THE DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs D.J. Guise): Members, today I received within the prescribed time a letter from the member for Stirling stating that, in accordance with Standing Order 145 of the Legislative Assembly, the Parliamentary National Party wishes to raise the following matter of public interest on Tuesday, 22 November 2005; namely -

That, given the Australian Bureau of Meteorology predicts up to a 75 per cent chance of a hotter than usual summer for Western Australia, this house calls upon the state government to:

1. Provide assurances that strategic bushfire access trails and Department of Conservation and Land Management roads in state forest and wilderness parks have been upgraded, with particular attention to the great southern and south west.

2. Provide assurances that there is no potential for disharmony over the state government’s proposal to give the Fire and Emergency Services Authority a mandate to take over control of local fires from local government volunteer bush fire brigades.

3. Increase funding for community campaigns to raise awareness of the risk of large fires in the great southern, south west and wheatbelt areas during the 2005-06 summer.

It appears to me that this matter is in order, and if sufficient members agree to this motion, the matter can proceed.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The matter shall proceed on the usual basis.

MR D.T. REDMAN (Stirling) [3.17 pm]: I move -

That, given the Australian Bureau of Meteorology predicts up to a 75 per cent chance of a hotter than usual summer for Western Australia, this house calls upon the state government to:

1. Provide assurances that strategic bushfire access trails and Department of Conservation and Land Management roads in state forest and wilderness parks have been upgraded, with particular attention to the great southern and south west.

2. Provide assurances that there is no potential for disharmony over the state government’s proposal to give the Fire and Emergency Services Authority a mandate to take over control of local fires from local government volunteer bush fire brigades.

3. Increase funding for community campaigns to raise awareness of the risk of large fires in the great southern, south west and wheatbelt areas during the 2005-06 summer.

A few of the ducks happen to be lining up now. In recent times, Western Australia has not had a serious wildfire to the level of the fires that have occurred in South Australia and other parts of the eastern states. It is a large threat and it is most important that action be taken to mitigate the circumstances that could lead to a disaster. The people living in the Walpole, Mt Barker and Denmark region and within the wheatbelt certainly dread this summer because it follows a winter that has produced an abundance of combustible fuel. The most worrying issue as we head into the summer is, first, the potential for disharmony over the government’s proposal to give the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia the authority to take control over local fires and local volunteer bush fire brigades. In my electorate it is a huge concern and that concern is shared by the electorates of the other members of the Parliamentary National Party. The second concern is the readiness of communities to deal with large fires during the 2005-06 summer. I will highlight the huge support that should be given to the local bush fire brigade volunteers in those areas who play a significant role in managing the bushfire risk and reacting to bushfires that get out of control. The third concern is whether the Department of Conservation and Land Management has undertaken sufficient action, including prescribed burning, to mitigate the risk of fire. The fourth concern is predictions of a hotter than average summer, and the fifth concern is the estimates of abundant fuel.

The threat of a super fire is of huge concern to members of the National Party. Substantial areas of forest, wilderness parks and national parks can be found in my electorate. The north eastern part of my electorate bounds onto the wheatbelt, and, following a good season, a significant amount of fuel can be found in that area. In his report of 2004 entitled ”Responding to Major Bushfires” the Auditor General stated -
In the summer of 2002-03, Western Australia experienced its most severe bushfire season since the fires which destroyed Dwellingup in 1961. Over 9,000 fires were managed by volunteer bushfire brigades throughout the State. CALM attended 620 bushfires that burnt out over 1.2 million hectares of Crown land and private property in the south west land division. Most of these were small and medium sized bushfires, although approximately eight per cent exceeded 1,000 hectares. The area burnt in the south west forest region represents an eight-fold increase on past years.

There was a substantial fire in my electorate in 1936 that my father told me burnt from Bridgetown right down to Denmark. We can still see the legacy of that fire in the staghorns sitting above the forest in the south west. I do not think anyone fully appreciates how a substantial wild fire can move those significant distances and pose a huge threat to life, private property and the environment. It is incumbent upon us to make sure that we let the community know of those risks. The Auditor General’s report continues -

Typically, less than one per cent of bushfires escalate to what may be considered a major bushfire.

In the past two years there have been 14 bushfires considered by FESA and CALM to be major bushfires. Four people lost their lives as a direct result of these fires. Millions of dollars worth of private property, stock, and crops were destroyed.

There is every indication that this summer will be one of the hottest and driest on record, and the risk of major bushfires must be taken seriously. A recent media release from the Bureau of Meteorology states -

The chances of summer minimum temperatures being higher than the median are between 60 and 75% across most of the southern half of Western Australia.

This equates to six or seven chances out of 10. Over the remainder of the state, the chance of overnight temperature averages over the summer being above the median is between 50 and 60 per cent. This summer is a serious concern. Those figures mean that it will be hotter than normal. One of the factors lined up alongside the hotter than normal summer is the abundance of fuel, which is another contributing factor to fires. The past winter has produced an abundance of combustible fuel in the agricultural areas in particular, but also in the forests of the south west.

