

# Union slams FESA

By **HAYLEY BOLTON**

FIRE union chiefs say homes could have been saved in Toodyay if the fire authority had not been focused on saving money by cutting overtime costs.

United Firefighters Union of Australia WA secretary Graeme Geer said available career firefighters were not deployed until seven hours after the fire began.

He said that when the incident controller called for backup, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority sent volunteers from Rockingham rather than career firefighters from closer metropolitan stations.

Tensions in the fire-ravaged community reached boiling point this week after an inquiry failed to determine who was to blame for the blaze.

More than 100 Toodyay residents yesterday criticised Office of Energy and Western Power officials at a town meeting, furious they had failed to find a cause of the devastating blaze.

Western Power has been cleared of blame, meaning residents whose homes were destroyed in the December fires have no hope of compensation.

Residents will be even angrier if the union's claims are true that properties could have been saved by sending career firefighters, who could have arrived more quickly than volunteers.

Mr Geer said the supervisor at FESA's communications centre had advised co-ordinators about 3pm (on the day of the blaze) that it was "very quiet in

the metro area" and they had "plenty of resources available", but no career trucks were deployed until about 8pm.

In one instance, the communications centre had received reports people were trapped, and still the available units in Perth were not deployed.

"We had a catastrophic fire rating that day," Mr Geer said. "Houses could have been saved if units from Perth were sent as soon as an emergency was identified. When career firefighters did arrive at Toodyay, they were all asking why they hadn't been sent sooner."

Mr Geer said units from Midland, Bassendean, Malaga and Welshpool could have been in Toodyay within 40 minutes.

"There are 28 career fire engines in Perth," he said. "To send a quarter of those resources would have been reasonable. Instead, they kept everyone in Perth and sent volunteers. Volunteers don't cost money — they are making decisions based on overtime."

FESA chief operations officer Craig Hynes said:

"The regional and state operations centres determine the most appropriate and available resources ensuring the rest of the state is protected.

"Resources are mobilised to maximise the suppression effort and ensure the effective and efficient protection of life, property and the environment, and based on sound risk-management principles."

Mr Geer said: "The volunteers ... did a fantastic job. What is in question is the support and decisions made by FESA."