

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Port Fairy — 15 April 2014

Members

Mr N. Burgess

Mr K. Eideh

Mr F. McGuire

Mrs A. Millar

Mr A. Ronalds

Chair: Mr N. Burgess

Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr N. Bunt

Research Officer: Mr M. Newington

Witness

Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association, VF17 Portland

Mr Michael Krause, Flotilla Commander

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Ronalds) — Thank you for your time this afternoon. This is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence today on marine rescue services under the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. I ask you to state your full name, if you are here representing an organisation, what that organisation is and what your position is within it, Michael.

Mr KRAUSE — Thank you, Andrew. Michael Krause, with the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard. I am the flotilla commander for VF17 Portland.

The ACTING CHAIR — Please put forward your oral submission.

Mr KRAUSE — Chair, I have not actually put forward a formal submission due to the short notice of this. I know the Coast Guard itself has submitted its business strategy plan. I have a copy there. Our highlight here was to attend and highlight our current operational function and also to highlight where we would like to go to from here — or the shortcomings, very similar to what VMR Port Fairy put forward.

The ACTING CHAIR — Where would you like it to go, Michael? Where do you think it should go?

Mr KRAUSE — Just to highlight the Coast Guard itself — a brief history in terms of Portland itself — the Portland Coast Guard has been operational now for 10 years. We are just about to have our 10th anniversary. In 2004, when the public had a general meeting, there was a public outcry for a VMR of some sort in the area because there was not one between Adelaide or Melbourne. The general consensus was to form a VMR. Which way we went was the big decider — whether we start our own VMR and develop all the advertisements and fundraising and the like or join a current operational VMR, being in our case the now Coast Guard.

We had reviewed Coast Guard initially when we took this role on as a public group. Coast Guard offered — one, it was a national, coordinated body. They had a fairly strong base in Victoria. All the administration, training — they were also a registered RTO, which was a major one for us, looking at the requirements for training. It was one of our main deciders as to why we went with Coast Guard initially rather than reinventing the wheel, one would say.

Since then we have come a long way. We were lucky enough to have a grant through MSV — now TSV — for a purpose-built rescue-cum-training vessel. It is a dual-purpose vessel which took somewhere in the vicinity of three to four years to actually come about. We now have an 11.99-metre vessel in full current survey, 2B, which we have maintained from day one.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is that a certified survey, with certificate?

Mr KRAUSE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — And why have you decided to do it that way?

Mr KRAUSE — The main reason we stayed with a full survey was to keep the standard of the vessel very high. Obviously there is also — being a high-risk operation and being blue water being out anywhere up to 200 nautical miles out to sea. One, it gives strength to the members, being the people who come on board. It also highlights to our commercial operators that we are very serious. We have a very high standard that we maintain the vessel at. All our crew are full coxswains. We aim for master 5s. We now have three master 5s. I had better get the right stats here — three master 5s, two coxswains, five advanced crew and 14 competent crew — competent crew being the minimum requirement to operate on the vessel.

The ACTING CHAIR — Where are they trained?

Mr KRAUSE — It is a combination. The majority were done through our liaison with South West TAFE, through Bec Davis — some of the courses, which are the specialised sea-air rescue elements, are above the actual commercial requirements. There are elements above the normal commercial requirements, which we undertake through Coast Guard and through our RTO.

The ACTING CHAIR — Your coxswain course — is that through Coast Guard or the TAFE or commercial?

Mr KRAUSE — It is a combination of both, actually.

The ACTING CHAIR — Are they commercially certified?

Mr KRAUSE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — So all of your coxswains are commercially certified?

Mr KRAUSE — Coxswains are, yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — And why have you decided to do that?

Mr KRAUSE — One is just for the professionalism. The other thing is obviously litigation — for coverage of our own members. We are obviously dealing with the public, so, again, to keep that standard very high is paramount for us as far as the safety elements of our requirements operate at sea go.

The ACTING CHAIR — And the cost of the actual training — where is that being borne?

Mr KRAUSE — Actually I have some figures here. The first couple of years it had been about \$18 000 a year, and it has now dropped down to a fairly stable — —

The ACTING CHAIR — Sorry, just to clarify, I meant the training for the coxswains; what does that cost, and who has to pay for that?

Mr KRAUSE — We have a current grant system through our partnership with Alcoa, which is part of ongoing training, Alcoa being very strong in its safety training. They have given us a very kind grant of \$10 000 a year for the last five or six years.

The ACTING CHAIR — That is what is paying for it.

