

ESPERANCE BUSHFIRES

Statement

HON DAVE GRILLS (Mining and Pastoral) [5.20 pm]: I rise to provide an update on the Esperance fires and an overview of some of the challenges the community now faces as it seeks to rebuild in the wake of this shocking tragedy. I spoke on the Esperance fires in this place last week and offered my condolences to all those affected by the fires, in particular those families who lost loved ones in the blazes. I believe the Premier made the comment that these fires were the worst seen in the state of Western Australia in some 50 years. Residents of the Esperance region will certainly tell us that these are the worst fires they have ever seen in terms of their scale, ferocity and the damage inflicted, not to mention the number of lives lost. The catastrophic fires started on Sunday, 15 November, as a result of lightning strikes on crown land north of Esperance in the Cascade area and, in total, burnt through 300 000 hectares—an area larger than countries such as Luxembourg and Samoa.

Following my statements last week, I travelled to Esperance to inspect the damage firsthand. I was joined by the Minister for Regional Development; Lands, Terry Redman, in Esperance on Tuesday. We had a number of productive meetings with various groups about the recovery process and about the role the state government and its agencies can play. It is clear, however, that it will be a long road to recovery. While in Esperance, I took a number of trips out to those farming communities north of Esperance that were most affected by the fires. A number of farms around Scaddan, Grass Patch and Salmon Gums have been decimated. It was truly heartbreaking to see what were healthy, productive fields burnt to a crisp. In many cases, the topsoil has been stripped, leaving nothing but sandy plains. Scaddan is a pleasant little community. It is named after former Premier John Scaddan. It has lost a number of buildings to the fire, including its town hall.

The financial and emotional impact on farmers and farming communities in the area will be felt for years to come, as will the impact on the local economy. It has been reported that an estimated \$150 million worth of crops has been wiped out. Department of Agriculture and Food WA monitoring suggests that more than 4 600 livestock were lost and about 30 000 hectares of harvest-ready crops were destroyed. In addition to livestock, wildlife has also suffered, although it is difficult to find estimates on how many animals have perished. There are grave concerns for the western ground parrot population in the fire-impacted Cape Arid National Park. Unique to Western Australia, the birds are one of the rarest parrots in the world and are in danger of extinction. Although there are captive breeding programs, we do not know the state of the remaining wild population in the aftermath of the Cape Arid fires.

Over the course of the past week we have learnt more about the victims of the Esperance fires. Allow me once again to offer my condolences to the family and friends of Esperance farmer Kym Curnow, known around town as Freddy. According to reports, Mr Curnow spent hours warning his neighbours to evacuate before being caught up in the blaze. His efforts saved others and his tragic death has left the Esperance community shell-shocked, as has the deaths of three young foreign nationals—Anna Winther from Norway, Julia Kohrs-Lichte from Germany and Tom Butcher from the United Kingdom. The three were enjoying an experience of a lifetime in regional Western Australia when tragedy struck, and my heart goes out to their grieving families.

Despite these terrible events, I must say that it was heartening to witness the Esperance community rally together to support each other during this difficult time. The work of all the volunteers who assisted in the firefighting and recovery efforts was remarkable. I applaud and thank all those who donated their time, money and belongings. I would also like to commend all Department of Fire and Emergency Services personnel, as well as WA Police, St John Ambulance, Horizon Power, the Water Corporation, the Department of Lands, the Department of Parks and Wildlife, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, and the Esperance and Dundas shires for their hard work during this crisis. I took the opportunity to inspect some of the work undertaken by Horizon Power to restore power to farms and I was highly impressed by the workers' efficiency and dedication. That was probably because they were all locals and wanted to do something, and that is what they could do. Now that the flames are extinguished, it is important that we do not forget about the Esperance region and that we continue to support the community as it rebuilds.

A number of issues have been raised in the aftermath of the fires including regional telecommunications, firebreak and vegetation management on crown land, water resources and coordination of the recovery effort. These are issues that will be examined in closer detail in the coming months. In relation to managing firebreaks and vegetation on crown land, farmers in the region have stated they want to work with state government departments to better maintain and, in some cases, re-establish firebreaks in the future. I am confident we will see some progress on this issue.

Lastly, as we continue to assess the damage and pain inflicted by the Esperance bushfires, I would like to extend my thoughts and sympathies to the people of South Australia as they currently battle blazes in the Barossa Valley. In this tired, brown land, fire always looms as a constant threat.

