

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Frankston — 17 March 2014

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Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad

Ms Eileen Murray, President

Mr Bruce Murray, Treasurer

Ms Lynda Murray, First Aid Training Officer

The CHAIR — Welcome. My name is Neale Burgess. I am the member for Hastings and the Chair of the committee, an all-party parliamentary committee, which is hearing evidence today on the inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria — I am required to say that. Welcome to the hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken in this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, but anything you say outside will not have the same sort of protection. I ask you to each state your full names and addresses and whether or not you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

Ms E. MURRAY — My name is Eileen Murray, and I am appearing on behalf of Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad. My personal address is [REDACTED].

Mr MURRAY — I am Bruce Murray. I am Treasurer and represent Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad. The same address: [REDACTED].

Ms L. MURRAY — I am Lynda Murray, and I am the First Aid Training Officer for the Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad. I live at [REDACTED].

The CHAIR — And you are appearing on behalf of the organisation as well?

Ms L. MURRAY — Yes, I am.

The CHAIR — Wonderful. I now invite you to make an oral submission.

Ms E. MURRAY — Obviously we have sent in a written submission on behalf of the squad. Just to go over the main points of that submission: Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad is an independent search and rescue organisation based at Blairgowrie on the Mornington Peninsula. All of our members are volunteers and on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We currently have one purpose-built rescue vessel — a 10-metre Naiad equipped for search and rescue — and a second vessel is due to be delivered in mid-2014.

We do not actually receive any regular government funding. We have at our disposal probably only two grants per year that we can apply for assistance with equipment and that sort of thing, and we do take advantage of that. We also have an affiliation with Life Saving Victoria.

In respect of the terms of reference, the main points of our submission are: the tasking of volunteer organisations by police, particularly in respect of the timing of calling us out, using the nearest resource and knowledge of locations around Port Phillip Bay; the lack of up-to-date computer technology at the rescue coordination centre in Williamstown; radio communication with the Victoria Police Air Wing and Life Saving Victoria during incidents; lack of communication between Transport Safety Victoria and volunteer organisations; and — this is a bit of a funny one — the lack of acknowledgement of volunteer organisations in media releases. We often go out on the jobs that are featured on TV when the Air Wing is doing its thing and it is all dramatic. We are left to pick up the pieces of the overturned boat; it can take two hours to tow it in somewhere. We might get our boat on TV, but they never say where we are from.

Mr SHAW — That is the media though.

Ms E. MURRAY — That is the media — and we are used to it.

Mr SHAW — Now, now!

Mr McGUIRE — You mean you do all the grunt work and those who do the glamour work get all the praise — is that it?

Ms E. MURRAY — That is right, yes, but we are not really complaining. We do not do it for that reason, but it would be nice now and then.

Mr McGUIRE — No, I took it in that vein.

Ms E. MURRAY — Currently the main issue for us is the new national regulations — not that we have an objection to accountability and requirements for training under them, but we believe what has happened is that they have placed unrealistic expectations onto the smaller independent groups in particular. For instance, we are

now in the same category of vessel as a commercial vessel, so we have to do all the same training and comply with the same rules as someone who might be operating a fleet of fishing vessels and carrying out an actual paid business. This is the really big one for us: the relevance and accessibility of the coxswain training. We are now required to have a coxswain on board at all times, as all groups are. We are not disagreeing with that, but the accessibility of the training is a problem. It is only carried out at two locations in Victoria — one being Docklands and the other being Sale, just around the corner. It involves a three-week course, and for somebody who is a volunteer that is a huge ask, especially if they have a job.

The CHAIR — Is that three weeks of weekends?

Ms E. MURRAY — No.

Mr MURRAY — Three full-time weeks.

Ms E. MURRAY — And some of it includes the weekends. Then there are about five days where they go to Geelong for practical work on board a large vessel. Where we are placed, down at the southern end of the peninsula, because we have a large holiday population that obviously is not there all the time we have a smaller population base to draw our membership from. Just recruiting members normally is a challenge for us. To actually recruit people who might have a coxswain certificate would be a bonus, but to recruit people who are even suitable for the training and who would be prepared to put in the amount of time to take on the training is a real challenge. We have accepted a couple of new people just in the last couple of weeks, but it is not necessarily going to result in them going to coxswain training.

