

PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM — DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION

526. Mr F.A. ALBAN to the Minister for Environment:

Can the minister please update the house on the Department of Environment and Conservation's essential prescribed burning program?

Mr W.R. MARMION replied:

I thank the member for an excellent question. As people know, the member for Swan Hills has considerable properties in his electorate that are surrounded by bush, and he has a strong interest in prescribed burnings. The release of the Keelty report highlighted the significant responsibility shared by all Australians involved in bushfire mitigation and suppression. We have already started addressing some of the shortcomings identified in the Keelty report. One of the important things the Keelty report highlighted was this government's longstanding commitment to prescribed burnings. That is the primary bushfire protection method for protecting the south west of Western Australia.

As I have said in this house before, the Department of Environment and Conservation has a target of 200 000 hectares a year of prescribed burning. It tries to get through that each year. Last year, because of the dry winter we, unfortunately, could not start our prescribed burning until April, so we got through only 136 000 hectares. I can inform the house that over a 20-year average we meet 85 per cent of our target each year. I inform the house also that, despite last year's effort, I have asked the Department of Environment and Conservation to make a concerted effort this year to reach the target of 200 000 hectares.

I can report that prescribed burning has already started. Sixteen strategic prescribed burns immediately adjacent to residential and semirural areas have been carried out from April right through to last weekend. These are in Banyowla Regional Park, Kelmscott, Greenmount, Kalamunda, Glen Forrest, Lesmurdie and Rockingham Lakes Regional Park. I also report that the local bush fire brigade crews from Kalamunda, Sawyers Valley and Baldivis, as well as the joint FESA–local government–Rockingham community fire manager, have participated in a number of these burns as joint exercises. That is to improve the inter-operations and mutual understanding, as recommended by Mr Keelty.

I thank all the volunteer bush fire brigades for their assistance in implementing the government's prescribed burning program. Through DEC's rolling three-year, six-season prescribed burn program for the south west, which is updated twice yearly, this government is ensuring that prescribed burning in the Perth hills is a number one priority for this government. We are finalising the spring 2011 burn program and we have 20 potential burns scheduled in the urban–semirural fringe between Mundaring and Serpentine. We are focusing on smaller, highly strategic burns.

I also remind the house that in the 2011–12 state budget this government invested an extra \$5 million to bolster DEC's firefighting resources. This funding was for eight fire trucks, which adds to DEC's existing fleet of 104, prime movers and low loaders to transport the bulldozers and front-end loaders; and to purchase a skid steer loader and a new bulldozer. DEC's network of 13 fire-spotting towers is being boosted with a replacement of the ageing towers at Mowen, east of Margaret River, and Solus, which is near Serpentine Dam. Also, a new hangar is being built for the fire-spotting and water-bomber aircraft at Manjimup; DEC airstrips at Walpole, Shannon, Nannup and Dwellingup are being resurfaced; and, I say to the member for Bunbury, a purpose-built shed for DEC's mobile control centre facilities is being built at Bunbury.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Thank you, members!

Mr W.R. MARMION: In closing, if I can close —

Several members interjected.

Mr W.R. MARMION: If I am allowed to close: this government fully supports all our brave men and women from state and local governments, our professionals and our volunteers who stand ready to defend our community and the threat to bushland.

Mr F.M. Logan interjected.

Mr W.R. MARMION: This is a serious issue. Having personally been in a bushfire in the 1990s—I lived in the hills once upon a time, as the member for Armadale knows—I have nothing but admiration for the volunteer firefighters of this state.

Mr B.S. Wyatt interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Victoria Park, I formally call you to order for the first time today. Joining you in those ranks is the member for West Swan and the member for Warnbro. Both are formally called to order for the first time today.