I will divide the short time I have into two parts. I will quickly talk about the Department of Conservation and Land Management’s role in managing bushfires in our national parks and wilderness areas, and then move on to the issue of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority and some of the local government areas in the agricultural regions. There is no doubt that CALM faces a huge task in managing the bushfire risk. It has a number of pressures on it. Before I highlight some of these pressures and the political play that may be involved, I state that I have a huge amount of respect for the steps that CALM takes in carrying out prescribed burns. Recently I took some time out to meet a CALM officer in Walpole, and I saw the effort taken in planning, protecting the biodiversity in burnt regions and preventing controlled burns from spreading to areas adjacent to the parks. CALM officers go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that all the processes are in place to protect the things we value in the community. In saying that, I point out that a couple of factors are placing CALM under pressure. Firstly, the extended droughts of recent times have created a high level of risk in lighting up a prescribed burn on a particular day. That risk has an impact in reducing the amount of burning that is done. Secondly, environmental groups are challenging prescribed burning as a method of fuel reduction. At the end of last year, I went to a briefing in Denmark offered by the manager of the Walpole office. He was briefing the relevant members of the community about the prescribed burning plan for the upcoming season. He had the patience of Solomon, because for half of that session in which he was trying to put forward the prescribed burning plans for that area he was being hit very hard by an environmental group questioning whether burning should happen at all. I do not recall the exact number, but about 30 burns were planned. I recognise that they would not be able to get through all of them, because they depend on the conditions of the day, and the officers make those judgments. A week or so after that meeting, there was a response from the government by reducing the number of prescribed burns on the list. I can see that only as political interference in something that should be fundamental, particularly in those areas with national park and native forest.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management has just designated the Walpole wilderness area, which covers a huge expanse of bush. By nature of this huge expanse of bush in one particular place being a wilderness, there is limited access. Roads have been closed. Therefore, I am very concerned about the level of access that the people from CALM will have to get into those areas and mitigate any fire that gets going. There are pressures on road funding right across the state. Members have heard me talk about this before. It extends to
the issues of CALM and the people managing those forests. The risk posed by the 130 000 hectares of blue gum plantations in the south west is also significant. There has not yet been a serious fire, but one is coming.

I turn now to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority. There is a general concern, certainly on the part of the people whom I represent, about FESA wanting to take over the role of the local bush fire brigades. This has been going on since the inception of the emergency services levy a couple of years ago. I want to highlight that one of the fundamental concerns is the impact that this will have on volunteers in the local bush fire brigades. Western Australia has 20 000 volunteer bush fire fighters in 635 brigades. The majority of the brigades operate under the direction of the respective local government authority or shire. We do not want to put that at risk. They must be acknowledged as being significant contributors. I am very concerned that some of the present moves by government are putting at risk the will to volunteer. Local brigades need to be enhanced and we need to support them. Some of my parliamentary colleagues will talk about the relationship between the volunteers and local representatives of FESA, whom many people in my area talk up because they are very happy with how they have been able to process and manage fires. They would like that capacity to continue.

A couple of recent changes in FESA have highlighted concerns to local people. The first was FESA’s moving to take over more control of fires. Its first step was asking local governments to sign an agreement that set up an automatic trigger for a FESA person to come in and take over a fire at a predetermined point, which could be negotiated. Many shires signed the agreement but two shires that I represent did not sign the agreement, which shows there is some concern about it. A very strong message is now coming from FESA that it wants mandated the right to come in and take over a fire. I understand that it was put into a package that FESA said it wanted to negotiate with locals. FESA said it recognises the issues of how local people deal with fires; however, it still wants a mandatory process. There have been many successful examples - the member for Wagin will talk about one - of how this relationship has worked well. It is not necessarily something that we need to change.

Another concern is a more recent issue, which I raised in question time today, about a recommendation by FESA to, I understand, the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, to move the responsibility of registering bush fire brigades from local government to FESA. As I understand it, the recommendation was that FESA register brigades and also disband local bush fire brigades. That recommendation was submitted. The Hansard transcript has not yet been publicly released, although it should be coming very soon. However, I have talked to the person from FESA who represents the south west. He said that FESA had withdrawn the part about disbanding local bush fire brigades. He said that FESA was happy to register brigades but not to disband the brigades. That sounds to me like making decisions on the run. That is having a huge effect on the local volunteer firefighters. I do not believe the necessary level of consultation has taken place with local government, because local government has serious issues with it.

In summary, the two main points that I want to highlight are, first, the issue of managing those bigger wilderness areas, which is a new issue for us and involves prescribed burning in particular and the maintenance of the necessary level of burning to protect property and life and, of course, our environmental values; and, secondly, the issue of FESA making this move to take over local brigades. I believe it is having a negative impact on volunteers. That is what all the locals in my electorate are telling me. The level of volunteers is hard enough to attain now, let alone if some person sitting on a shiny seat in Perth contemplates travelling to the south to take control of a bushfire that the local people believe they can manage best in consultation with, and with the support of, the local FESA people, whom they support. It is very important that we do not throw out the baby with the bathwater in the decisions that we make in this process. That is really a summary. I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that some other points will be made by my colleagues.