In October 2012 we put two members through coxswain training. They completed and passed the written exams for that, but then on top of that they have to accrue sea time. If you are doing your sea time on commercial vessels, it is 224 hours plus what they call a task book, which equates to more hours, so it is a bit hard to say how many hours. It is a competency that has to be ticked off, but it could equate to another 300–400 hours. If you are using your experience on recreational vessels, it has to be over 5 metres — and that is fair enough — but the person has to get 1800 hours. The two guys our volunteer group put through in 2012 still do not have their ticket because they have not got the sea time up to then go and do their oral exam, which means so much time has elapsed that they have to restudy the whole course to do the orals.

What we are saying is that we believe there should be another category — another step in the ladder, if you like — because at the moment it jumps from a recreational boating licence to a coxswain certificate, and then you go and do your master 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. We believe there should be something that is for search and rescue only. It does not matter what it is called. It might be a ‘rescue vessel skipper’ or something for which obviously training and assessment is required but not some of the things we do in the coxswain course, which are totally irrelevant to what we do as a group. Perhaps I will get Bruce to expand on that a little bit. Bruce is also one of our boat’s skippers.

Mr MURRAY — In the coxswain course they have to do, the engineering component covers probably 90 per cent, which is geared around large diesel engines, engine rooms and so forth. Most of the rescue organisations use outboards. There are a few that use an inboard engine.

The CHAIR — Can I ask you what the class of people going through the coxswain training would be made up of?

Mr MURRAY — When you say the class of people — —

The CHAIR — Say, a course that is going through doing the coxswain’s training, what would be the make-up of that course?

Ms E. MURRAY — It could be made up of some who are working on fishing vessels or tourist vessels that have to have a coxswain, and then it could be some of our volunteers.

Mr MURRAY — Passenger ferries, all those sorts of things.

Mr RONALDS — What is the mix, though?

Mr MURRAY — It varies, depending on who applies at the time.

The CHAIR — Usually 50-50?

Mr MURRAY — Less of our people.

The CHAIR — So it might only be that 20 per cent of those going through are volunteers and the rest are all paid?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, if that.

Mr MURRAY — It might only be a couple of people doing it for the type of thing we do.

The CHAIR — So it is generalised to cover for paid people.

Ms E. MURRAY — Absolutely.

Mr MURRAY — Paid commercial operations up to 12 metres.

Ms E. MURRAY — The reason for the change is that they have now made us commercial vessels. We are now classed as commercial vessels, whereas before we were not recreational and we were not commercial; we were covered by a ministerial order that allowed us to go out and do what we do. The training was localised — local knowledge and some formal and informal training.

Mr MURRAY — If I could just mention, they cover things like heavy lifting with booms, davits, cranes and things and safe loading to achieve a particular trim on a vessel and maintain that trim. We do not load passengers, cargo, fishing nets and that sort of thing, which is what that is all geared around. That is covered as well. A fair amount of the time is based around that sort of thing.

We do not normally have to use paper charts, as another example, whereas they spend a whole day doing paper charts, plotting courses and so forth. We do it on our electronic navigation screens. Okay, they can go down, but in most cases we are actually working in our own local area, so it is based a lot on local knowledge. Without the chart we can still go out, do the job and come back safely.

The CHAIR — I might have missed it earlier, but do the volunteers pay anything for this course?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, it is about \$1700 — —

The CHAIR — The volunteers pay?

Ms E. MURRAY — We pay it on their behalf, and we were fortunate to get some funding through the boating and facilities grant.

Mr BURGESS — So it is \$1700 for volunteers. Is that the same charge for — —

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, exactly. There is no difference in the charge for volunteers.

Mr McGUIRE — Sorry, I could not hear what you said there. Which grant do you get some money through?

Ms E. MURRAY — It was the boating and facilities grant, which is a Victorian government grant.

Mr McGUIRE — So there is a grant that gives you something?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, and through that one you can apply for vessels training and some equipment.

The CHAIR — But no guarantee?

Mr MURRAY — That is right.

Ms E. MURRAY — No, we are competing with everyone else in the state, including all the large organisations.

The CHAIR — What happens if you do not get that grant?

Ms L. MURRAY — We pay for it

Ms E. MURRAY — We would still pay for it. We are fortunate to be financially secure enough to actually pay for that, and we would never expect a volunteer to pay \$1700 just to drive our rescue boat. That is unreasonable.

We realise that these are national regulations that have come in, but obviously the states have all consulted together to make this happen. I think for the smaller groups in particular, or for any group that has volunteers, it is a huge ask. I do not think it is going to happen in too many cases that someone is going to take their annual leave to do the coxswain's course. We would end up having to pay their wages for three weeks or something. We welcome the accountability. There were other groups operating in the past that were just attached to a yacht club or something, and they really did not go through the search and rescue training that our people do. I guess that is where it is at for us.

