

BUSHFIRE RISK MITIGATION STRATEGIES

283. Mr F.A. ALBAN to the Minister for Planning:

I am aware that the minister made an announcement last week about the new bushfire risk mitigation strategies. Can the minister update the house on what the Liberal–National government is doing to reduce the bushfire risk in new developments?

Mr J.H.D. DAY replied:

I thank the member for Swan Hills for the question. This is obviously of significant interest to residents of his electorate of Swan Hills and also my electorate of Kalamunda, the electorate of Darling Range and, indeed, much more widely in Western Australia, particularly in the south west part of the state. In fact, it is potentially an issue for residents of locations much closer to the coast and much closer to the Perth CBD, as some people might realise, on some occasions. The major inquiry into bushfire management issues was undertaken by Mick Keelty a couple of years ago following the major fires in Kelmscott, Roleystone and also Margaret River. Various recommendations were made that affected a wide range of areas across government. In relation to new housing developments in bushfire-prone areas, various recommendations were made that have been accepted by the government. As a result of that, from 1 May next year, a bushfire hazard assessment will be required to be undertaken for all new homes that are constructed in bushfire-prone areas. Depending on the assessment that is provided, the home will need to be built according to Australian standard 3959. A range of protections are provided within that, which vary depending on the level of risk identified. However, they include, for example, ember screens over air-conditioning units, window screens, sealing off eaves so that embers cannot enter under them, and also other protections such as ensuring all above-ground piping is made from metal materials rather than from plastic.

The Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner will have the responsibility of designating bushfire-prone areas.

Ms R. Saffioti: When is that coming in?

Mr J.H.D. DAY: This project is underway at the moment. Indeed, quite a lot of information has already been gathered by local governments and also by Landgate. But the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner, as I said, will have the formal responsibility of designating areas as being bushfire prone. Then, as I said, homes that are built in those areas will need to comply with the measures that I have just outlined. Where a home is being built in an area that has not been mapped but is within 100 metres of one hectare or more of bushland, then they will also need to comply with this change. There will be a change to all local planning schemes in the state; that will be effected through a regulation change, which is currently being prepared, and that will have the effect of enforcing this action to ensure that homes are built to such standards.

In relation to higher-level planning issues or the development of subdivisions in relation to high-fire risk areas, there is a new state planning policy, which is now out for public comment. That will provide the sort of measures that need to be taken into account in improving structure plans and also need to be considered in any planning scheme amendments. There are also revised guidelines out for public comment at the moment in relation to constructing homes in bushfire-risk areas and to state planning policy, and I encourage members and members of the public to go to the Department of Planning website to look at these guidelines if they are interested and wish to make a comment.

There was a comment made by the member for Girrawheen last week when we made this announcement expressing concern about any impact on the emergencies services levy. In fact, there is no real link between these two aspects. The emergency services levy and the category in which homes are located are determined on the level of fire response service that is provided rather than the actual risk that applies. In fact, some homes in high-risk areas pay a lower levy because they rely on volunteer fire brigades rather than career fire brigades. The concern that was expressed by the member for Girrawheen is, in fact, one that is not real.

I thank all of the officers within government who have assisted us in getting to this position. It is actually a very complex issue legally, and potentially logistically, to some extent. The officers from the Department of Planning and the Department of Fire and Emergencies Services, the Building Commission, Landgate, local governments and indeed staff in my own office have all played a very important role in getting to this point and I am pleased that we now have clarity about what is to be required in relation to residential developments and building construction within high bushfire-risk areas.