MR G.A. WOODHAMS (Greenough) [3.29 pm]: I stand to support the member for Stirling in this motion. The proposal, in essence, to take command away from communities and pass it to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority causes the National Party some concern. I believe it will also present some conflicts at the level of community involvement. It would appear to me, and certainly to my National Party colleagues, that there is concern in the wider community, particularly for the future of local bushfire brigades and their volunteers. I will quote from a recent national bushfire mitigation report titled “Council of Australian Governments: National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management”. The report followed on from the disastrous fires in the eastern states in 2002-03 and found that there was a need to acknowledge the uniqueness of each community in the event of fire. It urged the value of localised approaches to bushfire mitigation, which includes lifting public and community awareness at all levels. The inquiry found that community engagement is a very powerful tool, and one that engages successful programs to involve residents. Such a program needs to be based on three particular matters: the specific community’s needs and style, the work that it does, and its other important community objectives. Communities can be dramatically different. It also means engaging with each community to understand what is different about that community. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach cannot
be taken. There also needs to be an avoidance of lecturing the community. More engagement and involvement with the community is needed, with more done to take the community on the journey, rather than simply lecturing the community. The final part of the report that I refer to is the premise that programs for increasing interaction, improving preparedness and raising awareness must be flexible, again adapting to suit the characteristics of the community; that is, empowering the community to act on its own behalf and at the same time encouraging it to share around some of that responsibility so that volunteers who fight fires and are engaged in and part of the community can feel that they have a worthwhile role to play and are not sidelined.

I turn now to a document produced in Western Australia, the Auditor General’s October 2004 report titled “Responding to Major Bushfires”. A couple of references in the report are particularly worth noting in this matter of public interest motion. One change that has occurred recently in Western Australia is the different land uses that we now deal with. I refer particularly to the threat that major fires pose to what might be described these days as urban sprawl, not only in the metropolitan area but also in regional communities. That sprawl has blurred the previously clear distinction between what was previously described as urban land and rural land. Housing estates are now extending into bushfire-prone areas, putting life and property at greater risk. One aspect that all members would notice if they travel around Western Australia - I urge members to travel around and get first-hand information on this themselves - is the tremendous fuel burden that has built up in the past winter. There is a fantastic burden of fuel in the community that certainly sets the scene for a possible conflagration - a very big fire. Higher fuel levels have also contributed to an increased risk of fire on properties on the Department of Conservation and Land Management’s land, which I believe CALM would acknowledge. The fuel has built up over the past 10 years and needs to be effectively maintained and controlled. However, that build-up makes the controlling of bushfires extremely dangerous.

The last point I make in talking to this MPI relates to the current weaknesses in planning and communications in Western Australia. Some inconsistencies in local level planning have hampered both firefighting and emergency management operations. The problems encountered include managing road closures and evacuations and the availability of maps and local firefighters to provide local knowledge of the area. The local knowledge of the area is vital to effective firefighting and, therefore, it is vital to successfully maintain the volunteer groups, who have greater knowledge of their areas than anybody else.

MR T.K. WALDRON (Wagin - Deputy Leader of the National Party) [3.35 pm]: I will focus on the second paragraph of the motion, which states that the government should provide assurances that there is no potential for disharmony over the state government’s proposal to give FESA a mandate to take over control of local fires from local government volunteer bush fire brigades. I was heartened by the minister’s answer to a question about that issue that local governments will have the final say. There is a real concern by local governments, which my colleagues have referred to. It is imperative that FESA and local government volunteer bush fire brigades work together and not be seen as two separate bodies in local fire control. FESA should not take control until it is asked to by the local authority, or it agrees that it is necessary to do so.

I was at the Kukerin bushfire last year. The firefighting was a great example of groups working together. The Kukerin bushfire was controlled by the local volunteer fire control officer. He was assisted by the local shire, local police and FESA officers from Albany. The FESA officers from Albany played a key role. They all worked together. The key to resolving that really dangerous situation was the fact that those groups worked together. I will go through a few things that happened. First, the headquarters was established at the shire office in Dumbleyung. Those four main groups - the local shire, the volunteer fire control officer, the police and the FESA officers - worked together. The headquarters in Dumbleyung became the control centre for the fire. Together those groups dealt with such things as road closures, equipment needs and the deployment and redeployment of fire trucks. They divided the fire into sectors, with each sector having its own control officer who reported back to the major fire control officer. They coordinated the delivery of food and drink to firefighters to avoid dangerous situations and to prevent people racing all over the place with food and drink. They controlled the replacement of crews, comments to the media and weather updates. They held regular briefings. They controlled the movement of stock, the evacuation of residents, school closures and St John Ambulance coordination. All the things that needed to happen were done in a controlled manner.

