

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Apollo Bay — 16 April 2014

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Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue.

Mr David Merry, President

Mr Michael Fischer, Treasurer

Mr Wayne Malady, Secretary

The ACTING CHAIR (Mrs Millar) — Welcome to this public hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee. This is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence today on the inquiry into marine rescue services in the state of Victoria. We welcome you to this hearing and also note that all evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments you make outside the hearing are not afforded such privilege. In a moment I am going to ask each of you to introduce yourselves, state your full name and address and also state whether you are attending today in a private capacity or are representing an organisation. If representing an organisation, could you state your position within that organisation.

Mr FISCHER — My name is Michael Fischer, and I reside at [REDACTED] I am representing Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue today, and I hold the position of treasurer.

Mr MERRY — I am David Merry. I live at [REDACTED] I am the president of Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue.

Mr MALADY — Wayne Malady. I reside at [REDACTED] and I represent today the Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue. I hold the current position of secretary.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you. I need to advise you that the evidence given today will be taken down and will become part of public evidence in due course. I am now going to invite you to make a verbal submission on behalf of your organisation. Following your verbal submission committee members will ask some questions of you.

Mr FISCHER — Firstly, good afternoon to everybody and welcome to our lovely town of Apollo Bay, members of Parliament and also staff. Some weeks ago we received correspondence in regard to this inquiry, and having looked through the terms of reference we were not too sure whether or not we could actually make a contribution. But since that time I have spoken to Nathan, and he said it would be a good opportunity to come along and just give an overview of what we do, how we operate, some of the challenges that we have faced in the past and possible challenges in the future.

I will run through a little bit about who we are and what we do. As you know from coming here, Apollo Bay is a fairly isolated town, even though it is not all that far from Melbourne — 190 kilometres — it is a fairly windy and arduous sort of trip by car. The nearest major town to here is Colac, which is 72 kilometres away — around 1 hour of travel. Being such a geographically isolated location, the community of Apollo Bay is fairly self-reliant, and a lot of the emergency rescue services we require are here in town, such as the fire brigade, police and the like. We have our own hospital et cetera.

In regard to a marine rescue service, this has not always been the case. I moved to Apollo Bay in 1988 as a member of Victoria Police. It became quite apparent in those early days that there was no formal rescue organisation in this town. Whenever we responded to marine incidents it was really an ad hoc affair as to how we would cope and resource the emergency. For example, when the Apollo Bay Surf Life Saving Club is open, which is only during the main holiday periods of the year, we can call on their resources to assist us. In other times of the year we have to rely on the good nature of either commercial fishing vessels or pleasure craft that may be in the area. There were no facilities or resources here in the town itself to respond to any sort of emergency. Naturally the Water Police would be contacted for any of these marine rescues, but because they were stationed at Williamstown it was not possible for them to attend in a timely fashion. It really was a case of good luck more than good management that we were able to get a vessel to attend an incident.

As a result of these shortfalls, Sergeant Merry and I looked into forming an ocean rescue organisation down here. In 1994, after doing some research and getting some assistance from the Water Police and various other organisations, we started our own stand-alone organisation, which is the Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue service. We are an incorporated stand-alone body and a non-profit organisation that has as its sole charter saving life at sea. We are manned by 17 volunteers at the moment, whose qualifications range from the master 5 certificate, coxswain certificate right down to boat licence operators. At the moment we operate one vessel, which is a 7.59-metre Stabicraft. It is housed at the local police station, at [REDACTED]

Initially when we started the rescue service all funding was raised locally through simple things, like chook raffles at the pub on a Friday night to donations from various people or organisations. In the first 10 years we had difficult times and really just struggled from year to year to provide this service. We purchased an old Shark

Cat, which we funded ourselves. We raised around \$40 000 over a period of two to three years and operated this vessel from Apollo Bay. About 10 years later — around 2003 or 2004 — we received significant funding from Marine Safety Victoria to purchase a new vessel, which we still have to this day, which is the Stabicraft. We received a \$120 000 grant for that vessel, which was quite a substantial injection of funds. Since that time we have received funding from Marine Safety Victoria, which is now Transport Safety Victoria, in regard to the upgrade of motors and replacement of major equipment, such as the trailer, which we replaced approximately 12 months ago. So in regard to funding we are not really in a position to make any complaints. Although if we received some sort of funding on an annual basis for running costs, that would be of great benefit, but today that is not the case.

That is just a small snapshot of who we are and what we do. We respond to jobs that we receive either directly or via the police. In all the rescues we attend we have to contact the Water Police first so there is no risk. We attend from direct calls. If we receive a direct call, we always contact the local police, or the Water Police pass on that information, and we do not attend any rescues unless the Water Police give us the say-so to attend. That is pretty well who we are and what we do. Would anyone like to add anything? Otherwise we will turn it over to some questions.

The ACTING CHAIR — Excellent. Could you perhaps outline for us briefly the area that your rescue service covers?

Mr FISCHER — We do not have a geographical area, I think, that we adhere to. We pretty well go to Lorne and then Port Campbell.