Ms L. MURRAY — A lot of the reason our people are doing the coxswain's course is not because they want to get a job in that area but because they need to drive our rescue vessel. They are getting it just to drive our vessel.

The CHAIR — For the privilege of saving people.

Ms L. MURRAY — Absolutely, and basically to give back to their own community.

Ms E. MURRAY — One of the concerns — because this issue has come up before in previous inquiries, and we were hopeful that it would have been addressed a long time ago, but it never has been — was that somebody might get a modified coxswain to drive our boat, say, and then try to use it to drive the Queenscliff ferry. They would be underqualified for that one, but you know what I mean. If it were called something totally different, a 'rescue skippers ticket' or something, whatever, there would be no confusion. So much of the work that all the search and rescue groups do comes down to local knowledge. We do not go and search around St Kilda. We might go up as far as Frankston occasionally, but that would be if there were something big going on. We go into Bass Strait out through the heads and either side of the Surf Coast there. Generally speaking ours is the southern end of the bay, whereas VMR Mornington is mainly centred in Mornington, Frankston, Safety Beach and that area.

The CHAIR — Do you think that your view of this training is representative of the whole industry?

Ms E. MURRAY — I would say it is definitely of the independent groups, the smaller groups.

The CHAIR — Do you think it is of all the volunteer groups?

Mr MURRAY — It has been discussed at length at different times when we have met up with other groups, like the Coast Guard and all the other independents.

The CHAIR — What is their view?

Mr MURRAY — They have always felt the same thing. There have been previous inquiries about marine search and rescue years ago.

Ms E. MURRAY — It started in 2003 and ended in 2008.

The CHAIR — That is a long inquiry.

Mr MURRAY — And nothing much ever came from that, but the consensus seemed to be that there needed to be this separate qualification that was still a course similar to the coxswain's course, retaining the modules from that that were appropriate and leaving out the ones that were not. Perhaps you could even add in some more on towing methods and rafting up to towing into confined spaces and so forth.

The CHAIR — So align the training more with what the requirements are for what you do.

Ms E. MURRAY — That is right, in keeping with what we do.

Mr RONALDS — How many of the people who have got coxswains now are commercial — that is, they work for you but are actually commercial people?

Ms E. MURRAY — None.

Mr MURRAY — We do not have any.

Mr RONALDS — So all of your people who are qualified do it purely for this.

Ms E. MURRAY — It is purely done for us.

Mr RONALDS — Do they come from the commercial world?

Ms L. MURRAY — No.

Mr RONALDS — So you have only got people who do it just for you, and that is why they do it.

Ms E. MURRAY — Exactly.

Mr MURRAY — We have never been able to attract anybody who has already had a coxswains and comes on board with us, because they are too busy in their business.

The CHAIR — It is probably not the thing you would want to do, volunteering for exactly the same thing you currently do.

Mr MURRAY — That is right.

Ms E. MURRAY — Maybe when they retire, but we are waiting for them to retire.

Mr McGUIRE — Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad was formed in 1967 in response to then Prime Minister Harold Holt's disappearance off Cheviot Beach, is that right?

Ms E. MURRAY — You have been doing your research.

Mr MURRAY — Have they found him yet?

Mr McGUIRE — You operate under a ministerial order.

Ms E. MURRAY — We did. Not only us. All volunteer organisations' vessels were classed under a ministerial order until the new national regulations came in

Mr McGUIRE — Okay, so you now have a national frame of reference.

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, because of the national framework they have now decided to put our vessels into the category of commercial.

Mr McGUIRE — When was that introduced?

Ms E. MURRAY — We had to comply by June last year, but it did come in in 2012, I think, for the real commercial operators.

Mr McGUIRE — Would it be a fair deduction — here are three members of the same family — to say we have dedicated families down there running this?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, we have others and partners there.

Ms L. MURRAY — Lots of others as well.

Mr McGuire — You are volunteers, and it is really your commitment to this cause that drives it, is it not?

Ms L. Murray — Absolutely.

Mr McGuire — I know you talked about the coxswains and that issue. If we were looking at an integrated model and where you fit, what advice would you give us that would help you? You are saying you are not recognised for the hard work you do.

Ms E. Murray — It was tongue-in-cheek.

Mr McGuire — All these things are important to people who work really hard. I totally respect this.

Ms E. Murray — We all joke about that. All the groups joke about that.

