circumstances where the telephony network would not cope and can melt. Hence at least some of the reason why it remains the backbone of the communications system for emergency services.

Ms SHING — Thank you for the presentation. You referred, Ms Oxley, to additional funding that was provided to upgrade the telephony system, and I note that there was, I think, just under $60 million in the budget for additional upgrades and facilities for ESTA this year. What has been required or what necessitated that additional funding in terms of upgrades to enable you to meet that availability in response?

Ms OXLEY — So in terms of telephony, it was a $15 million project, I believe, and with that we had the Telstra Spectrum system, which is actually going to be no longer supported from December this year, so there was a necessity to bring a new system in.

Ms SHING — Did that accommodate or remove blackspot issues that otherwise have arisen and have been a source of constant concern, particularly from regional and rural communities?

Ms OXLEY — It does not specifically address blackspots. Are you talking about mobile blackspots?

Ms SHING — Yes.

Ms OXLEY — Okay, so this is really the telephony system that we are using to receive calls.

Ms SHING — But in terms of incoming calls, does it improve the reception or the capacity to take incoming calls from mobiles in those blackspot areas? Forgive my relative ignorance on the way in which the technology works.

Ms OXLEY — No. However, we have put an improvement into the system, so we can get an improved knowledge of actually where the people are in terms of mobile origin. Previously we really did not know where they were. It is something that, if you go back through multiple ESTA annual reports over time, you will see us point out — —

The CHAIR — Google knows, but you did not. But you will now.

Ms OXLEY — Yes. Well, now we can actually triangulate where they are, so we can see approximately where the people are, and we do have a tool within the centre so that if somebody is lost but they can get through to us that we can shoot them a link, they click on and then we can know where they are.

Ms SHING — Right, okay. Thank you very much for that. Mr Ronaldson, when did you come on board ESTA?

Mr RONALDSON — February this year.

Ms SHING — And what were the key objectives in, I suppose, your remit in coming on in February this year as far as organisation and improvement was concerned?

Mr RONALDSON — Well, the first remit was that ESTA faced a number of financial challenges. The core of ESTA's funding is that it receives payments from the emergency service organisations in the field — ESTA is the core — to provide services to them. There is a long history of ESTA, going back some way, not receiving sufficient funds to cover growth year on year — the assumption being, I assume, that ESTA was going to make this up in some productivity-based way.

Ms SHING — Had that become acute in recent years?

Mr RONALDSON — It had become more acute. Certainly when I arrived the cash reserves of ESTA were probably below what you would want to see from an operating entity. The second issue they had at the time was that their solvency was diminishing also. ESTA relies on a lot of technology at its heart, and it is written off pretty quickly against the balance sheet, and its equity was diminishing at a reasonably rapid rate. So I think the first remit was to have a look at its finances, take some appropriate action and have more extensive discussions with government than had been, for a variety of reasons, not possible in the past.

Commensurate with that, whenever you talk about finance you do talk about general planning and ways forward, so I think the second remit was to have a clear corporate plan. It is required under the act, and it is required to be approved by the minister. Perhaps a bit unusually, the ESTA act is quite specific in terms of ESTA having certain requirements on it to liaise extensively with all of the emergency services out in the field, for what often happens in ESTA is really a reflection of what happens in the field — the operational changes. So it is some exercise, I must say, if you get five or six significant organisations. They certainly have like goals, at least from time to time, but are very different organisations from each other, with their own agenda items. For instance, we have one CAD, and they all feed off the one system, but they have very different requirements of the CAD. So to get them all in a room and get agreement on base operations, what performance will be and those performance standards, and also to agree on a menu of changes and how to fund them, is some exercise.

Ms SHING — So are you satisfied then that to the best extent possible, and not wanting to limit your opportunities to seek further funding, that this additional $58 million to budget for that growth and for that corporate planning and strategy around the inter-agency work is assisting you to better meet the demands upon ESTA as we prepare for what is going to be a more intense and prolonged fire season, based on the information that we have all had before this committee?

Mr RONALDSON — Yes. Two things happen. Undoubtedly that is the case, that the government is putting in more money, and I can now say that the cash position of ESTA is improving. I can also say in all fairness that we have undertaken some saving measures inside ESTA.

Ms SHING — Always good to hear.

Mr RONALDSON — We have shifted the load of employment from nominal operational more towards an operational focus and done a number of other savings measures around the organisation. But certainly that

combined with the additional money that the government has put in last year and this year means that ESTA is in a much stronger financial position.

