

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Lakes Entrance — 8 April 2014

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Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, VF22 Paynesville

Mr Alexander Fowler, Deputy Commander

The CHAIR — Welcome to this hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee in its inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, any comments you make outside this room will not be afforded such privilege. Can I please ask you to state your full name and address and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

Mr FOWLER — My name is Alexander Arthur Fowler. I live at [REDACTED] and I am appearing on behalf of the Coast Guard flotilla at Paynesville, VF22.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. The evidence you give today will become part of a public document, Alex. I ask you to please start your oral submission.

Mr FOWLER — Firstly, the submission I am giving you is actually the flotilla commander's submission. He apologises for not being here; he is overseas. I will refer to his notes, if that is okay.

The CHAIR — That is fine.

Mr FOWLER — I believe you have a copy of them.

The CHAIR — Yes, we do.

Mr FOWLER — Do you want me to go through them all in full detail?

The CHAIR — No, it is fine. If you want to, you can add emphasis or perhaps comment on some of those where you think it is pertinent.

Mr FOWLER — Coast Guard in Gippsland started approximately 10 years ago with the affiliation of three independent rescue units and two royal coastal patrol flotillas. Since then we have integrated and organised our own squadron formation for Gippsland so that Gippsland is virtually autonomous. Paynesville itself operates a marine radio base seven days a week from 7.30 am until 5.15 pm, plus we have after-hours coverage on a casual basis when required. In addition to the radio base, we have a Stabicraft 759 rescue craft, which conforms to 2C survey status.

The CHAIR — Continually conforms?

Mr FOWLER — Yes, it is inspected annually by the marine assessors.

The CHAIR — Why is that?

Mr FOWLER — Initially the boats were in survey. Boats in survey require a commercial coxswain in charge. Marine safety, whilst accepting the Coast Guard had training in parallel stream to that for the commercial coxswain qualifications, did not recognise it, did not issue a ticket. This is my belief. So to get around the problem of keeping the rescue boats on the water without having to have all the skippers accredited and the cost involved, they came up with the classification 'survey compliant'.

The CHAIR — Which still requires the yearly — —

Mr FOWLER — The boat meets all the survey requirements — equipment, first aid, everything that a commercial boat would need to be in survey.

The CHAIR — Forgive me if I am incorrect here, but until your evidence my impression was that none of the other boats are surveyed regularly.

Mr RONALDS — They were built to survey but were not compliant in survey.

The CHAIR — Or not required to be tested to be compliant.

Mr FOWLER — I would have to check, but I know that up until two years ago the Paynesville boat was checked. Surveyor Mal Feldon used to come down.

The CHAIR — Do you know if that was a requirement? You are not absolutely certain? Was it done for safety purposes?

Mr FOWLER — I was under the impression it was a marine safety requirement.

The CHAIR — Okay. Thanks very much, Alex. Continue.

Mr FOWLER — As I say, that is my impression. I would have to go back. I have been out of the executive line at the flotilla for about three years. I have only just been roped back in to cover the casual vacancy.

The CHAIR — Welcome back.

Mr FOWLER — Thanks. With it we have membership at Paynesville of about 50 members, of whom some 45 would be active. By active, I mean as radio operators and/or boat crew. The radio base is open every day of the year except Christmas Day. During the peak season we work two shifts a day. During the winter times we curtail the hours because the demand is not there and we have trouble getting sufficient volunteers to be able to cover the full roster. But from cup weekend through until after Easter we are operating the two shifts minimum.

We monitor boats on the lakes with the radio base. We also monitor vessels traversing the Victorian coastline and Bass Strait. We operate our primary VHF channels 16 and 67, which are the emergency and calling frequencies.

The CHAIR — When you say you monitor those vessels, you are talking about vessels that are in contact with you?

Mr FOWLER — The sets are monitored. Vessels can contact us. We can contact them, if they are listening. Our transmitters for VHF 16 and 67 are on Mount Nowa Nowa, which is north-east of here, to get the range to go out over Bass Strait.

Mr RONALDS — What would be the range, Alex?

Mr FOWLER — Officially, it is about 50 kilometres to 80 kilometres.

Mr RONALDS — Practically?

Mr FOWLER — Practically we talk to Coast Radio Hobart at times. We talk to Tamar Sea Rescue on a regular basis.

Mr RONALDS — Would it be fair to say that with planes for the Tamar the whole of Bass Strait is covered by 16?

Mr FOWLER — Eastern Bass Strait, yes.

Mr RONALDS — Eastern Bass Strait. Sorry, yes.