The comment by the FESA officers was that they were very glad to be there to provide their expertise and analysis. They provided sound professional advice. It was great to have FESA officers at the bushfire, but the officers also said that local knowledge and local control were critical to fighting the fire. The members of the volunteer bush fire brigades said that they were happy to control the fire, but it was great to have the expertise and input of the FESA officers, as well as their advice and support. The presence of the FESA officers gave the local people great confidence. The backup and shared decision making for the fire was crucial. The local government and police worked together and provided expertise and assistance. They provided local knowledge of roads; the local headquarters and radio control; the point of contact for everyone, including the media and
people who wanted to know what was going on and what they could do; and the shire equipment used to fight the fire. The police were involved in road closures. Traffic management became an issue, because there is great danger on the roads when fires occur and other emergency situations arise.

Together with the member for Merredin, I was in Kukerin to see the bushfire operation in progress and to be given reports during some of the debriefings. In fact, the Minister for Agriculture and Forestry, Hon Kim Chance, and the Treasurer came to Kukerin at our request, which was great, and they saw how well the operation worked. The one thing that became clear to me is that it can work well as a combined effort. The danger we see is in diminishing the role of the local volunteer bush fire brigades. There is no need for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority to take over unless the local body feels that it has reached a stage at which FESA needs to take over because, for example, the fire has gotten too big or there is a very dangerous situation. The local body would still like to work out arrangements with FESA. That would have happened at the fire, should it have progressed any further. We do not want FESA to have so much control that it will cause the volunteer bush fire brigades to be disbanded. I hope that does not happen, because we need each and every one of them.

Another thing concerns me, which has already been mentioned. If FESA takes over the total role, a Big Brother syndrome may emerge. There will be a lack of local interest. People will throw up their hands, and there could be a loss of brigades or a reduction in the effectiveness of local brigades. That would be disastrous.

I will talk about the Badjebup fire. At the end of the day, it was not a big fire but it happened on the same day and there could have been a terrible calamity in the great southern had both those fires not been brought under control. There was no time for FESA to be directly involved in fighting the Badjebup fire because it was already involved and doing a great job at Kukerin. The Badjebup fire was totally controlled by the locals. That fire had the potential to be more destructive than even the Kukerin fire. Luckily, there was local knowledge about the salt creeks and the salt lake system, and the locals were able to get to the fire extremely early. Their quick action and coordination resulting from their local knowledge stopped the fire. Had it gone past that point, it would have been only 30-odd miles to Nyabing - the home town of the Treasurer. We talked about that with the Treasurer on the day of the Kukerin fire. The disaster was stopped. Had it gotten bigger, it would have been great to have had FESA there. Perhaps, if FESA have been in control from the start and there had then been a delay, a problem could have arisen. I think that FESA recognises that, and all the FESA people I speak to recognise the importance of local involvement. I wanted to stress this today because of the conditions that exist now and will exist through the summer. We have had problems with power poles. It has been a great season this year and there is a high fire risk. There have been problems on road verges, which are a mess. The travelling public will be out and about in country Western Australia two or three weeks from now, when holiday-makers start their holidays. It is a real problem.

I remember my first year in this Parliament, when we celebrated the Year of the Volunteer. Volunteers are crucial to everything we do in Western Australia, not just country Western Australia. They do so much for St John Ambulance, schools, community groups and volunteer bush fire brigades. We must not put them at risk. We must continue to work as we did at Kukerin. If we do, I am sure we will be able to address the fires that will be a heck of a threat to this state this summer.

DR J.M. EDWARDS (Maylands - Minister for the Environment) [3.43 pm]: I am pleased to commence the response on behalf of the government. I signal that, although we welcome this motion, we will move to amend it.

We have heard some very useful information this afternoon and we have heard of some real on-the-ground experience from the member’s electorate. I am sure that every member of the house shares the concern about bushfires and wildfires. The recent winter brought lots of rain and extra foliage. The risk of fires is high, and we have heard the dire warnings of a much warmer summer than average.

The government has recognised the importance of providing adequate resources to the Department of Conservation and Land Management for fire protection. CALM was provided with an additional $23.4 million over four years, beginning in 2003-04, for improved fire management across the state. I was pleased earlier this year when additional new money of $2.75 million was allocated for CALM to employ an additional 40 staff in the south west. They have been undertaking a range of duties, including fire management. The additional funding has enabled CALM to deliver on its prescribed burning programs and to maintain strategic fire access and water supplies. In the past financial year - we run the prescribed burning system that way - the department was able to achieve a total of 213 000 hectares of prescribed burning, which was just over the annual target of 200 000 hectares.