Mr MERRY — The guys before us were talking about the two hang-glidiers. Where was that? It was past Peterborough. We went down to that one as well, and that was just to help in a search pattern with the Water Police. We do not really have any restrictions on how far we go. We went a bit of a way offshore with some tuna fisherman a few years ago, when they were coming in thick and fast. From probably the heads to Port Campbell is kind of the area we look out for.

The ACTING CHAIR — How far out to sea is the furthest rescue you have conducted?

Mr MERRY — There is a big reef off Cape Otway, which is about 26 miles offshore. We have been out there a few times — just breakdowns and stuff.

The ACTING CHAIR — Could you give us some idea of the typical number of rescues you perform each year and what the breakdown of those are in terms of the instances you respond to?

Mr MERRY — I think on average we do about 24 to 30 rescues a year, but some of them can be quite minor — someone has run out of fuel half a kilometre out or has had a motor breakdown. Our priority, though, is life; we make sure that people are safe first, and secondary will be recovery. A lot of instances are tows, but when there are other people in the water we do not worry about the actual vessel — it is about saving lives.

Mr EIDEH — The committee notes that during a review of Victorian volunteer marine rescue services in 2002 Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue's vessel was removed from service by the Water Police due to poor maintenance. What were the circumstances that led to this situation? As your organisation now uses a different vessel for rescue response, how will Apollo Bay Ocean Rescue ensure that it is properly maintained?

Mr MERRY — That is probably a little bit wrong that poor maintenance issue. It was an old boat, but we did get a grant for two new motors on the back of that boat, and they were oversized for the boat. That was basically what gave us a big cross; it was not seaworthy because the motors were overpowered for that particular vessel. It was an old boat — a hard boat to keep maintained. Our new boat, which we have had for —

Mr MALADY — Nine years.

Mr MERRY — nine years now, we take it up to Dromana each year to get it serviced by the guys who supply Stabicraft. They cannot believe what good condition it is in. They are rapt with the way we look after it.

Mr MALADY — I think the last time we were there they stated it was the best looked after rescue boat they had seen.

Mr EIDEH — So there is no issue with maintenance?

Mr FISCHER — No. If I could just add to that, the previous vessel was fibreglass, and when we purchased it, it was already showing signs of significant wear and tear, but it was all we could afford. In regard to those motors, we ordered a certain size motor, and they were not available. The manufacturer insisted on an oversized engine because that is what they had in stock. Subsequently we ended up with something we did not really want, and the stresses on the hull were too great, which we notified the Water Police about. It was not a situation where they came to us and found a fault; we notified them that the vessel was not able to be put to sea. As a result of that, it was only a year or two later that we received the funding for a purpose-built vessel, which has an aluminium hull and is designed for the rough and tumble of the coastline. Whereas the previous boat was not really designed for it, and because it was a fibreglass vessel it was past its use-by date.

Mr EIDEH — The committee understands that Colac Otway shire has released a consultation document to develop an Apollo Bay harbour master plan. The document includes a ‘sling berth for emergency access for marine rescue’ as an item for consideration. Are you aware of the harbour master plan consultation document? Do you believe a sling berth should be a priority in the adopted Apollo Bay master plan?

Mr FISCHER — I will answer that. There have been four harbour studies at Apollo Bay in which we have been involved in the consultation process, and at the end of those everything we have requested we have not got. In principle, we have not been given a facility on the harbour, which was all we were after — just an allocated area in which over the long-term we could build a maintenance shed to house a vessel and to have a quick-launch facility. In view of the failure of the last 20 years, we have found ourselves at the police station, which has been the only suitable location. In the long-term we would like to be at the harbour and have a facility there. That would be the obvious choice, and it would provide the speediest service, but to date we do not seem to be getting anywhere. Each time they have a harbour study, we seem to be omitted from the list. Then after several phone calls we get a last-minute inclusion, make a submission and then, when the plans come out, we are not even included. It seems to be a source of great frustration that we cannot even get an in-principle agreement that, yes, we will have a place at the harbour. Is it an urgent issue? Possibly not, but certainly part of our long-term plan is to eventually be at the harbour if we can be.

The ACTING CHAIR — Michael, I note from your evidence that the vessel is located at the police station. Could you outline to us what your typical response times are in a rescue scenario based on that?

Mr MERRY — We are probably in the water within about 15 to 20 minutes. We have a pretty good system going. We have purchased an old, second-hand, V8 four-wheel drive that is constantly hooked up and ready to go. Basically, we just have to get there, go through our list, get the bungs in and be ready to go straight into the water. We have a great response time.

The ACTING CHAIR — A number of the rescue services that have provided evidence have indicated some difficulties with communication between calls coming into the police and being dispatched to the correct rescue authority. Have you experienced this? I note that you have given us evidence that some calls come direct and some come via the police, so you have a range of calls coming from different sources.

Mr MALADY — All our calls come via the Water Police. It is rare that we would get a direct call. If we did, we would redirect that via the Water Police, so I do not think there have been any communication issues. We have a number of radios on the boat — UHF, VHF, a police radio — as well as mobile phones. There is also a surf club radio. I am not exactly sure what that radio is called, but it is there; so there are four radios. Most of our communication is via mobile phone now, and it is rare that we would not have a signal out where we are.

