NUMBAT HABITATS — PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM

Statement

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [5.02 pm]: Even though I had a bit of time to speak today, I want to give a little more attention to forests. This will probably be the last time I will speak about forests, and I find them to be very, very valuable. That leads me to a question that Hon Tjorn Sibma asked earlier this week about the Perup fire and the rationale for why a habitat for dibblers was found to be marked out with tapes to be avoided yet a fire was ignited by incendiaries from the sky, causing a fierce, intense fire. The tapes where the dibblers lived were burnt, the logs were burnt—everything was burnt. The answer to the question was that the soil was dryer than the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions thought. It said that it had gone there and raked some of the material away from the logs and wet the area with a hose before dropping fire from the sky to light up the forest, but that the preventive measures did not work. The DBCA said that the conditions were a bit dryer than it thought: "Oops. We'll learn from that and try not to do it again." That happened after I raised the point last year that one of these so-called controlled burns had burnt a thousand-year-old peat swamp. I acknowledge that people might not think that a swamp would burn, but after the droughts that we have had and the decrease in rainfall, that is what is happening. The swamps are getting dryer; therefore, when there is fire near them, they burn, and when peat burns, it keeps burning. It smoulders underground and could still be smouldering. It is just dreadful. That is why I have to speak one more time. When we do our prescribed burns, we need to look at the more recent science.

Hon Lynn MacLaren asked a question on 13 May 2015 about the 200-hectare prescribed burn target. The details given in an answer by Hon Helen Morton stated that the figure of 200 000 hectares was developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by departmental fire managers. We are still burning forests based on a rationale from more than 40 or 50 years ago. The forests are no longer like the forests that existed then and there is not as much forest as there was in 1970. It just does not make sense. It begs the question: why are we refusing to consider current science and research when we are determining how and where to burn?

The question that we asked about the Perup fire was not about just the numbats. That fire affected an extensive range of flora and fauna, some of which may not have been counted yet. But the fire has gone through and we have lost that forest. The frequency of prescribed burning sometimes makes it impossible for some species of flora to survive because we burn the forests at a faster rate than it takes for plants to grow and produce new seed. We could not plan an extinction any better than that. We just keep killing off seed before it gets a chance to grow another plant to grow more seed. I am really asking the government to please review the prescribed burn plans during this term. Do not base it on emotion and fear, but base it on science. It has to be done, because the severity of these burns is ridiculous. It is too late to say that we are going to learn from our mistakes. We have to stop making mistakes around our fires.

It is interesting that the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and the Forest Products Commission have started talking about Indigenous burning as though they know what they are talking about. From what I hear, the Noongar people down there who are watching what is happening and seeing the land destroyed are saying that that is not what they meant. They did not say to go out and burn every year everywhere. There is more to it than that. To just take that on and say, "Yes, we know what we are doing. We have talked to a few Indigenous elders and what we are doing is fine" is not it. They have to look at how it is done, what has been done since then and what is happening now when we burn. We have to make it better.

They also say that they are doing mosaic burning. If we wanted to look at the size and scale of some of the burns, we would have to be up in a satellite to see the mosaic nature across the landscape. There are large patches. They are not just a chequerboard image or a quilting image of patchwork-type stuff. That is not it. It is not a mosaic in the way that the word is usually used. It is very large scale burning and that does not allow the fauna in those areas a chance to escape. As I said, this is planned extinction—nothing else. Unless we change how we do it, we are going to lose a lot of biodiversity. We already know biodiversity is being threatened by so many different things, yet we are doing an even worse job.

We have been told that fire exclusion zones have been set up. Last year I asked a number of questions and was told that fire exclusion zones have been changed every couple of years. The government decides to exclude different areas every couple of years and that is where it burns now. That is not what a fire exclusion zone is. A fire exclusion zone is a place where we do not put fire so that we can look at that area and see how it changes over five, 10 or 20 years and actually see the impact of not burning. We have a big landscape. We can do it. We do not have to worry that it might become a wildfire and get too close to towns because we have areas that are not located close to towns that can be managed to make sure that the fire does not get in there.

A lot of people working in the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions understand this, but it does not seem to me and to others that they are being listened to. The people on the ground are much more sensitive to what is happening, so why can we not hear their voice? Earlier I was talking about speaking up for people who do not have a voice. Some of those people without a voice are the ones who are working in our own departments.

I have met with those people a number of times and they often say, "Don't tell anybody that I have been talking to you about this, but here is some information you might want to know." It should not be that way. Why can we not talk to people who work in the department? Why can they not come forward and speak to their managers or even people several up the hierarchy and say, "This is what is going on." That is knowledge; it is information. If we work with integrity, honesty and respect, that is what we could expect. That is what I would like to see so that we can find the best practice for south-west Western Australia. We need the best practice for jarrah forests, karri forests, mixed forests and woodlands, because the practice of burning in each of those will be different and it will be based on current information and Indigenous information and everything in between. We can do it better.

I also want to say a few other words about forest bees, as I mentioned in my valedictory speech. I do not know how many people here know that we export live bees—I think they are kept very cold—to Canada, and possibly other places, because bees around the world are being lost. We could keep raising more and more. It is easy to do. We have 3 800 registered beekeepers, and I know there are many more who are not registered. It is another industry, but we need the forests and the flowers on those trees to feed the bees. It is not that difficult to understand, yet we are still stuck in the old ways of thinking that trees are something we cut down, even when we do not have a market for them and even when we have to chip them up or sell them as firewood because that is the best use for them. It just does not make sense at all.

Ecotourism is another thing we can do within our forests. People are getting down there. We are seeing so many city dwellers getting out into the country, especially if we have a shutdown. They flock down there. To show them the value of our natural landscape, our natural heritage, is fantastic. They bring back that knowledge and they tell people here how wonderful it is. Hopefully, they learn that we need to protect it, then.

As we said earlier, we are cutting down native timber way too fast. We do not need to cut down any of it. We can develop our plantations now so that they will support us into the future. We keep cutting down our native forests. Those big old trees—they are so big that it would take five or six people to reach their arms around them—are still being cut because they are not in an old-growth forest; they are just very old trees. We still cut them down, chip them up and send them overseas so that we can buy toilet paper. Wonderful! What an absolute waste. What we are doing down there is criminal. We continue to allow it to happen and try to justify it because of the timber industry, which has fewer than 500 people working in it. Many of those workers are truck drivers whom we need to drive trucks for other purposes around the state. These truck drivers could be doing something else. They could be driving our trains and then we would not need so many of them. They could be carrying out those small haul transport jobs so that they would not have to be away for long periods of time. We could have fewer trucks on our roads so that we would not have as many accidents and we would not have all the road widening that we are seeing.

In my last few minutes, I wish to say that if anybody is interested in fire and would like to find out more and would love a trip down to Margaret River, a fire and biodiversity forum will be held on 4 June. I advise everyone who has any interest in fire, forests or our future to show up.