

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Melbourne — 24 March 2014

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Torquay Marine Rescue Service

Mr Adam Stephens, President

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Ronalds) — Welcome. This is an all-party parliamentary committee inquiry of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee into marine rescue services in Victoria. Please state your full name and residential address.

Mr STEPHENS — Adam Stephens, [REDACTED]

The ACTING CHAIR — Are you attending in a private capacity or on behalf of an organisation?

Mr STEPHENS — I am attending as president of Torquay Marine Rescue Service.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much. The evidence today will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. You are covered by parliamentary privilege while you are in the inquiry but not outside it. You may go ahead with your verbal submission.

Mr STEPHENS — Thank you for having me here today. I understand that the questions that have been proposed to me are in relation to the formation of the Torquay Marine Rescue Service, the nature of its activities, training and the like. Is that correct?

The ACTING CHAIR — Yes. It is pretty open.

Mr STEPHENS — No worries. It was formed in 1984 — as I understand it, Greg may have briefed you on some of the background as it was before my tenure — by a bloke called Norman Ainsworth as well as Adri Djiksmen and Pat Duncan. The formation of the Torquay Marine Rescue Service came about after witnessing an increasing number of misfortunes in the vicinity. Torquay was a beach ramp at the time, with no formal infrastructure for boating in place.

They formed the committee on 1 October 1984. Subsequently on 7 November 1984 the steering committee commissioned a 5.8-metre Stessl monohull twin-engine aluminium boat and christened it *Betty A*. The committee had 30 members in the crew at the time. Training commenced around that date and was headed by a bloke by the name of David Maughlan, a retired police boating squad member, who took the crew through its paces.

In 1998 the second rescue craft, a Sea-Doo Explorer, was purchased. That was a jet boat which we have used right up until this date — we have just decommissioned that vessel. We later purchased a 6.8-metre Stabicraft monohull, with twin 115 four-stroke outboard motors, which gave us a search and rescue capacity — and I stand to be corrected — to approximately 17 nautical miles offshore. I will check that. It carries C 2 survey. I will have to check the actual range on that in my notes.

We have recently taken possession of a 6.1-metre Sealegs amphibious rescue vessel, for which we were grateful to be funded \$88 000 from the VESEP 2013–14 grants. In addition to that we operate two Yamaha PWCs for inshore rescue work. We have just recently disposed of one of those, and we are looking to purchase a second one as our SOPs require us to operate two up.

Torquay Marine Rescue Service is tasked by Victorian water police to respond to incidents that are called in to them. We also receive calls from members of the public and local police and record notifications from the local surf clubs, either formally or informally. In terms of funding, we are self-funded. We receive no or little ongoing government funding other than that for which we apply from the respective grants, whether it be the VESEP or other government grants that may come around from time to time. We do not receive any funding from local government councils, including the Surf Coast Shire Council or the City of Greater Geelong, in the areas in which we operate. I understand we are probably one of the very few rescue environments, as would be the case with many volunteer marine rescue environments, that do not receive any funding from state or local governments on general day-to-day operations or activities.

We currently have approximately 20 members or thereabouts on board as members of our crew. It is a full volunteer membership, which is oversighted by a committee of management comprised of eight members at the moment.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is that additional to the 20, or included?

Mr STEPHENS — That is included in the 20. We have additional members who are on call and affiliated with the club. They hold a commercial operating coxswain certificate and can actually pilot our Stabicraft, which requires a coxswain certificate. The other craft are not surveyed commercially, so they do not require a coxswain certificate.

Mr RONALDS — And that is okay now? We have heard evidence that they all have to be under survey. Is that not correct?

Mr STEPHENS — There is no survey for certain types of vessels at the moment. As I understand it, it is in process that surveys will be attached to PWCs and also to the 6.1-metre Stabicraft, but at the moment there is no survey classification for that type of vessel.

The ACTING CHAIR — If the PWCs are under survey, does that mean you have to have a coxswain's for private jet skiing?