As members have heard, we have had a slow start to burning this spring because of the extended winter rainfall and the prevailing conditions. CALM has been able in the past couple of weeks to take advantage of good
weather and catch up with its prescribed burning program. To date, approximately 85,000 hectares of prescribed burning has been done in the south west forest regions, which is almost double the amount announced a couple of weeks ago. A huge effort has been made over the past couple of weeks. CALM is now confident that it will meet its prescribed burning target for 2005-06. The department has completed a number of important protection burns on CALM-managed lands in the south coast region, with some 6,500 hectares having been burnt to date.

To reassure the member for Stirling, the sheet outlining today’s aerial and hand-controlled burning program contains the Giants forest block near Walpole. Also on today’s list, and probably in the member for Stirling’s electorate, is an area of land at Porongurup. I am picking only the ones that are really relevant. Dawson block and Giants block were on the list yesterday. Clear Hills block, which is 25 kilometres west of Mt Barker and consists of an area of 9,308 hectares - I am not familiar with this block - was on the prescribed burning program for last Friday. Proginup, which is north-north-west of Walpole - another block with which I am not familiar - was also on the list for that day. These are just some examples in the member’s local area. Blocks on this sheet range across other parts of the south west, and I could refer back to previous days. Burning is definitely taking place with a view to protecting the member’s community and its assets.

The department has given particular emphasis to road maintenance over the past couple of years, focussing on strategic fire access and bridges. This issue is of concern. In recent times works have largely been funded from the department’s enhanced fire operations budget - the new money we have given to CALM. We were very pleased to receive a boost to that funding in 2004-05 when we received some matching funding from the commonwealth government under the national bushfire mitigation program. I lay on the table for the remainder of today’s sitting a map outlining the results of that bushfire mitigation program. It is a very good map highlighting some of the areas in the members’ electorates. However, what is most impressive about the map is the inclusion of photographs taken before and after the work on the strategic access tracks as they show the real difference. I particularly encourage members who have spoken in this debate to look at the dreaded map to see what has occurred in their areas.

[See paper 1095.]

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I note that the paper has been tabled.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Well and truly.

I also assure the member for Stirling that we understand and share his concerns for the Walpole wilderness area. Fire protection is a key consideration and the management plan, which has gone through its recent development phase, has been discussed very carefully. The draft management plan is due to be considered by the Conservation Commission of Western Australia in the very near future, after which it will be released for a formal public consultation process.

To reiterate, fire is a big concern to us especially in light of its impacts on the communities referred to by members. I am pleased that CALM has received good recognition as a result of other inquiries that have been held, particularly those in the eastern states; that is, we do carry out a prescribed burning program, we do have targets, we do have a management plan with different values and, by and large, we do it well. I have taken the opportunity to attend a lot of fires to make sure I know first-hand what is going on.

An opposition member interjected.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Stop laughing. I have been very impressed by the people who put the effort in and the work on the ground. In touching on some of the members’ comments, I am also impressed with the level of thought given to the detailed planning and coordination. I also had the opportunity recently to open a training day for the Department of Conservation and Land Management, in which people from CALM, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority and other entities joined some people from overseas and the eastern states who have specialised training in decision making in fire management. Although I appreciate all the points the member made about the role of local volunteers and the bush fire brigades, a lot of effort is being made to provide training at a higher level to assist people to make difficult decisions, such as when to walk away if a fire is out of control and people are at risk. Members opposite can be assured that people in FESA and CALM have undertaken the required training, have worked through scenarios and planning exercises and have the capacity to make those types of decisions.

Amendment to Motion

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: On that note, I move -

To delete all words after “house” with a view to substituting the following - notes the state government has -
(1) Provided assurances that strategic bushfire access trails and CALM roads in state forests and wilderness parks have been upgraded, with particular attention to the great southern and south west.

(2) Provided assurances that there is benefit in the state government’s proposal to give FESA a mandate to take control of local fires from local government volunteer bush fire brigades.

(3) Increased funding for community campaigns to raise awareness of the risk of large fires in the great southern, south west and wheatbelt areas during the 2005-06 summer.

MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland - Minister for Police and Emergency Services) [3.51 pm]: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the motion this afternoon. I will deal with those aspects that more closely relate to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority’s role. Some concern seems to have been generated about FESA’s submission to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. I note that the committee is considering a range of submissions but will not make recommendations until 2006. That time will, of course, be post this bushfire season. Any changes to be made as a result of recommendations from the committee could not be implemented until some time next year and would certainly be implemented post this bushfire season. No changes proposed by FESA will in any way impact on this bushfire season. However, the proposals put by FESA to the committee will still provide for local government to control fires in a local government area unless an agreement exists.

The member for Stirling has indicated that some shires have already implemented an agreement with FESA. He noted that a couple of shires in his area had not done so, but he was aware that others had. In fact, 55 local governments have agreed that, in extreme circumstances, FESA has the right to take over a fire. That is an indication of the level of support among local governments for that intervention. As I said, 55 shires have already signed up. I think there is a lot of support among local governments for the concept of FESA intervening in that way.

