

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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Australian Maritime Safety Authority

Ms Christine MacMillian, Manager, Planning and Business Support, Emergency Response Division,

(via teleconference).

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Ronalds) — Welcome to the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. Welcome to the hearing. Could you please state your full name and address and whether you are giving evidence in a private capacity or representing an organisation?

Ms Macmillian — Sure, Andrew; I can do that. My full name is Christine Lynne Macmillian. My address is [REDACTED]

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much. I need to let you know that evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. I would now like to invite you to make a verbal submission. We will probably ask questions as we go along or at the end.

Ms MacMILLIAN — Sure. One addition to that is that I am in the process of representing the Australian Maritime Safety Authority in my position as Manager, Planning and Business Support.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thanks, Christine.

Ms MacMILLIAN — In regard to providing a submission I just want to state that of course the Australian Maritime Safety Authority has international obligations on behalf of Australia to maintain a search and rescue service in line with three international conventions: the Convention on International Civil Aviation of 1944, referred to as the Chicago Convention; the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, referred to as the SOLAS convention; and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, referred to as the SAR convention. From that the Australian Maritime Safety Authority has statutory duties under the Australian Maritime Safety Authority Act to provide a national search and rescue service in the manner consistent with our international obligations.

In line with that we have an intergovernmental agreement on national search and rescue response arrangements, and we have put into practice in Australia the ability for AMSA to pursue its own statutory duties in cooperation with the state and territory governments where they hold their own relevant statutory obligations for the welfare of citizens and the safety of citizens. For that we have basically a cooperative statement of mutual understanding, and from that we have the national SAR manual, which really puts in practice the processes and procedures for which search and rescue is governed in Australia.

In regard to our specific input into the inquiry, we were really inputting information under terms of reference (c) and (d), and it really was about how the national system of search and rescue is established and maintained in Australia and also in regard to our particular involvement with marine rescue units and services. When you get below the police level, we work through the police in respective territories for linkages into marine rescue units that are nominally known as volunteer marine rescue units.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you have much direct impact with those?

Ms MacMILLIAN — We do not have much direct contact, and I say that in the context of the way the intergovernmental agreement and the national SAR manual is set up, which is that we interact directly with the respective state and territory search and rescue authorities — nominally the state police — and they then coordinate the volunteers.

The ACTING CHAIR — So your interaction is basically done at the top level with the police?

Ms MacMILLIAN — That is correct. The only other direct, real involvement we have as part of the arrangement for national search and rescue in Australia is what we call a National Search and Rescue Council, which is made up of state and territory police representatives, ourselves and the defence force. On that we also have observer status for our chair on the national volunteer marine SAR committee, and he attends as an observer.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of this inquiry, your involvement is, as I say, at the top level. In terms of investigating things that have gone wrong — incidents and so forth — is it fair to say you are involved directly in that or not?

Ms MacMILLIAN — First of all, yes, we respond to search and rescue. If the volunteers are involved, we do that through the police. In regard to investigations, that is not something in which we have direct involvement.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is fair enough, I just want to be clear on this. Do you have any recommendations to us in terms of marine rescue in Victoria?

Ms MacMILLIAN — I have no direct recommendations. The only thought is that because we interact with all the police and the state authorities, we know that there are different ways each state and territory has decided to run their rescue services on the marine level. It is probably worth investigating how effective that is and what other types of arrangements are in place in the other states.

The ACTING CHAIR — So from your perspective looking at dealing with a number of different states, what can you say from your experience with Victoria? I guess where does it fit is the first question.

Ms MacMILLIAN — Actually that is something that I probably cannot particularly comment on directly. I can tell you from our perspective that our relationship with the police SAR authority is well established and very functional, and that is part of the whole IGA and the national SAR manual. I would not say that our interaction with the police in Victoria is any better or worse than in any other state. When we request cooperation with the police on an incident, they will then work to respond in the most effective manner with the resources available, and I believe from an AMSA perspective we have not recognised any less capacity in Victoria than we have in other states.

The ACTING CHAIR — I am just asking my colleague if he has any questions.

Mr EIDEH — Christine, the committee has received evidence from Yachting Victoria, Ray Shaw at the public hearings in Geelong on 18 March, said that unlike states such as New South Wales and Tasmania there is incomplete VHF radio coverage along the Victorian coastline because the existing repeaters are not all linked. Are you aware of this situation, and you have any comment on the potential impact for marine rescue services in Victoria?

Ms MacMILLIAN — I cannot comment on the specifics of the level of HF and VHF coverage in Victoria. I have seen different pieces of information on both systems — the HF and VHF networks in Australia — but in regard to Victoria's present situation, I am not presently well placed to comment on that.

Mr EIDEH — Okay.

The ACTING CHAIR — Do you have any other comments to make for us?

Ms MacMILLIAN — I guess the only other comment on the last question would be that it is the experience of search and rescue coordination that communications is an essential part of that, so I guess in general it is always good to ensure you have a reliable and consistent coverage of search and rescue communications. VHF channel 16 is recognised as the distress and calling frequency, so if there is evidence that it is not well established then they could be reasons to better develop it.

The ACTING CHAIR — Under the current situation the marine rescue services all have to have a coxswain to be able to skipper the boat. What is your opinion of that? Do you think there is scope for maybe a different qualification?

Ms MacMILLIAN — Andrew, because we have another element within AMSA that has been working with the police and the volunteers on their levels of qualifications, I am more than happy to take some questions on notice, but that is not my area of expertise.

The ACTING CHAIR — I appreciate that. In fact we will probably follow that up as a committee; I think that is a good point. Is there anyone else in that case from your organisation to whom we should be talking?

Ms MacMILLIAN — I believe AMSA's domestic vessel division has been working very closely with the relevant volunteers around the country on qualifications, so there are a couple of points of contact. I am not sure who is heading that presently, but I can definitely get you an address and send it to you by email.

The ACTING CHAIR — We would really appreciate that; it would be very good. Are there any other comments?

Ms MacMILLIAN — As I have talked about the IGA and the national SAR manual, the only other thing that we have recognised through our experience is that the present way we prosecute search and rescue in Australia we consider to be quite practical and also quite effective. It is about maintaining that capacity to do that at both the Commonwealth and state levels.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is a good point, and we appreciate that. Thank you very much for your time. You will receive a copy of this transcript in about a fortnight. If there are any typing errors or punctuation errors, feel free to make adjustments, but please do not correct anything of substance. Thank you very much for your time today.

Ms MacMILLIAN — Thank you, Andrew, and we will send that information through to Nathan.

The ACTING CHAIR — I appreciate that. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.