Mr FOWLER — We have repeaters along several high points from Mount Imlay, which is just over the border in New South Wales; Mount Taylor, which is the back of Bairnsdale; and Mount Oberon and Mount Fatigue on the promontory. Then there are others further west, which with a computer link-up enables us to talk to vessels outside our immediate VHF 16 range providing they are on that frequency and that they are aware of that frequency.

Mr RONALDS — The frequency being? For the record, sorry.

Mr FOWLER — Mount Imlay is channel 81. Mount Taylor is channel 80. Mount Oberon is channel 22. Mount Fatigue is channel 81.

Mr RONALDS — How are those frequencies noted by vessels?

Mr FOWLER — They are published in the marine safety radio booklet. A fair amount of it is word of mouth to boats passing through. We advise that they can contact us on those frequencies. Ideally if we had VHF

channels 16 and 67 being able to be transmitted from those repeater bases, it would mean that a boatie would only have to worry about the one frequency.

Mr RONALDS — It is our understanding that that is under way. Is that correct?

Mr FOWLER — I believe so. There is a lot of talk. I have not seen the action, but that does not mean a thing.

The CHAIR — Continue.

Mr FOWLER — One of the results of private organisations going to Coast Guard is that all of the units are now on a uniform training level. They have to meet the same requirements, whether it be at Marlo, Port Welshpool or Paynesville. It is standard. That came to me when I went to Queensland a few years ago and went out with the Cairns unit. They were doing exactly what we are doing. There is that common training level and common subjects.

One of the problems that volunteer organisations have — and we are no different from the rest — is funding. We have to raise money for our normal operating expenses: fuel, maintenance of equipment, engine servicing et cetera. We are able to apply for grants periodically for equipment, which involves a local contribution. This can be a problem at times, particularly on the training side of things. If our members have to have commercial qualifications, we are looking at several hundred dollars for each person to go and do their commercial coxswains at one of the approved training institutions.

The CHAIR — How much?

Mr FOWLER — Several hundred. Do not ask me what the current figure is.

Mr RONALDS — We have just heard from someone in the gallery that training is about \$3000 — is that correct? — and it is about \$300 for the actual test.

The CHAIR — That is evidence we have already received.

Mr FOWLER — That is okay. That is probably more current than what I have.

The CHAIR — That is fine.

Mr FOWLER — It is some years since I did my training. At Paynesville we do the radio and the boat. We do virtually no public education boating courses, because we do not have the resources.

One of our major concerns, for want of a better word, is what the future of marine radio will be: whether it will be centralised or locally run. If it is centralised, my major concern would be having people manning radios to assist vessels on local knowledge of a place 300 or 400 miles away from where they are.

Mr RONALDS — To clarify, your concern is that, for example, Sandringham becomes the hub for marine radio, and there is not the local knowledge, or are you more worried about — —

Mr FOWLER — I am more worried that all radio will be done at a central point with satellite stations not being involved.

The CHAIR — Correct me if I am wrong, but you are saying that the added functionality of the new technologies would give the capacity to operate it at a central point, but you think that there would be severe risks in doing that?

Mr FOWLER — There could be delays in getting the information out to boats, which could be a problem.

Mr RONALDS — A local knowledge issue is a part of it?

Mr FOWLER — Local knowledge can be critical.

The CHAIR — I agree with that.

Mr FOWLER — A few years ago, for argument's sake, I had Melbourne water police ring up wanting to know what boat they would deploy at Anderson Inlet, down near Inverloch. Why they rang me at Paynesville, I don't know.

The CHAIR — I think we have already received evidence similar to that today.

Mr FOWLER — I informed the constable that he should contact the SES at Inverloch. If it was critical, it could be a delaying factor.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr RONALDS — That is very fair.

Mr FOWLER — We often get requests for information on the radio here about crossing the Bar. We have a reasonable knowledge of it, but we do not have a view of it so our information is restricted. But somebody in Melbourne would be more restricted. I joined marine rescue at Paynesville to put something back into boating. That has followed through to the Coast Guard, and I would hate to see the facilities to ensure the safety of the voting public reduced or jeopardised.

The CHAIR — I think you made that point very well.

Mr FOWLER — I think that basically what I have said plus my own thoughts summarises what Peter Foxton has put in his report to you. Do you have any questions? Can I help you in any way?

Mr RONALDS — No, I think I have asked lots of questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Alex, for earlier today and also for the information you have now provided. It gives us plenty to think about. You made those points very well so I am sure the author of the report will be very satisfied with the additional information you have provided. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your time and the information you have given us. You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings. Feel free to point out any grammatical errors but do not make any changes to the substance of the document.

Mr FOWLER — I would like to thank you for travelling out to see what goes on out in the field.

The CHAIR — It has been an absolute pleasure.

Witness withdrew.