The ACTING CHAIR — Is it rare in your experience to have problems with communications from mobile phones?

Mr MALADY — Yes, it is rare. We would rarely have any communication issues.

Mr MERRY — We seem to have more issues with radios than with the actual mobile phones, and everyone is using them.

Mr MALADY — Our only direct line through to the Water Police is by mobile phone. The police radio would go via ESTA in Ballarat, and then they would have to relay the message through to Williamstown. We will directly just pick up the mobile and go straight through to the Water Police.

Mr FISCHER — We find that is the Water Police's medium of choice — they prefer direct contact by mobile phone. That way there is no secondary or third person relaying messages, so that seems to work very well.

The ACTING CHAIR — Excellent, thank you. In relation to training, you have outlined in your evidence that your volunteers have a range of training experience. Can you outline for us whether you find the current training to be sufficient and acceptable or is it something that your volunteers find onerous?

Mr MERRY — We got some funding about three years ago for training. We have put four people through coxswain courses. Obviously, as mentioned by the other guys at Port Campbell, it is a big course and it takes up a lot of time. We have six coxswains in our club already, and I found that course invaluable. Even though I was brought up on the water, I found it to be a really good course. We have a really good number of people. We have a couple of master 5s in the club as well, and they are professional fisherman. I can see how it would be hard to get a whole club qualified as coxswains, because it is a lot of time for a volunteer to take out, and some people just do not have that sea time.

The ACTING CHAIR — When the training for those four volunteers was completed, was it done through a commercial course or a TAFE course?

Mr FISCHER — It was a commercial course in Geelong.

The ACTING CHAIR — You spoke briefly in relation to your rescue service's finances. Could you give us some idea of what your annual budget is as an organisation and the sources of funding you are able to attract each year?

Mr FISCHER — As far as costs go, not a lot of money goes through the club other than the big-ticket items. Basically, money goes in and money goes out through the funding model for purchases, whether it be a trailer or whatever. Annually, we probably only need maybe \$3000 to \$5000 to get by. That is to pay for insurance, registration and the replacement of terminal equipment, because under the survey requirements certain things have to be repaired or replaced. In regards to that, we do not need a lot of money to survive. The problem is that each year we have to go through the problem of trying to raise that sort of money. Most of it is through all sorts of things. We have raffles, or we may have something in conjunction with the local hotel where we may have a function on — a band or something like that. We do get donations from some local people, but none of it is continual, so each year it is almost like reinventing the wheel in looking for new sources of funding.

In that respect, if we could get some sort of annual amount of money from Transport Safety Victoria — as I said, it does not have to be a lot; \$3000 to \$5000 would certainly get us by — then any surplus money we raised we could use to extend the service. For example, at the moment we are trying to get a maintenance shed built at the police station. We need to be able to house the boat, because at the moment it just sits outside in the elements. Ultimately we would like to put it into a shed of some description so it is not out in the rain, sun et cetera.

The ACTING CHAIR — You noted that you have 17 volunteers. Does the service have any challenges in attracting volunteers, and if so, what do you see as the barriers to attracting new volunteers?

Mr FISCHER — I do not think we have had any problems, really, in attracting volunteers. Because we have a port here and because there are a lot of commercial and recreational fisherman, attracting people has not been a problem. Getting people with the right qualifications has probably been the issue.

Mr MERRY — We did not really want 40 or 50 members. The number we have has been working well for a few years now. It is all hands on, and it seems to be enough at this stage.

The ACTING CHAIR — Excellent. In your opinion, do you think there is an undersupply of marine rescue services along the western coast?

Mr MERRY — It depends. You know, you have five flat days and there are so many people going out fishing and there are massive waterways, but then for six months there is nothing, so I do not think so.

Mr FISCHER — I think what would be helpful, though, as a long-term strategy, would be if we saw the Water Police down here a bit more frequently, perhaps during peak periods like Easter and Christmas. They have been down here in the past, but it seems to depend on funding, so it is not as regular as we would like. I think that would be a useful tool as far as, firstly, assisting organisations like ourselves, and also in regard to law enforcement and ensuring that boat operators are doing the right thing.

The ACTING CHAIR — Are there any other comments you would like to make to us this afternoon?

Mr FISCHER — I do not think so.

Mr MERRY — No.

Mr EIDEH — All covered?

Mr FISCHER — I think that is it. We are just happy to have been able to explain a bit about ourselves and what we do.

The ACTING CHAIR — Thank you very much for attending this afternoon, for your contribution and for your time. We also very much appreciate the services that you and your other volunteer members provide to the public and to the state of Victoria. You will be given a copy of the transcript from today's hearing in about a fortnight's time. You will then have the opportunity to correct any typographical errors within it, but you cannot change any matters of substance within the transcript. We thank you very much for your time and for speaking to us today.

Mr FISCHER — Thank you.

Mr MERRY — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.