

YOUR REF
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ENQUIRIES MATTHEW SCOTT - 90710622
DATE 11 AUGUST 2017



Economic Regulatory Authority
Perth BC
PO Box 8469
Perth WA 6849

Re: ESL Review Submission

At the Ordinary Council meeting on 25 July 2017, the Esperance Shire Council passed the following resolution regarding the ESL Review so to provide a position for the Shire of Esperance on this important issue for our community.

That Council;

- 1. Receive the Review of the Emergency Services Levy – Draft Report as provided by the Economic Regulation Authority*
- 2. Adopt the following positions on the management and distribution of the Emergency Services Levy.*
 - Response – work toward money being available during an emergency, that is not managed by DFES; limiting restrictions for additional resources such as water bombing aircraft etc.*
 - Mitigation – money being available to DPaW for mitigation work within the UCL and UCL/PP interface to restrict the run of bush fire and reduce the impact on the community.*
 - ESL Management – the ESL being managed by an agency, independent of DFES, where the application, allocation and acquittal process can be more transparent.*

The three main areas of interest to Council are reflected in the Recommendations of the Report, these being;

1. Response;
2. Mitigation; and
3. ESL management.

Response

Annually, the Shire of Esperance budgets \$20,000 for response to fire activity within the district. This amount is exceeded annually. This funding includes the use of heavy machinery and other operational expenses associated with bush firefighting. This does not include aircraft for water bombing or reconnaissance services.

When requesting aerial support the current arrangements are that the requests are escalated through DFES and the incident is at the mercy of operational needs across the State. Locally we have both helicopter and aircraft operators available to assist, however these cannot be engaged as they are not DFES contracted resources and/or ESL funded. The Shire cannot afford this expense within its own limited financial constraints.



Approval for additional funding can be sought from DFES, however the decision making process can take time and at times be overly bureaucratic, potentially at a time when decisions need to be made quickly.

Once aerial support is approved, there can be further delays due to the distance to travel to the Shire. This travel time can take up to 4 hours, which can be detrimental to any firefighting response. The community also feels frustrated when they know local contractors may be available but are unable to be engaged due to lack of funding or conflicts with preapproved contracts.

The Shire of Esperance would like to see the introduction of ad-hoc contracts for aerial support whereby prior arrangement can be made with local contractors and ESL money available to fund their use in need.

Additionally at times, the Shire of Esperance requires additional ESL funding for protracted incidents. To request assistance for additional funding during an incident the Shire must contact DFES and provide justification for expenditure. Generally authorisation for additional expenditure is given, however there has been experiences associated around time frames and budget constraints. During a protracted emergency, which the Shire and local volunteers are capable to manage, the need for justification and restricted access to resources can further complicate an already stressful environment.

Key Recommendation 11 states 'The ESL should be used to fund the response activities of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, the bush fire brigades and State Emergency Service units. (Chapter 3)'

The Shire of Esperance agrees and supports this statement and believes Bush Fire Brigades via Local Government should be able to access ESL funding during an emergency without constraints or limitations. Whether this is through additional ESL funding, surplus to operational Brigade expenditure or accounts forwarded post incident for payment, allowances should be made for these response expenses. A fire incident should not need to be escalated to DFES control and management simply to access additional resources.

Mitigation

Annually the Shire of Esperance funds a \$60,000 Strategic Fire Break Program. This work is primarily town site mitigation with work completed around Esperance and the six outlying town sites.

Within the shire there is approximately 530km of UCL and private property interface, the November 2015 fires started in UCL but headed towards and eventually impacted on private property under catastrophic conditions. It is recognised that Parks and Wildlife Services (PaW) are legislatively responsible for mitigation work in UCL; however we understand that neither their budget nor resources are sufficient to effectively manage this land in its entirety.



Key recommendation 9 of this report states “the ESL should be used to fund prevention undertaken by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, bush fire brigades and State Emergency Service units that have community-wide benefits or which involve coordination of prevention across land tenures”.