Ms SHING — And culturally, do those additional resources help in terms of the way in which people do their jobs?

Mr RONALDSON — I think that it is a pretty tough environment. You used the word 'cultural', didn't you?

Ms SHING — Yes. And from an operational perspective, Mr Piper, you might like to add to this once Mr Ronaldson is finished.

Mr RONALDSON — Well, it is a pretty tough operating environment. It does not get much airplay this way. This is my own view. ESTA is judged on a whole range of performance measures that usually get down to seconds. You have operators on the phone, easily talking with people in difficult circumstances, that have to get through sometimes some quite complex software. For instance, in the case of AV, it is a very complex software package, the aim of which is to try and work out whether the person is immediately dying or not; that is basically its aim. They have to do this in very quick time, obviously. The most common cause of death is heart attack. Well, you know, the system, the whole system of which ESTA is the frontend, has 10 minutes to get to a person with a heart attack. If you do not get to them within 10 minutes, basically they are very sick or they are dead. So the time requirements of people on the floor — both our call-takers and dispatchers — are quite intense, and they get lots of calls like this every day. So I would say that the additional money in terms of that context has certainly allowed us a little bit more elbow room in terms of thinking about training and preparation.

We certainly have a rate of young people leaving the organisation at a higher rate than what we would like, so we want to retain people longer. The longer we retain them, as a general rule, the better they get. This goes to the issue of more resources, I think, for training and support in a reasonably robust operational environment.

Ms SHING — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Have you got a question?

Mr RAMSAY — Would you like me to have one?

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time.

Mr RAMSAY — All right, I will just be quick. I am a member for western Victoria. We have had two significant fires over the last couple of years — one in Wye River, down near Lorne, and another one up at Dereel. Dereel has no mobile network at all around that Rokewood-Dereel area. Its capacity to ring in even to ESTA is restricted, as it is for Wye River, and as was for that particular fire. I am interested to know from your point of view how does Telstra prioritise its infrastructure where communities are at fire risk and not able to have a mobile net coverage? And part two, if I may, to one of your panel is: I would like to know how many false alarms there are in call-outs. The MFB rattle down Collins Street 60 times a day it appears, by the sound of the sirens, but how many of those are real fire call-outs, or how many of those are false alarms? Have you got that data, or can you provide that data?

Mr RONALDSON — I will start of the batting but other people are better informed; we can quickly shift. Your first question is a good question, I guess, for a federal minister of communications. It is a long series of debates about the efficacy of the phone networks, particularly for remote communities. It is one of the reasons — yet another reason — why emergency services often operate on radio. But certainly, you know, it is a well-worn path to say that remote communities generally have a lower level of telephony services than more dense communities, and it is a long debate across Australia.

Mr RAMSAY — Did Black Saturday have a review process where there were problems with rural and regional Australia or Victoria specifically in relation to incoming calls to ESTA from regional areas where there has been poor coverage of mobiles, and has there been a response to that review, if there was a review?

Mr RONALDSON — I do not know.

Mr PIPER — There were certainly no recommendations for ESTA along those lines. The very nature of bushfires is that it will take out infrastructure anyway. There are two issues at play: one is the natural maturation of third-party networks across Australia. That is certainly not in the remit of ESTA. The ESTA telephony system certainly gives us great ability to manage a more flexible and agile approach to the larger scale emergencies that occur and from surge events from time to time, but they do not naturally go to improving coverage for communities with data networks.

Mr RAMSAY — False alarms, I can take on notice, can I?

Ms OXLEY — We will have to take that on notice.

Mr RONALDSON — I will have to take that on notice, Chair, if that is okay.

Mr YOUNG — In regard to the forecast and predictive work that you do in looking towards major events that could be a problem, there is obviously work done by emergency services departments not just with fire, which this inquiry is mostly about, but in other weather events. Is the forecast work that you do in conjunction with those other emergency services or is it independent, and is this work that we might be doubling up on?

Mr PIPER — The paradigm has shifted for all emergency services from all agencies, all hazards, to create a greater community focus, so the essence of this is about collaboration with the community. On a daily basis we will receive State Control Centre briefings and intelligence about what is happening, and that will be all manner of dynamics that occur and can impact on operations: road outages, infrastructure works, weather conditions. It really is a truly collaborative approach. I do not think it would be seen or could be justified as a double-up.

Mr YOUNG — Could you just run me through it? Obviously you get calls coming in, you give advice on the information that is presented in those calls, but given a particular event you could get numerous calls on the same event. How do you deal with that in so far as providing information back? Do you provide information back to those people who make a secondary or 10th call on the same thing, and how good is the flow of information to you to provide that to people?