Mr STEPHENS — This is something that I think is yet to be negotiated. We understand that there will be a restricted survey. They may issue some sort of restricted coxswain's for it; you can get restricted coxswain's issued for certain vessels.

The ACTING CHAIR — Who is that through?

Mr STEPHENS — That is through Marine Safety Victoria.

The ACTING CHAIR — Will they do a restricted coxswain's?

Mr STEPHENS — It will restrict you to the operation of that particular vessel. I understand that the restricted coxswain's is something that the Coast Guard has looked at progressing specifically in relation to their vessels that enables them to operate, recognising that training is done specific to that vessel for that specific purpose and it is not general in terms of the commercial operation which the coxswain certificate carries. It is similar to what one would say in terms of the CFA or SES, where you are trained to operate a rescue vehicle specific to that service and not outside that area.

Funding for us is a significant ongoing concern. The ongoing running cost of the club is somewhere in the order of probably about \$20 000, not taking into account the depreciation of assets. We are heavily reliant on and have been very lucky to have the generous support from the old Torquay community in terms of the funding of our vessels, but as we know times have changed and the funding is starting to dry up, especially as the older members start to pass away. A lot of the major companies that we have been very lucky in generating some support for us go to publically listed companies and are therefore a lot more tightly controlled in terms of the way they can dissolve their funds. A lot of the old money, as it has termed, in Torquay is very quickly drying up, and that makes it extremely difficult for us to find our activities and places increasing pressure on the membership to actually raise those funds.

The ACTING CHAIR — You will get funding for the rescues you do.

Mr STEPHENS — We get reimbursement for the rescues we do in terms of fuel.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is that working well?

Mr STEPHENS — It is working well for us in the context of the rescues that we actually undertake. It certainly does not cover the fuel load that is required for training or anything like that. Given the nature of our service, we could be anywhere down from 4 rescues a year right up to 20-plus rescues a year, depending on the nature of what is actually going on in the environment. If we were solely reliant on the funding we would receive in response to the number of rescues we do, we would certainly be well and truly behind the eight ball and would not be able to operate.

The ACTING CHAIR — Who is the closest other rescue operator? You have done 4 to 20. What is an average year?

Mr STEPHENS — An average year is probably around the 6 to 10 mark, I would say, of actual callouts to respond — —

The ACTING CHAIR — How close is the closest — I do not want to use the word ‘competing’ — other facility?

Mr STEPHENS — The closest facilities with a survey rescue vessel that is able to do offshore work are Apollo Bay and Queenscliff.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you know how far?

Mr STEPHENS — Apollo Bay is about 60 nautical miles, and then you have Queenscliff inside the heads. We do have Barwon Heads ocean rescue, but their vessel is not surveyed, so it is restricted to 2 nautical miles offshore. Along the coast down our way we also have surf lifesaving. Again they are restricted to a maximum of 2 nautical miles offshore.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is there good interaction with those other — —

Mr STEPHENS — We enjoy a good relationship with both the clubbies and also the other rescue services around our area that we deal with.

The ACTING CHAIR — How would you say you differ from the Coast Guard? Why are you so much better?

Mr STEPHENS — The organisational structure is the key difference between us and Coast Guard. Obviously Coast Guard is a larger body, as with surf lifesaving, and it has had a much longer tenure. Coast Guard predominantly started inside the bay, though obviously it has a number of flotillas outside the bay down at Lakes Entrance and a few inland. Our service came out of a demand from the local fishermen down there, probably similar to what it was like at Apollo Bay, where they saw a need that was growing. There was no Coast Guard flotilla that would service down there when we were formed, so the local residents took it upon themselves to form that. We differ in our training a little bit. Our management structure is different and certainly not as layered and complex as the Coast Guard would be. Due to the number of flotillas they command, a different organisational structure is required to run that compared to us, who are dealing with just one body — our own particular area.

The ACTING CHAIR — Of your 6 to 10 rescues, where do they generally come from? Are they via the police?