The Shire of Esperance strongly believes PaW is the best agency to manage the mitigation requirements of the UCL area, recognising their experience and knowledge of the landscape. Traditionally PaW have not had access to ESL funding, however the benefit of work carried out in these areas and the value of longer term strategies for land management in the UCL is seen to be a huge community wide benefit, from both a community and industry perspective.

There is a strong feeling amongst the Esperance community that a shift in attitude needs to be made from a response focus to a mitigation focus in bush fire management. Currently, it is recognised that “when the smoke goes up the cheque book opens” and any amount of money will be spent to combat a fire. This is in complete contradiction to the old tried and tested saying “Prevention is better than the cure”. The Shire is aware of various reports and studies that strongly argue that a focus on appropriate and controllable mitigation works provides significant benefits and outcomes (socially, economically, and environmentally), as opposed to responding to potentially uncontrollable incidents.

Local discussion, after the November 2015 fire, suggested that, had adequate mitigation work been completed throughout the UCL and private properties in preparation for a catastrophic event, such as the one that occurred, the damage, losses and associated costs would have been significantly less.

Key recommendation 36 states, “The Office of Bushfire Risk Management should require local governments to publish their bushfire risk management plans and treatment strategies.” The Shire of Esperance agrees and supports this statement, however this will create another requirement for Local Government to comply with, noting many Shires may not have the skills, expertise knowledge and even financial resources to develop and implement. The Shire has long recognised the need to develop bush fire risk management plans however has not had the resources or necessary expertise to develop an effective model.

The Shire would like to see some funding assistance available by way of providing access to consultants to assist local governments to establish these plans and strategies to address and reduce risk in these areas.

ESL Management

Key Recommendation 5 states, “The Office of Emergency Management should be made independent of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. It should report directly to the Minister for Emergency Services rather than the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner. (Chapter 8)”



Currently DFES is both beneficiary and distributor of ESL funds. The current perception within the rural area is the distribution of ESL funds is inequitable.

The Shire of Esperance agrees and supports the recommendation for the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to manage the Emergency Services Levy; however the OEM needs to be an independent body from DFES, reporting directly to the Minister for Emergency Services or even another Minister or arm of government to further ensure complete independence.

Currently the Shire has concerns with a number of items that should be claimable through the Local Government Grants Scheme (LGGGS) and that more basic needs should be covered by the ESL. For example the Cascade Bush Fire Brigade is located 50kms from the nearest Ambulance Sub-Centre; however the Brigade was unable to be reimbursed for a defibrillator, an essential lifesaving tool.

The Shire would like to see a review of the ineligible items listed in the LGGGS manual, many items listed in this list are critical during an incident (for example, mobile pump units, radio networks, standard first aid equipment).

Recommendation 14 states "The ESL should be used to fund the full costs of the Community Emergency Services Managers in local government. However, it should not be used to fund the broader emergency service and management responsibilities of local government, or the administration costs linked to bush fire brigades and State Emergency Service units. (Chapter 3)" Currently the Shire of Esperance is required to pay half the costs of the Community Emergency Services Manager role through Municipal (Ratepayer) funds, while DFES share is paid by ESL revenue.

The Shire agrees and supports recommendation 14, that the Emergency Services Levy should fully fund the costs associated with the Community Emergency Services Manager.

In conclusion the Shire of Esperance has identified three main areas of interest where improvements could be made to the Emergency Services Levy being; Response, Mitigation and ESL Management. These areas have been identified in the Economic Regulatory Authority Report. The Shire has considered all recommendations identified in the report and agrees and supports these recommendations.

The Shire looks forward to the final report from the Economic Regulatory Authority. An equitable and improved management and distribution of the Emergency Service Levy (ESL) in Western Australia would benefit Local Governments, Bush Fire Brigades and the Community.

Yours faithfully,

Matthew Scott
Chief Executive Officer