Mr KRAUSE — That has been spent, plus extra money through various grants. Our first aid we have done through pro dive, through Frank Zeigler, who has very kindly donated his time, which has been a massive saving for us. It is a matter of working in with our local providers, whether it be South West TAFE, Frank Zeigler, and even working now with the board with our current memorandum of understanding. So there are a lot of good things happening in that way.

The ACTING CHAIR — How do you find coordination in terms of rescue?

Mr KRAUSE — For Coast Guard, Portland is very good. We have a good working relationship with the water police. We have had quite a few of our coxswains and master 5s go down to Williamstown, look at their operations and how they coordinate things. The water police have been up to Portland quite a few times now looking at how we operate our systems, our SOPs — our safe operating procedures — our emergency management policies and procedures and the way we operate our communications centre, which is done through Keppel Prince, who were kind enough to give us a little office and a very nice little spot right on top of the hill.

Mrs MILLAR — In relation to where your office is located, do you have any issues similar to those related by the last witnesses, in respect of the position of the office impacting on telecommunications?

Mr KRAUSE — We are very lucky in our location, because it is high, with Portland being in a cliff top area. We also have a repeater out on the smelter, which is approximately 300 feet above sea level. Typically that will go to the border quite easily, which will give us about a 50 to 60 —nautical mile range.

The ACTING CHAIR — On what channel?

Mr KRAUSE — The biggest problem there is vessels coming back to us. It is all right for us to be able to talk to them, but we need to hear them. So you are still restricted to the vessels' capabilities. We try to educate people so they know that the best insurance policy is an EPIRB.

Mrs MILLAR — What is the size of the area you are covering?

Mr KRAUSE — It is from the South Australian border to Warmambool and 200 nautical miles out to sea, so it is a very vast area.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of rescues you are involved in, first of all how many and then what sorts of rescues do you normally engage in?

Mr KRAUSE — On the number of rescues, we currently have had, through the water police, 197 assists, including commercial fishing vessels. We have had a few medivacs. We have done a few international vessels that have entered the port. That stems from our good relationships with customs and quarantine. We need to liaise with them quite often. Total man hours on operations out at sea to date is about 3481 hours at sea, and that is with a minimum crew of three between those operations.

The ACTING CHAIR — You have told us how many rescues you have done. What was the general cause of them, or has there been a range of different things?

Mr KRAUSE — As I said, the bulk of our operations is in relation to domestic or recreational vessels. Quite a few, the other 15 per cent, have been commercial fishing boats — trawlers. We have done four medivacs. A recent rescue was a recovery from a cruise ship which passed Portland. That was a very interesting exercise.

The ACTING CHAIR — Are you finding the rescues have changed over the years in terms of their type, whether people are better equipped, or in your opinion is there no pattern?

Mr KRAUSE — Generally speaking with recreational vessels it is operational fault in a lot of cases — fuel run outs or just being out there too long. So it is straight out recovery. Unfortunately for obvious reasons of safety we do not allow fuelling at sea — OH&S — so it is a basic tow back. An operation from the shelf, which is typically about 25 or 30 nautical miles, is about a 12-hour operation for us. From the time of call-out from the water police to back on the berth is roughly 12 hours with three members, so it is a fairly lengthy session for any volunteer.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of funding for a rescue mission like that, how does that work in practical terms?

Mr KRAUSE — The funding we organise ourselves. We try not to tie ourselves down to little fundraisers, such as sausage sizzles. I think our sheer operational cost in the last eight years has been in the vicinity of about \$96 000, and that does not include fuel. Typically it is costing us about \$12 000 a year to keep afloat and keep the vessel going.

The ACTING CHAIR — And that is funded via what? Grants?

Mr KRAUSE — Grants and our memoranda of understanding, such as with the port. The port has been very kind this year and donated \$12 000, which looks like an ongoing partnership, and the grants are obviously the big one.

Mrs MILLAR — So how do you raise that \$12 000 each year?

Mr KRAUSE — For grants quite often we will go to the likes of Geoff Handbury, who has been very generous, and those types of people. It is just local businesses, because the sort of money we are looking at typically is \$5000 to \$10 000 little handshakes. We call them handshakes, because sometimes they do shake when they give it to us. We have been very fortunate. We have had some very good support from local businesses.

Mrs MILLAR — So you are not doing any fundraising just in the community per se?

Mr KRAUSE — No. The reason we have kept away from doing little fundraisers is that our members are pretty well committed to their training. Most of them put in at least 8 hours if not 10 hours a week, so to tie them up sitting out the front of Safeway selling sausages does not bring our crews up to their training requirements.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of obtaining the funding in regard to fuel for a rescue mission, how do you do it and is it done in a timely manner?