FESA has progressed that view partly because it was raised in the Auditor General’s recent report and because the State Coroner has recently made recommendations. Both the Auditor General and the State Coroner have made suggestions for improvements to the way major fires are controlled. As an agency, FESA has acted on a range of those recommendations. Nonetheless, recommendations have been made that provide for FESA to take control in those extreme circumstances.

I note that some 8,000 fires occur each year. Thankfully, due to the excellent work of this state’s volunteers and our fire agencies, only a handful become major incidents. Additionally, the major incident provision would be enacted only when the conditions were as described above; that is, during a major incident. I was very interested in the member for Wagin’s example of the 2004 fire at Kukerin, which is in the Shire of Dumbleyung. As that incident demonstrated, if a large fire is well managed by the local government, there is no need to use the provision. Provision or no provision, it would not have been used at Kukerin, because there was simply no need for it. The Fire and Emergency Services Authority, like the member for Wagin, fully acknowledges that the Kukerin fire was extremely well managed. In that case, the chief bushfire control officer remained in control with the support of some experienced bushfire liaison officers. In most situations, the bushfire control officer is sensible and able to make and will make the right call. However, if things get out of control during a major incident and that call is not made, if the bushfire control officer makes the call, “This is my fire. I have been fighting fires in this area all of my life and I will not hand over the fire”, there could be a Mexican stand off. If things go horribly wrong, there would be a range of liability issues and we would have another situation with the potential for a coroner’s report to assert that the state should have stepped in. In those circumstances, we would have to say that we had no capacity to step in because it was a local government matter. I reassure members that this relates only to extreme circumstances. Quite clearly, FESA has talked to local governments. It has already convinced some 55 local governments to come to a formal agreement that, in extreme circumstances, FESA will have the power to step in. That should give elected shire members and their communities a greater sense of security because, without that, they will become totally reliable on the judgment call of the chief bushfire control officer.

Mr T.K. Waldron: The minister makes a good point. However, a lot of local governments are afraid that it will start coming in more and more and then take over. That is a fear, because they have been burnt before, to coin a phrase. If situations are handled in the same way that the Kukerin fire was handled, if FESA comes in only during a major incident, most people would accept that. However, there is that area of doubt. They really are concerned.
Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I appreciate that that is the fear. All I can say is that FESA has absolutely no desire to fight the 8,000 or so bushfires that occur each year, bushfires that are well and truly managed by local government bush fire brigades. Managing those fires is quite appropriately their responsibility. Those volunteers do an excellent job. There is no issue there. We are talking only about major incidents. As the various Auditor General and coroner reports handed down on not only Western Australian bushfires but also major bushfires around Australia indicate - it is heartening to see that a number of members who have spoken on the motion have had a look at some of those reports - judgment calls will always be made. That happened during the Canberra fires. There was a lot of talk and a lot of commentary in the media about the fact that although a lot of equipment, brigades and so forth were on stand-by to assist, that assistance was declined in the early stages. I suspect that a big part of the reason that some of that assistance was declined was that the person in charge of the fire believed that he had it under control. Sometimes people in charge of firefighting have the mentality that the fire they are fighting is within their boundary and is their fire. They think that they have always handled such fires and always will.

Mr T.K. Waldron: I take the minister’s point. However, don’t you think that we need to show a level of trust in local people, such as those at Kukerin. If there is one person -

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: What I am saying is that a level of trust situation is what we have operated on for the past 100 years, ever since bush fire brigades have existed. However, having operated in that sense, various state governments have come in for criticism from the Auditor General and the coroner when things have gone wrong. We are definitely not talking about a situation in which FESA will be given carte blanche to choose to take over one fire but not another fire. Clearly, criteria will need to be set. It will need to be a major incident. This is a matter that I am confident the standing committee will look at very closely and make recommendations on. I believe there is potential for those who have raised the MPI today to reach agreement with me on this matter. If we can tighten and define the conditions under which FESA will be able to take over a major incident, we may well be able to reach significant agreement on this matter. I therefore ask members to take a serious look at both the Auditor General’s report and the coroner’s most recent recommendations, because they make a good case for the state to be able to take control of a major incident if it believes that is necessary. In the Kukerin instance FESA did not believe that a takeover was necessary, and it was not.

With regard to part 2 of the motion, I want it to be clearly understood that if there was a major incident and control was handed over to FESA, local knowledge and involvement in the incident management would continue to be paramount and crucial to the success of the operation. In no way would FESA step in and do everything on its own and not take on board the skills and knowledge of the people who are on the ground during that major incident.