Mr STEPHENS — They are generally tasked by the water police, and it is a concern of ours. A number of the ways that tasking comes through means that tasking is often somewhat delayed.

The ACTING CHAIR — When you say delayed — —

Mr STEPHENS — Delayed in terms of the area in which we are able to respond quickly, the capability of the equipment we maintain in terms of the ocean-going nature of our vessels, as well as support to the surf clubs in terms of what we can do in relation to the inshore work we can achieve on the PWCs, given their ability to operate inshore under heavier swells than an IRB would be able to operate under due to their speed and agility. We have either not been called out or been called out on delayed notification of searches where they have occurred, where we have received notifications from members of the public and then had to contact water police to get advice, who have then notified SES to say, ‘If you could attend, that would be greatly appreciated’.

The ACTING CHAIR — In those instances have other marine rescue services been there already?

Mr STEPHENS — Sometimes other rescue services have been there. It has either been surf lifesaving responding with the chopper or, in another instance, Coast Guard responding with one of their vessels outside the heads. It comes down to a lack of knowledge by the person who is at water police at the time as to what services are available in that area for response.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is there no central database of all the resources?

Mr STEPHENS — I am not familiar with what water police holds in terms of its database. We have found it has been ad hoc in terms of the nature of the callout that has actually occurred.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is your vessel equipped with GPS tracking back to the police?

Mr STEPHENS — No, it is not.

Mr EIDEH — The committee notes that following the 2009 review of the New South Wales marine rescue service, the state's three main rescue organisation services were consolidated into a single body. In your opinion, what would be the advantage and disadvantage of such an approach in Victoria?

Mr STEPHENS — As I understand it, in New South Wales and Queensland there was an association that oversaw the management of the volunteer marine rescue services. They are effectively an independent rescue organisation that forms under that single association. Some time ago, I am advised, there was an association that looked over the volunteer rescue services in Victoria, but that lost favour and lost its way from a lack of direction. There are certainly advantages and disadvantages in terms of the coordination being handled by a single body. However, if you were to consolidate under a single body, it would be more pertinent to accommodate it under a single association, rather than give it to volunteer marine rescue at, say, Rosebud, or Coast Guard or something like that, due to the vast variances in the different communities you are dealing with and from which these people come.

As a member of the CFA, I also note that some of the training implications imposed by larger bodies may not be palatable to some of the other rescue services in terms of the way they go about doing training. It would be seen as very much an impost due to the nature of their operations. It may require them to undergo training that is not necessarily suited to their area or necessarily required for them to perform or function to a level to which they are required to perform. If you were to impose across the board one set of standards or training by one organisation, it would be likely to cause angst amongst the members due to (a) fear of the unknown and (b) the increased impost they may have in terms of training to meet those requirements to be a member of that organisation. It could result in losing a number of members, and we would certainly struggle to keep our older members who have that experience of the sea, which is something that only comes with experience.

The ACTING CHAIR — How do you find recruiting younger members?

Mr STEPHENS — We are getting better and better with younger members, and something on which we are focusing at the moment is training and developing our younger members and giving them the time.

The ACTING CHAIR — In your opinion, why do they join?

Mr STEPHENS — We are offering something a little bit different now. We are offering them a way to get out there, be a member of the community and actually do something, and we are providing them with opportunities to train that they cannot get in other areas. All of our members show a strong interest in the water and a strong interest in the open water, and we draw on that. A lot of them are descendants of fathers and grandfathers who have been members of the club who have passed down those skills. Unlike dealing with land-based activities, there is nowhere to hide on the ocean, so you really need that experience under your belt to be passed on down the generations and be kept going.

Mr EIDEH — Is this in-house training?

Mr STEPHENS — Yes, we do in-house training. A lot of our members who are PWC operators and our trainers have done the surf lifesaving training course. We base a lot of our training on the PWCs on that training course and have added additional requirements that we need to operate in our environment. The surf lifesaving course is very much dedicated to training for the inshore surf environment, and that only covers a certain aspect of our mandate of operations. It certainly does not cover night-time operations or the like on which we need to pick up and skill up our members.