Mr KRAUSE — It is done through MIRs, which is how we do all our call-outs, and we have no problems. The administration side of it goes through to Coast Guard Melbourne, and we normally get it in a timely manner. Once a month we get our total return.

The ACTING CHAIR — There has been talk about having a single organisation within Victorian marine rescue services. What is your feeling or your organisation's feeling locally?

Mr KRAUSE — Absolutely. I think there should be one. I would like to see a big Coast Guard organisation, mainly because of the way they seem to have managed things. The biggest problem I foresee with any of the Victorian marine rescue services is the administration cost or the time to have things done. My biggest problem is that since taking on the job of commander I spend about an average of 20 to 22 hours a week just chasing up paperwork and dealing with inquiries. I sat down and spent a couple of days with the water board and the like. The administration side is astronomical. It is a requirement for us to keep those elements going, because the climate is for regulation — our OH&S workplace regulations, TSV regulations and the like — and just generally keeping across the red tape all the time. I would like to see full-time employees, particularly in the Coast Guard ranks.

The ACTING CHAIR — So you are not necessarily as much in favour of a single organisation, but you are in favour of some sort of professional administration? Is that what you are saying?

Mr KRAUSE — No. I would like to see the Coast Guard manage it. I have seen and I have had quite a few talks with my colleagues over in New South Wales, where the government is taking control. Unfortunately they have lost a lot of their volunteers because the people behind the organisation do not have the same passion. What keeps the organisation strong and moving forward is the passion of its members. They will not let it fail, no matter what. I do not think that putting in an administrator would work. I think it would undermine the structure of that family.

Mrs MILLAR — Are there other measures that could be taken to reduce the amount of regulation you are facing?

Mr KRAUSE — Talk to the government.

The ACTING CHAIR — Here's your chance!

Mrs MILLAR — Yes, here's your chance!

Mr KRAUSE — That is a very good question. I do not know, because there are so many government bodies involved within the whole organisation that we need to report to, including WorkSafe, TSV and the like. Similar to any business, if we had the full-time people to manage it and if it was part of the business strategy, it would make our organisation a lot more professional, help us move forward a lot faster and provide a better service to the community and people as a whole.

The ACTING CHAIR — With regard to your communications, are they adequate in this region from a practical perspective?

Mr KRAUSE — Yes, our biggest requirement is people hours. We normally monitor our radios on a weekend and on public holidays. We have put in 21 000 rosters. I have got the specs here. That is equivalent to 10 000 hours behind the radio. Part of our Coast Guard strategy is to link all of our communications into a central location and also have the facility to monitor from home using technology and the national broadband system. With our repeater system throughout the state, currently that is working well, but like any system there is a lot of room for improvement.

Mrs MILLAR — As you have described it, you are covering a very large area. Do you think there is an undersupply of rescue services along the west coast?

Mr KRAUSE — There is only one safe port, and that is Portland. We are covering it fairly well. We have had two instances only recently where we had a requirement for two vessels.

Mrs MILLAR — Were they simultaneous incidents?

Mr KRAUSE — Yes. We had a front come through and a large trawler broke free, and at the same time we had a man who had drifted away in his little dinghy and was getting swamped. That was getting close to having to be a body recovery, rather than an assist.

Mrs MILLAR — What did you do in that instance?

Mr KRAUSE — Through our coordination with the water police it was decided that life was the no. 1 priority. The other boat could drift south and we could recover it later on, but in the interim, because it was a fairly large vessel, they decided to call in the port of Portland to send out a tug and bring it back into port. It was blowing about 60 knots that day, so it was quite a good day!

Mrs MILLAR — Other than the simultaneous incident scenario, do you feel there is adequate coverage for marine rescue?

Mr KRAUSE — At the moment, yes. There is major growth in the industry, particularly within Portland with the increased facilities being put in, such as the new 4-lane ramp. We are looking at an average of 700 boats out each day on a weekend, so there will be a fairly strong increased demand. We are playing it by ear, and hopefully the tune will slow down a little bit. But generally speaking, yes, the number of vessels has increased and the size of the vessels coming out has increased dramatically. It is not the small open dinghy; we are now talking about 7.5-metre boats and \$200 000 to \$250 000 worth of boat going out. You can see that people have been very keen.

Mrs MILLAR — The previous witnesses referred to undertaking training, and they said that the training they had undertaken with the community had reduced the number of incidents. Is your organisation conducting any training?