Part 3 of the motion refers to community campaigns. Last year the state government provided, as did the commonwealth, additional money for our aerial firefighting capacity in the great southern. As part of that, FESA and CALM work together to ensure the state is prepared for the fire season. That funding has been continued. Also, the state government has significantly enhanced the WA helicopter water bombing - helitac - capability. We used helitacs for the first time in the 2002-03 fire season. Last year we doubled the number of helitacs from two to four, and that will extend the range of the water bombing service by 50 per cent from an 80-kilometre to a 120-kilometre radius from the Perth central business district. The funding provided amounts to $1.35 million annually. The increased rotary-wing water bombing capability will provide an increased capacity to service communities in the outer areas of Perth’s expanding rural-urban interface and will provide additional fire protection during wildfire events that threaten these outlying communities. The integration of the rotary-wing helitacs with fixed water bombers has proved very successful. The fire knockdown capacity of the fixed wing, combined with the fast turnaround times of the helitacs, provides a formidable increase in the fire protection of Perth’s rural-urban interface. The combination of both fixed-wing and helitac operations as an automatic response has now been formalised, and that was used as the standard response to fires in the Darling scarp last year. This enabled that high-fire risk zone to receive an immediate concentrated attack, resulting in a reduction in fire size, duration and intensity.

We have also put in place new technology for fire intelligence mapping. The funding for the integration of the fire intelligence mapping with the fire management aerial platform has assisted in the overall management of significant fire emergencies in the high-risk rural-urban interface environment. I have looked at that technology. It is fitted onto helicopters and means that we can map out the pattern and intensity of a fire and direct the resources to where they can be deployed most effectively. The enhanced information provided from this air intelligence aids in improving the timeliness of information alerts to warn the public of the potential impact of wildfires on the community. The emergency services levy that was put in place by our government has resulted in an enormous increase in funding to volunteer bush fire brigades in our State Emergency Service, so that they
are much better able to respond to bushfires. They are certainly much better equipped and much better protected than they were just a few years ago.

I refer to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority’s public advertising and education campaigns. Just a few weeks ago I launched the Prepare: Stay and Defend or Prepare: Go Early campaign, along with the member for Swan Hills, at Darlington. That is an advertising campaign for television and the newspapers.

Mr B.J. Grylls: Is that being shown on the regional stations also?

Mrs M.H. Roberts: I believe it is. That is coupled with FESA’s annual SummerSafe campaign. For this campaign, the design and evaluation components total more than $300,000. The campaign has a budget of some $43,000. It is a grassroots campaign. As part of it, we have produced some very good literature. That literature is also available on the FESA web site. The literature is being distributed by firefighters in fire-prone areas through a doorknocking campaign.

There are also very strong networks, and the member for Greenough referred to the involvement of local communities. Some members opposite will be aware of our bushfire ready action groups, otherwise known as BRAGs. There is a strong, no-cost promotion through existing networks such as local governments, members of Parliament and the bushfire ready action groups. Those groups are part of the on-the-ground community effort.

FESA is also working on its dry season campaign for the fire season in the northern half of the state in 2006. FESA and the police are also developing a $350,000 automated, web-based alert system to provide, for the first time, a whole-of-government, all-hazards approach to public warnings during emergencies. The first trials of the new system will be conducted early next year. I believe the member for Greenough also mentioned the importance of communications. Whenever there is a review of a major bushfire incident - in fact, any emergency incident - communication is always at the forefront. I was delighted that earlier this year we announced a $20 million commitment to communications over three years. That is for the WA emergency radio network project. The regional community is the prime focus area for that WAERN project. It also has the potential to provide considerable benefits to the high-risk urban-rural interface of the outer Perth metropolitan area. Primarily, this emergency radio network is proposed to improve the safety of FESA regional staff and volunteers, and the welfare of Western Australian communities in general. A $20 million commitment to communications is pretty much unheard of. It means that we will have the capacity to communicate not just from state government agency to agency, but also to local governments and everyone who is involved. It will be a tremendous advance once that system is fully in place.

Mr D.T. Redman: I refer to FESA taking over the right to register bushfire brigades and potentially its capacity to disband them, whether it be by legislative means or by simply not funding them. One of the concerns in the community is that the decisions to decrease the number of bushfire brigades are made on the basis of the lack of funding or limited resources to be able to support the equipment, rather than the issue of risk.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: The resource base has never been bigger. All members opposite know that since the ESL has been in place, the resource base of bushfire brigades has never been bigger. I assure people that there is no plan by FESA to decrease the number of bushfire brigades. If anyone is putting that information out in the community, it is a furphy. I said in answer to a question earlier today that we will not close any bushfire brigades unless it is with the agreement of the local shire. If a local shire does not want a brigade to be closed, it will not be closed. We are saying that if a shire wants to establish a new brigade, the approval of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority should be sought. Certain funding requirements must be met with the approval of a new brigade. The benefit of establishing a new brigade must be assessed against the funding requirements of the existing brigades, because only a certain amount in the budget is allocated for brigades. If there is a fear in the community that FESA will be in the business of closing down brigades, I can assure people that it will not. FESA might want to talk to local governments about brigade A or brigade B and whether they should continue or whether it would be better off to provide a brigade in a growing area or an area of greater need. It is responsible to have those types of discussions. FESA is not seeking to have the capacity to dictate whether a brigade should be closed. If I can allay that fear, I do so here and now.