Mr McGuire — What would your advice be to us, so that we can make recommendations to Parliament? Where do you fit in? What is an integrated model that would be an improvement on what we have got?

Ms E. Murray — I guess it would be the way it works at the moment. The police are always in charge, for obvious reasons, and they task us, whether you are the Coast Guard, VMR, us or Ocean Grove rescue or whatever, you cannot respond to a job unless the police have said, 'Go ahead'. As far as that side of things go, I believe that is the way that should stay. In the scheme of things we are just a small cog in a big wheel, obviously, but there are a number of independent groups that have chosen to stay independent. We were approached not that many years ago to join the Coast Guard, but our members all joined our group for a reason, and they want to stay independent.

Mr McGuire — You heard what the Coast Guard was saying in their testimony, about what we need to have?

Ms E. Murray — I could not hear that.

Mr McGuire — Did you hear the point they were making about better coordination? The word they used was less 'parochialism'.

Mr Murray — Yes.

Mr McGuire — Is that an issue?

Ms E. Murray — There has been some of that in the past. Southern Peninsula Rescue Squad has got a fantastic rapport with the police, and we really pride ourselves on that. We go out, we do the job and we come home. We do not do anything else. That is what we are there for. We want to go home and have dinner. We are not going to hang around on the water any longer than we need to. There have been issues in the past.

One issue — and I say this in the submission — that has improved of late was the tasking of groups. All the groups train hard, put a lot of time and effort into training and expect to be called out if there is something happening in their area. What was happening in the past, a lot of the time, another group might be tasked to a job that is right on our back door. We are actually sitting in the clubroom and we are seeing the boat towing a boat to Sorrento, and we are thinking, 'Okay'. That has been a problem for independent groups, but we did address that with police some time ago and it has improved. We have only had one instance of that this season, and that has been really good because we just ask for it to be fair and equitable. It is meant to be that the nearest resource is called. Okay, we might be out on a job and not able to attend, that is fair enough, and the same for any other group. But all the groups spend equal time to train and do the job and we are there to support the community, and that is what we want to do.

Ms L. Murray — It is not just because of all the training we do. It is so that people, for whatever reason, who have broken down out there and are in trouble are not sitting there for a long period of time. If you have got somebody who has broken down in Sorrento, we are sitting in Blairgowrie and someone is coming from Frankston, obviously we can do the job a lot quicker than someone from Frankston. These people do not need to be stuck on the water any longer than they have to be, so they should send the nearest resource to them.

Mr MURRAY— The independent groups generally are affiliated with Life Saving Victoria. We work together, we train together sometimes, we work hand-in-hand with the Coast Guard when the time arises that we need a bigger search and so forth. It is a multi-agency-type thing quite often.

Mr McGUIRE— Do you have a succession plan after the Murrays have gone on to bigger and broader things?

Ms E. MURRAY— We are working on it. One of the other things with the coordination of the rescue resources in the state relates to the rescue coordination centre in Williamstown. When we first went there we thought we were going to see some wing-ding computer system. They have all got computers, but they do not have a system where if someone rings in on 000 and says, 'I have broken down off Mud Island', or whatever, they could type in 'Mud Island' or 'Sorrento' or something and it would come up with the nearest available resources and rescue organisations, but no, they do not have anything like that. Every time we ask them about it they say it is all to do with budget. They do not have the money for such a thing. Life Saving Victoria have got one, yet our Victoria Police are coordinating not only marine rescue on the bay but every waterway in Victoria.

The CHAIR— All of that information is available at Sandringham, so I am surprised that it is not available at Williamstown.

Ms E. MURRAY— The police do not have it at their disposal.

Ms L. MURRAY— It is definitely not.

The CHAIR— That is interesting, because we saw that this morning with the full list.

Ms E. MURRAY— If you went to Life Saving Victoria, you would see the same thing.

Mr MURRAY— It is available at Life Saving Victoria.

Ms L. MURRAY— You would expect to see a screen with all of the independent groups flashing to say, 'See where we are'.

The CHAIR— We saw that.

Ms L. MURRAY— There is not even a map.

Ms E. MURRAY— As the body responsible for tasking everyone, Victoria Police should have a system like that at their disposal.

Mr RONALDS— It still does not have vessels.

Ms E. MURRAY— Only a couple of weeks ago — and I did put that in the submission — we recently had a situation involving a lack of local knowledge. Once again, that computer system would fix that. We had a call from a member of the public to say their boat had taken on some water, and he had managed to beach it near the quarantine station at Port Nepean near Portsea. Everyone should know where that is. The upshot of it was that, because they had rung us directly, the protocol is we ring Water Police and say, 'We have taken the details. Do you want us to go?'. We were told, 'We think we might have someone in the area'. We said, 'Okay, that's fine'. We did not wait; we just kept going.