Mr KRAUSE — Our training is ongoing. It is 24/7, basically. We have personal training every Saturday and Wednesdays, typically. Training is a very high priority. As I have said, rather than selling sausages we prefer to be in the classroom. Typically, we do the classroom sessions during the week and they are nice and short — 2 to 3 hours. Then on the weekends we will put that into practice on the vessel in going out to sea. We do a lot of cross training with surf lifesaving, the SES and the water police when they are down here. We do quite a few exercises with those guys when they come down. It is interesting to see the differences in methodology. We have our Buster, which is our man that we throw in the water. We developed that quite a few years ago. He is a full wetsuit, stuffed. You have got the average person, who weighs 70 kilograms when wet. Trying to get him onto a boat, particularly at sea, is very difficult. A lot of the training typically is done with a buoy or bin — you just hook it up and haul it on board — but with that you do not get the real sensation, particularly when you are in a 2 or 3-metre swell, of what it is like to try and recover a body.

Mrs MILLAR — You are mainly referring to the training of your volunteers. What about your community engagement activities?

Mr KRAUSE — On community engagement, we work with Ambulance Victoria, the paramedics, and the CFA. All their guys do survival at sea training, and they run that through us. I spend as much time as I can on community engagement. I visit quite a few of the secondary colleges periodically, and we target the teenagers particularly — the upcoming boat users. I spend quite a few hours during school time on that. I am lucky that my employer lets me go, being an educator myself. We tend to try driving it more at younger rather than older people, because they are the sorts of people who will say to their dads, ‘Where is our EPIRB?’. ‘We haven’t got one, son’. That is who we really target. We would like to spend a lot more time doing it. Obviously, being volunteers, and, as I said before, the administration rollover chews up a lot of our time. Rather than spending 20 hours teaching and helping the public, we are tied up with this administration catch-up and putting the paperwork through to be compliant.

Mrs MILLAR — Have you noticed those activities having any impact upon the number of rescues you do?

Mr KRAUSE — Locally, yes. Part of that is our being out there working with the local chandleries, fishing clubs and the yacht club, and making them aware that we are there. That makes them aware, but sometimes they think we are policemen. They see our big yellow thing coming, and they hide their tinnies and the like. In a sense, yes, that is good. It is interesting.

Mr EIDEH — My question to you, Michael, is what processes are in place to respond to distress calls on emergency radio channels that occur outside of monitoring times?

Mr KRAUSE — We run 24/7. Our phone and comms room comes through, and I have typically got it hanging off my hip. It is in the shower. Our typical response time is about 10 minutes — 10 to 15 minutes max. We are lucky enough with our memorandum of understanding with the CFA that we utilise their paging system. We also have our backup, which is using Telstra SMS. Quite often we will use both, particularly if the CFA has a busy period, because all our calls go in as non-emergency. They get stacked up sometimes, so we utilise two systems there. We have never yet knocked back a call back.

Mr EIDEH — That sounds very good.

Mr KRAUSE — We are very proud of our operation at the moment.

The ACTING CHAIR — In terms of vessel tracking, are you hooked into the police system? Do you have AIS? What is your situation?

Mr KRAUSE — We have a full AB transponder on board — AIS. We also have the police tracking system on board. We also have the Coast Guard tracking system operating for our domestic frequency, so we have three tracking systems. Within our operational procedures we also have the vessel call in periodically with its location — with its latitude and longitude — and that gets put into the logbook and written onto a paper chart.

The ACTING CHAIR — Just so we can be clear for the record: you have AIS, which is trackable by anyone?

Mr KRAUSE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — You have your own tracking through the Coast Guard ?

Mr KRAUSE — Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR — And you have tracking through VicPol?

Mr KRAUSE — Correct.

The ACTING CHAIR — And then you do a manual phone in of — —

Mr KRAUSE — A manual chart — yes, when the vessel goes out there must be somebody in the comms room at all times.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much. Is there anything we have not asked you that we should have asked you? Now is your chance to talk to the government — as you said!

Mr KRAUSE — No, I think we have pretty well covered most of it. I suppose some of the stats typically are the hours our members put in. Our operational hours, as I mentioned before, are about 3500 hours per crew. Our training — and this is really highlighted here — on the vessel alone is over 7000 hours, in regard to time spent on the water. Our comms is well over 10 000 hours, in service to the public and monitoring as well as our own operational requirements. Our typical operational costs over the last eight years have been roughly \$96 000 — just for the fun of it. Our fuel costs have been \$24 128 for operational assists and a further \$16 785 for training alone. It is quite an expensive hobby, as one would say.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time. We appreciate a great deal what you and our previous witnesses do. We thank you very much for what you do in the community. It is very much appreciated. The evidence today will become public evidence in due course. You will get a copy of this in the next fortnight. Have a look at it and please feel free to make any changes to typographical errors but none to the substance. Once again, thank you very much for your time.

Mr KRAUSE — It is a pleasure. Thank you for your time.

Witness withdrew.