MR B.J. Grylls (Merredin - Leader of the National Party) [4.10 pm]: In the short time that remains for the National Party to present its case, I rise to inform the house that we cannot support the government’s amendments to the motion before us today. Although the Minister for Police and Emergency Services contends that she has provided assurances that strategic bushfire access trails and Department of Conservation and Land Management roads in state forests and wilderness parks have been upgraded, what we are hearing on the ground does not support that. That is why in the last sitting week of Parliament we have put this issue on the agenda. We have argued it before and we will argue it again this year.

This issue is of great concern to the people who live in the south west of the state. The members for Warren-Blackwood, Collie and Stirling have very real concerns about this matter. As the member for Stirling said, the
staghorns at the top of the very tallest trees in wilderness areas are reminiscent of the huge wildfire of 1937. We have seen what happened in Canberra when it was under enormous threat from bushfires, and we heard the stories from Adelaide last year when many people in the Eyre Peninsula lost their lives. We have been lucky in Western Australia until now, although lives were lost in Tenterden, and lives were very nearly lost at Kukerin. I know people who were lying in gullies, while the fire leapt over the top of their heads.

This is a very serious issue, and Parliament must take the time to address it every year to make sure that the ministers responsible understand the concerns of the people on the ground. We have not heard the Minister for Police and Emergency Services give her view about the Bureau of Meteorology forecast that there is a 75 per cent chance that this summer will be hotter than usual. We understand that a very wet winter increases the fire load. The people who live in country areas are now talking about the risk of a super fire. We need to hear from the minister that she accepts that the risks are higher this year, and that measures have been put in place to ensure we can cope with that. The Minister for the Environment must give recognition to the people on the ground who will don their overalls and volunteer to fight the fires. They need to be assured that the Minister for the Environment also is fully aware of the risks that they undertake.

We cannot support the government’s amendments. Those of us from country Western Australia are concerned to ensure that the bureaucrats in the departments that make these decisions understand people in regional Western Australia and how they feel about these issues. The notion of FESA having the ability to take control of the fire brigades scares the volunteers. They are the ones who make the time to volunteer their services to the local fire brigades and risk their lives to fight the fires. We appreciated the support of FESA at Kukerin and other aspects of its involvement. However, the idea of FESA at some stage having a mandate to take control of a fire situation must be done with the full agreement of not only the councils, but also the people who administer the local volunteer brigades, right down to the newest member who has joined only this year. They join volunteer brigades to provide assistance to the community when the time arrives. The volunteers are worried that when a fire starts, they will not be allowed to take orders from a local person in the chain of command whom they have looked up to, but will have to take orders from somebody who is not from the area and who does not have local knowledge. It should worry them because the local knowledge at a fire scene is absolutely critical. My family drove for two hours to assist at the Kukerin bushfire. On arrival, they had no idea of the local area, including the lie of the land or from where to access water. If it had not been for the local people who were on the ground providing that information, my family believes it would have been in trouble. It is very important that this issue be addressed each year when the opportunity arises.

Amendment (words to be deleted) put and a division taken with the following result -

Ayes (27)

Mr P.W. Andrews  Mr S.R. Hill  Mr M. McGowan  Ms J.A. Radisich
Mr J.J.M. Bowler  Mrs J. Hughes  Ms S.M. McHale  Mr E.S. Ripper
Mr A.J. Carpenter  Mr J.N. Hyde  Mr A.D. McRae  Mrs M.H. Roberts
Mr J.B. D’Orazio  Mr J.C. Kobelke  Mr N.R. Marborough  Mr T.G. Stephens
Dr J.M. Edwards  Mr R.C. Kuecera  Mrs C.A. Martin  Mr P.B. Watson
Dr G.I. Gallop  Mr F.M. Logan  Mr M.P. Murray  Mr M.P. Whityley (Teller)
Mrs D.J. Guise  Mr J.A. McGinty  Ms M.M. Quirk

Noes (21)

Mr C.J. Barnett  Mr J.H.D. Day  Mr A.J. Simpson  Ms E. Walker
Mr D.F. Barron-Sullivan  Mr B.J. Grylls  Mr G. Snook  Mr G.A. Woodhams
Mr M.J. Birney  Ms K. Hodson-Thomas  Mr T.R. Sprigg  Dr G.G. Jacobs (Teller)
Mr T.R. Buswell  Mr J.E. McGrath  Dr S.C. Thomas
Mr G.M. Castrilli  Mr P.D. Omodei  Mr M.W. Trenorden
Dr E. Constable  Mr D.T. Redman  Mr T.K. Waldron

Pairs

Mr J.R. Quigley  Mr R.F. Johnson
Mr D.A. Templeman  Mr M.J. Cowper
Ms A.J.G. MacTiernan  Dr K.D. Hames

Amendment thus passed.

Amendment (words to be substituted) put and a division taken with the following result -
Motion, as Amended

Question put and passed.