Mr PIPER — Depending on the agency there are always call backs depending on the pressure and demand on that service line at the time. Perhaps I can provide an example of Wye River. So at Wye River the essence and the reason there was perhaps no loss of life, which was provided through review, was that there was early public communication and action plans provided throughout the community in response to the early alert about that fire. So in terms of the information that ESTA provide, quite often there will be multiple calls for one fire. Now, we know again during daylight hours or hours of darkness there will be differences in call-handling time. During the day people are quite oriented to where they are. Call-handling time for Wye River was around 43 minutes during the day, and we know that at night-time — —

Ms OXLEY — Seconds.

Mr PIPER — Sorry, 43 seconds. Thank you, Julia.

Ms SHING — Thank you for correcting the record, Ms Oxley.

Mr PIPER — So we know during the period of night, as the fire may have changed course or was visible at night, people were less oriented, and again call-handling times escalated to about 83 seconds per call. We do provide information. Quite often when people ring multiple calls for the same fire, the advice is that we are aware that the fire is there. We will also have recorded diversions that were put on 000 telephony during major campaigns and major fires to actually direct people to appropriate information sources.

Ms DUNN — Thank you all for your submissions. I note here in the background information it talks about the data transactions, which go into the several millions on the mobile data network. What I am wondering is: do you have any views or have you done any assessment, I guess, on the robustness of that network, particularly in those scenarios where there are surge incidents like bushfires, for example, and how that bears up under that sort of pressure?

Mr PIPER — It is a good question. Is this specifically around data network available to the community or data network available to emergency services to conduct operations?

Ms DUNN — Data transactions that you are pushing out.

Mr PIPER — From an ESTA perspective, the metropolitan region is serviced by a bespoke high priority availability network that is supplied by the vendor. Currently under the emergency management operational communications program there is the testing of a third-party network provider to support those services. That is still a piece of work that is being reviewed and being trialled.

In the rural regions there is no bespoke network, so some emergency services are reliant on granular data information via a third-party network, and that is only available where the network exists. There is a method of data communication that is a one-way communication method, which is EAS paging. Emergency alerting system paging is a highly resilient, highly available paging network, and you saw the statistics or the numbers around capacity and availability. That is a service that is used by CFA, Ambulance Victoria and a number of other responding agencies as their primary form of messaging, and again that is supported by multiple variations of network, whether it be satellite technology or fixed communication points.

Ms DUNN — I know on Black Saturday one of the issues was the complete breakdown in communication systems that simply could not cope with the capacity that was enduring at the time. Do you have, I guess, any insights into the systems that are in place now as to how robust they would be under a similar scenario?

Mr PIPER — Again we are heavily reliant on the maturation of the third-party networks. There is technology being developed that the entire sector is exploring — things such as LANES technology, which is a product that is provided by Telstra. That provides a specific lane, if you like, of data available to emergency services. However, we know, after collaboration with both the telcos and the agencies, that that is a business-grade offering; it does not provide the same offering that existed under the bespoke network. So as technology grows in that region, I think we will see reliance on a statewide radio network, a high availability radio network. There will be a transition to long-term evolution hybrid networks into the future, but I would say that the capacity of the state to move to that position does not exist at the moment.

Ms DUNN — Thank you.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Thanks for your presentation. I just have one question, which may not be related to the work you do. When I was in the United States there was an alert warning — it scared a lot out of me. The alert warning came up to tell us that there was a major cyclone or hurricane or something that was coming. Do we do that, and if we do, is it done by your organisation?

Mr PIPER — Those types of alerts and warnings would be part of agency activity. If they wanted to introduce that as part of their response, we would certainly enable that. It is not for us to determine, but we would work and collaborate on that.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, I understand. If it was a major bushfire or even a major fire, to pre-warn people — because everybody says, 'Listen to the radio', but technology has moved on and there are other vehicles — you could do that in a certain designed area to alert people to a possible pending fire?

Mr PIPER— I think that is currently done —

Ms SHING — CFA alerts, yes, absolutely. We already get those.

Ms OXLEY — That is done, yes.

Mr PIPER — by alerts via commercial radio.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I am in sunny Vermont South. Does it work well? Given that you do it, are there any impediments to the process? What is the turnaround from the time that you are allowed to do it? How do you do it and how do you target a geographical area as opposed to just everywhere? I am trying to get some understanding of that process.