Then we had a phone call to say that they could not find the gentleman, and he was not where we said. We said, 'Where are they looking?'; and they were at Point Franklin. We thought, 'That's not where the quarantine station is'. They had actually sent land police from Sorrento to Point Franklin. To cut a long story short — I did put this in the submission — this whole thing resulted in 3 hours later the man still being down at the beach at Point Nepean. We were not able to be tasked; because he was on the beach they would not task us. We could still go, which we did. We just went and got him anyway, but we cannot get an incident report, a number for that, to claim the fuel.

The CHAIR— Why?

Ms E. MURRAY— Because he is on the beach.

Mr MURRAY — Because he is safe on the beach.

Ms E. MURRAY — When you are at Point Nepean you cannot get to anywhere. If you cannot start the jet ski, which it was, you cannot go anywhere. So we just went and towed him back to Sorrento and that was it.

Mr McGuire — I just want to capture that point. Are you saying that in the state of Victoria we do not have a centralised place where you can actually see all the available resources at any given time if there is a need for a rescue?

Ms E. MURRAY — Certainly not at the rescue coordination centre in Williamstown. That is the only place we have been, and that is where they are tasking all the organisations from.

Mr McGuire — But does Victoria Police have one?

Ms E. MURRAY — That is Victoria Police.

Mr McGuire — That is Victoria Police there?

Mr MURRAY — That is Water Police.

Mr McGuire — That is Water Police headquarters?

Ms L. MURRAY — Yes.

Mr McGuire — You have had incidents where, as you have just described, one organisation was cutting across the other and meanwhile the person still was not rescued?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, with this person. The land police did go and speak to the gentleman, but then it went back to the Water Police and they just left him there because he was on the beach and safe. But you cannot get off that beach. He could not get his jet ski going. He could not swim back. He could have started walking down the road from the quarantine station back to Portsea, but that might have taken him quite a long time. It is just a bit silly. We have done this many times. We just go down and get them and bring them home. They have to get home somehow.

Mr EIDEH — Following a 2009 review of New South Wales marine rescue services, the state's three main marine rescue organisations were consolidated into a single body. In your opinion, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach in Victoria?

Ms E. MURRAY — It would depend how it was structured, such as how the funding would happen. At the moment none of us get any regular government funding. It is only the odd grant here and there. We are lucky because in 2010 we sold a helicopter. That enabled us to buy into our new clubroom and buy the state-of-the-art rescue vessel that we have got now — and we have another one ordered. If we manage our funds well, it will perpetuate itself into the future and we will not need to rattle tins and things. We would like to know about that part of things if we have to give our money over to somebody. Without knowing what sort of structure it might take, I do not know. As with others, our group has already declined to be a member of a large organisation, so it would be a matter of seeing what form it would take. I do not have any knowledge of how the New South Wales model actually operates.

Mr MURRAY — It is largely because there is a lot of bureaucracy once you get into a big organisation, whereas we believe we do things very efficiently.

The CHAIR — Light and lean?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes, exactly. That is the main reason why the people who joined us joined us because they like the way that works.

Mr McGuire — I think you have explained it pretty well, but — just so that I do understand it — you are saying we have the integrated overall system, you are a subset of that and you have developed as a family operation. You have given this long-term commitment?

Ms E. MURRAY — We are not really a family operation; we are just part of it.

Mr McGuire — You have attracted other people to come and support you?

Mr MURRAY — We did not set it up. We came on board 11 years ago.

Ms E. MURRAY — The squad has been operating for almost 47 years.

Mr McGuire — I understand that, so what is your advice to us on how we break down the barriers between different groups and get a better-coordinated system?

Ms E. MURRAY — It is a big question.

Mr MURRAY — I do not know that there is a great barrier. As far as we are concerned there is no barrier between us and anyone. We are tasked by the Water Police. If a call comes in directly to us, we go back to the Water Police and they decide whether we get the job or somebody else does because it is somewhere in the general area of either group. We do not believe we have a problem working with any of the other groups. We go out on searches where we work with Water Police, the Coast Guard, VMR Mornington. We could have an eight-boat line search, and it is all agencies together with the police Air Wing and so forth.

Ms E. MURRAY — It works very well.

Mr RONALDS — Do you have the Coast Guard or VMR close to you?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — Are they both at the same marina?