Mr EIDEH — How often do they review it?

Mr STEPHENS — We review that monthly. As part of our committee meeting they review the training, make sure it is all up to date and make any amendments to the training that may be required. The members are also reviewed each time they take the skis out. In terms of their training, they are trained in stages. They get trained in basic operations, then they get trained in open water operations, then they get trained in surf operations and then they get trained to be able to operate at night. Their skill sets are built up over time. It is not simply a case of just jumping on something or going and doing a course.

The ACTING CHAIR — Excellent. What is your biggest challenge?

Mr STEPHENS — Our biggest challenge would be funding to give members the opportunity to maintain their skills out on the ocean. I could not stress enough to the committee the amount of training that is required and the ongoing commitment for those members to keep up those skills given the nature of the environment in which they operate.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of the rescues you do — to give us a better idea, not just specific cases — what sorts of rescues have there been?

Mr STEPHENS — The rescues we have done generally involve the search and rescue of deceased persons. We have searched for lost divers and searched for lost jet ski riders who have drifted some nautical miles from us at night. We have also recovered surfers who have had broken hips at places like that. We have had mass rescues involving school groups of kayakers who have been blown offshore. We have attended events where they have had in excess of 100 rescues in a 15-minute period due to changes in weather conditions. The rescues are quite varied.

The ACTING CHAIR — Generally are they within the 2 nautical miles?

Mr STEPHENS — No, definitely not — not by the time we get notification that a rescue has occurred. A case in point is the last rescue we did recently. This summer, about 8 nautical miles out to sea in swells that were probably 12 to 14 feet, we were searching for what was believed to be an upturned kite surfer but which ended up being an upturned banana boat. We did that by ourselves with the police air wing to try and locate that vessel.

The ACTING CHAIR — In 12-foot waves?

Mr STEPHENS — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is there anything else you think we should hear?

Mr STEPHENS — In terms of funding, I would like to see — —

Mr EIDEH — This is an important one.

Mr STEPHENS — Yes, it is definitely important. I will give you an idea in terms of the vessel for which we recently got funding. It was \$147 000; it is a major impost on us. The marine and rescue environment is the only emergency response organisation that does not receive any sort of ongoing funding from either state or local government for its operations.

Mr EIDEH — Why not?

Mr STEPHENS — Are you asking me that question?

Mr EIDEH — Do you apply?

Mr STEPHENS — We apply for funding grants, but I cannot see that it is the responsibility of volunteer marine rescue services to go to the state government and say, 'We should be funded for day-to-day operations'. The SES and the CFA, no matter how small the brigade, will get an operational budget for training, equipment purchases and administration. You can have a CFA station out in the middle of absolutely nowhere, but it is still covered under that operational budget, and it may get two or three callouts a year. If it is based on the same number of callouts, yes, sometimes we get minimal callouts, but we are there. However, we do not get any operating budget.

We perform that function on behalf of the water police. We do that search and rescue until they are able to attend, and whilst they take control of the coordination we are the actual physical assets along with surf lifesaving and Coast Guard that will go out to find that. But there is no base-level funding to ensure the viability and provision of that service.

Under the boating CAP, Torquay was just recently classified as a district boating facility. There is nothing in the boating CAP or the review of the boating facilities that turns around and acknowledges that a boating facility has gone or increased in terms of the populous and its users or anything like that which gives consideration to the provision of any sort of rescue services. It is just taken that we will provision that facility, whether it is a state boating facility or whether it is a regional or district boating facility. No consideration is given in that document to review what sorts of emergency services need to be provisioned in the upgrading of that facility. I think that would go a long way to seeing where we are actually provisioned.

The ACTING CHAIR — Have you got anything else, Adam?

Mr STEPHENS — No, I do not have anything else.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much for your submission. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about a fortnight. You are able to correct any typing errors or things of that nature, but not matters of substance. Thank you very much for coming. We do appreciate it.

Mr STEPHENS — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.