Ms OXLEY — We are not the ones that are pushing out that information to the community, but we are certainly — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Who does it?

Ms OXLEY — That would be sitting with the agencies and within emergency vic. So there is a Vic Emergency website et cetera, supporting things — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — No, I am not on the website; I am out in my car. I am a farmer working out there and all I have got is my phone.

Mr PIPER — Large-scale alerting is done under the auspices of the State Control Centre when a levelled emergency — a categorised emergency — is called by the State Control Centre. The State Control Centre then has a controlling authority. So it is the agencies that form part of that emergency management team who determine when those alerts are going to be provided. So they would be best positioned to provide you with advice on that.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Okay. I am still not clear, but that is all right. So you do not have any involvement in that process?

Mr PIPER — We have a presence in the State Control Centre. We are not a response agency. We have a liaison capacity to provide information between the intelligence from our operations and business-as-usual activity — the number of emergency 000 calls that are arriving at any given time; that would feed into the intelligence of that greater campaign.

Ms OXLEY — And data. So there is a data stream from CAP.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Okay, thank you.

Ms BATH — Thank you for your submission today. I am interested in the process and response times from somebody ringing in. They see a large fire happening in country Victoria somewhere and they ring 000. Can you walk us through the process and the response time that you expect from the call to the pagers going off in the CFA station and responding forthwith?

Ms OXLEY — In terms of response, ESTA has a standard for fire, for emergency calls, of 90 per cent of calls answered in 5 seconds, and with the CFA in the last year we certainly exceeded that standard every month. The call comes in and we then triage it. As soon as we have enough information in terms of location in particular, then we accept the event and that goes through to the dispatcher to actually do their piece of work.

Ms BATH — Ms Oxley, is that the 5 seconds?

Ms OXLEY — The 5 seconds is their response to the community, so the community would — —

Ms BATH — The pick-up, correct.

Ms OXLEY — They would ring 000, and it goes to Telstra — police, fire, ambulance and state — and that then comes through to ESTA. Depending on the service, it will go to that particular service within ESTA. We answer the call pretty consistently in that service standard with fire, and then the call-taker triages the call. They get to a point in the call where they have established where the emergency is and the nature of it so they can determine the priority, and that goes to the dispatcher, who then identifies the relevant emergency response.

Ms BATH — Thank you. Again I refer back to some information that we were given by Mr Marshall about stations responding within a period of time. So I guess my question would be: in the efforts to improve and make more efficient in all ways the response time, has there been any review of this that you have done internally or the like, and have there been any recommendations from that?

Mr PIPER — Again we tend to deal in seconds. One of the changes that Julia alluded to earlier was we have made changes to our call-taking script around fire. We used to ask a series of questions before we would actually activate the dispatch. We now essentially determine what the issue is, where the location is and then dispatch, and then follow up that information. So we are continuously looking at our systems and improving our systems and processes in conjunction with the agencies as to how the agencies need their services delivered.

Mr RONALDSON — Can I say as a general comment that this is the same for all our services. I think the realisation is that often the most valuable time is the time taken, as you said, between when the call comes in and when something is dispatched. After that there are a whole lot of circumstances beyond the control of

emergency services that go to things like congestion on the roads and the time from when you are leaving to where you go. There are a whole lot of unknown variables, but the bit that is in control often is the bit that we do. How efficiently can you find out where they are, what is going on, the severity of it? How efficiently can you find the resource to meet it? It is a function of a whole lot of variables, but at least we control a lot of them. A lot of the services, particularly the ambulance service, are looking very, very closely at this part of the journey which is within ESTA as a way of getting more efficient through their cycle.

Ms BATH — Thank you. I appreciate those comments. Last question: in terms of the receiving, so the pager — you are sending that information out to the fire station and the CFA volunteers or the CFA paid participants — do you have any say over the pager quality or the pager so that your information can be received efficiently?

Mr PIPER — The service levels are embedded within the contract in terms of transmission time, transmission rates. We are aware with paging particularly that the construct is that paging services are built into pillars, and if we overload a pillar with messaging it will impact or delay messaging, so we need to create additional channels so we do not see that delay in transmission of data messaging.

Ms BATH — I imagine on peak surge days that you will have overload by the nature of the location of the specific fire?

Mr PIPER — There is no doubt, and that was evidenced in some of the bigger fire campaigns that we have seen.

Ms BATH — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Can I thank all three ESTA people for speaking today. No doubt the secretariat will be in contact to follow up a number of points.

Ms SHING — Thank you very much for your evidence.

Witnesses withdrew.