Ms E. MURRAY — No, the Safety Beach Coast Guard is at Safety Beach. We are at Blairgowrie, Queenscliff Coast Guard is next and VMR is at Mornington.

Mr MURRAY — We are about in the middle of those other two.

Ms E. MURRAY — But we often all work together in long-line searches.

Mr RONALDS — But you do have your own independent area?

Mr MURRAY — It is not defined.

Ms L. MURRAY — There is no line drawn.

Mr RONALDS — It is undefined, I understand?

Ms E. MURRAY — Generally, yes.

Mr MURRAY — And we do not believe it should be. We believe it should all overlap.

Ms L. MURRAY — On a number of occasions we have received a phone call independently to our duty phone with somebody saying, 'I have broken down in this particular area'. Then we have rung the Water Police and said, 'We've had somebody call us. They're in such and such an area. We said, 'That is in VMR's area, so it is probably best to call them because they are closest'. We do not mind doing that because it saves the person sitting there for that longer period of time. With the rescue squad we are about giving back to the community and we go out to save somebody's life, not to save a vessel. We actually go out to help somebody, not to help the boat.

Mr MURRAY — That was actually another part of our submission, which no doubt you will have read — that is, we would rather be called out when the incident first happens, especially if it is a person's life involved. If it is just a breakdown, they are usually safe; but if there is a person's life involved, we would rather be called out, get there and be told they do not need us than to be called 2 hours later and then know you are probably looking for a body because the water is too cold.

Ms E. MURRAY — That happens on many occasions, not just to us; all the volunteer groups would attest to that. That brings us back to when we are on the big searches. Usually what happens on a big search is the first vessel there takes command of the scene until police arrive, and it might be Air Wing or it might be Water Police. One of the issues we have from time to time when Air Wing come on the scene is not being able to communicate with them on the radio. There is no reason for it equipment-wise. We know they get busy doing things as part of their thing and they cannot always pick up the radio. This happened to another volunteer group out in Bass Strait not long ago, when they were several kilometres out to sea in pretty rough conditions. Air Wing were searching as well. Air Wing left, and they thought they had gone to refuel. Nothing happened and nobody came, so on calling the Water Police they were informed that the search had been called off. They had not told the volunteers, which could have put their lives at risk. That has happened.

Mr RONALDS — But you do have communications. You do have the same radios and all that?

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — So it is not a functional issue?

Ms E. MURRAY — No, it is not. It used to be that you had to have an air band radio, but you do not now. It is just VHF.

Mr McGUIRE — You mentioned earlier that you have sold your helicopter. Has that caused a gap in your surveillance, or has the Air Wing or somebody else picked that up?

Ms E. MURRAY — The Air Wing comes down. It depends who you talk to. If we had kept the helicopter, we would not exist now. We would have gone broke. It was sold because it was not being used enough for search and rescue and because the police and air ambulance have about seven helicopters between them. When ours first came into being, it was the only rescue helicopter in Victoria, if not Australia. It did fantastic work. In its last years it was mostly doing training and community work. That is the sad bit. We did a lot of work with disadvantaged and sick children and that sort of thing, which was a really worthwhile thing to do. We still have people coming down and asking, ‘When is it coming back?’, but it will not be coming back. As far as a gap —

Mr McGUIRE — Operationally?

Ms L. MURRAY — I think we are busier.

Ms E. MURRAY — Operationally Air Wing made a pretty quick response to a couple of jobs we were involved in down off Sorrento and Portsea area this year. Maybe they were already in the air. If they are in the hangar at Essendon, it can take them half an hour to get off the ground because they have to get it out of the hangar and wind it up. If they are already out, it can be 15 or 20 minutes.

Mr McGUIRE — So that we fully understand this issue, is there a need for it or is it covered? What is your view?

Ms E. MURRAY — I think they have it covered, to be honest with you. If our helicopter had still been there, they would not have used us more anyway.

Mr McGUIRE — So you think they have it covered? That is important.

Ms E. MURRAY — Yes.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee, I thank you all very much for your time. It was a real pleasure to listen to what you had to say, certainly with the amount of experience you have between you. It has been educational for me, as I am sure it has been for the rest of the committee, so thank you very much. You will receive a transcript of today’s proceedings in about two weeks. If you can have a look at that and see what mistakes you think are in there but not change anything of substance in the document, that would be much appreciated. Thank you again.

Ms E. MURRAY — Thanks very much for giving us the opportunity. It has been great.

Committee adjourned.