

PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM

Motion

HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West) [11.31 am] — without notice: I move —

That the Council —

- (a) recognises that a massive backlog in the prescribed burning program over the past two decades was a major contributing factor to the recent catastrophic wildfire at Northcliffe in the state's south west; and
- (b) calls on the state government to urgently re-examine Western Australia's current burn program and commit to a program of responsible and strategic controlled burns in order to protect lives, property and the forest biodiversity.

Hon Ken Travers: You move it and we'll second it.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: I thank Hon Ken Travers.

As members are well aware, we have debated prescribed burning on a couple of other occasions over the past 12 months. Last Thursday, Hon Rick Mazza and I went to a public meeting in Pemberton and heard the concerns of the local residents. The issues that were raised were very constructive about getting better outcomes for what we have seen as a drop in the prescribed burning program. Residents also raised concerns about where the program is sitting at the moment. Two motions were moved at the meeting. The first motion called on the state government to increase the level of prescribed burning, including night burns, and also to remove the amount of red tape. The second motion asked the government for a direct 20 per cent of the emergency services levy to help with the prescribed burning work within a kilometre of the towns.

This debate is about getting practical outcomes and getting things done this year. We are roughly a month away from winter, and then we will get the rain and everyone will forget about the matter. Then it will be spring and then summer will be here again and what will we be facing? We will probably be facing a similar situation to what we are facing now. Mr Roger Underwood, who has worked tirelessly for the Bushfire Front, made the comment at the meeting that nobody is in charge of forest care and it appears that nobody cares enough to fix the mess.

Firstly, I will talk about some of the residents and how they felt after the bushfire started. On Sunday, 1 February, according to my notes, Northcliffe resident Debbie Rudd wrote on her Facebook page —

We've lost power and home phone. Fire out the back being helicopter bombed. Generator has sprinkler going. Spot fires everywhere and flare ups. Fire getting closer. We have all sprinklers going.

Tash wrote —

Very scary with bulldozers making big firebreaks around the house and 12-plus fire trucks at the farm. Paddocks and bush all burnt.

Cathy wrote —

My mind is in turmoil right now ... our humble little cottage is still standing, but everything around it is lost.

These are just a few of the many comments posted on Facebook by the frightened and panicked Northcliffe residents who used social media as a way of expressing their feelings.

Northcliffe is a small town in the south west. More than 600 residents live in it and it was under imminent threat from a fire that was started by lightning. It has been well documented. Those fires happen every year, so it is a matter of how we counter those fires. At the time, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services reported that the fire was moving at about 500 metres an hour and there were spot fires about every 100 metres in front of it, so it was starting to gather momentum and heat. The president of the Shire of Manjimup, Wade DeCampo, urged the residents to leave. They did not have that long to evacuate.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! Hon Nigel Hallett has the call. Those members wishing to have private conversations should do so outside the chamber.

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: In a short time, which would have appeared to be an extraordinarily long time for the people involved, approximately 100 000 hectares were burnt. That is an area with about a 330-kilometre perimeter. About 40 properties were affected. We must acknowledge all the people involved from the fire and rescue service, the State Emergency Service, DFES and the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the professional firefighters who travelled across Australia to provide assistance.

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

We must continue to look at what could have been done earlier. In the annual burns of the 1960s and 1970s, some 350 000 hectares were burnt. In the 1980s it dropped to about 200 000 hectares, in the 1990s it was around 150 000 hectares, and in 2000 it dropped to under 100 000 hectares. A lot of that was due to public pressure. We had a very strong green movement. I note that members of the Greens are not even in the chamber today; I would have thought they would be a bit interested in this debate. A lot of those policies came from that era. It has been building up over many years.

The four principal concerns about forest management are, firstly, the lack of fuel reduction burning; secondly, the failure to provide basic fire protection to the thousands of hectares of regrowth forest; thirdly, the fatal decision to alter the focus of bushfire management from prevention and damage mitigation to a reliance on suppression; and, fourthly, the decimation of the then Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Department of Environment and Conservation in the forestry field and the fire administration system.

The fire expert said that 50 per cent of Northcliffe was burnt because the fire was in fuels that were 20 years old. The area of the fire to the south was burnt in 2012 and firefighters did not have to provide as much assistance to stop the fire in that area. Today, we are asking our firefighters to do the impossible—that is, to fight fires in extremely heavy fire loads. They cannot do it. One of the recommendations put forward was that this year we should look at securing the town sites within the area. That can be funded through the fire and emergency services levy. We can contract out that work to various private individuals. That is achievable, if it is the will of the government and the people. The second principal is to develop a strategic plan to start back-burning these areas. Once again, that can be done under contract. There are 400-odd professional, retired firefighters who have the experience and proven ability to do it. That can be done under the direction of the department. At the meeting, the chairman of The Bushfire Front Inc, Roger Underwood, received a standing ovation after outlining his view on where the bushfire fronts could go. The maps produced by the Department of Parks and Wildlife at the meeting showed that the vast majority of forests surrounding Pemberton, Northcliffe, Walpole, Eastbrook and Strachan have fuel loads in excess of 11 years. The residents of Pemberton are very concerned about these fuel loads. The main public building on the edge of the forest in Pemberton is a school. That will be the first thing to go. Residents are calling for a one-kilometre burn around the town. A petition is being circulated by Northcliffe resident Mr Mark Muir. That will be presented in the chamber in coming weeks. The petition will call on the government to implement a comprehensive burning program to a target of eight per cent a year, and provide adequate funding for day and night burning to ensure that this target is achieved.

Another issue raised was that a lot of the tracks or gravel roads through the forestry area have had logs placed across them. Backhoes have been used to dig ditches so that people cannot go through. It was to stop people entering the forest, but what it has also done is prevent firefighters from being able to get through to start back-burning et cetera. People who had to get passes to go into the area were waiting up to an hour and a half to two hours because of the line of people. In one incident, police stopped a government agency from taking a bulldozer in because they did not have a pass. It is pretty damn clear: if there is a bulldozer on the back of a truck that is attempting to go in, there is a job to do!

Hon Kate Doust: According to another bill we are dealing with, a bulldozer on your truck might mean you are going off to chain yourself to it in protest!

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: That is another issue.

We had to get a pass to go in but we were not ticked off when we came out. It is a fairly flawed system. I can understand the basis behind it, but it has to be better. When talking about turnaround times to and from Manjimup, it was not even located near the fire area. That caused a lot of frustration.

The intensity of the fire that Hon Rick Mazza and I saw certainly made us sit back and look. Where there had been prescribed burning, the fire was fairly gentle. At Mt Barker, the old trees from the 1937 fires were still above the forest, dead. We saw trees that were regenerating on the outside, generally smaller ones, but they were dead on the inside so will not come to anything. It was estimated that some of the temperatures where forestry had not been burnt were in excess of 1 200 degrees. That is the difference between a third-degree burn and a first-degree burn.

Another issue put forward about private contracting is that they could do six burns in a season. They could work two 12-hour shifts over three nights. The estimated cost for that would be about \$70 000; for the season, it would cost about \$1.4 million. The government has the royalties for regions program. It could pay for some of these things. A quick, isolated decision is needed. It would be great if that funding could come from royalties for regions. It is not a lot of money. The money is there for those types of things. I would certainly encourage the royalties for regions program to consider this.

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

Communications in the area was another huge issue. As we all know, the bottom end of the state is pretty devoid of communications. The helicopter crews were putting out the back-burning, but they did not know which was which as they were unable to communicate with the ground crew. Maybe we should look at putting in a tower and Doppler radar at Manjimup to connect all that southern area. It would cost between \$3 million and \$5 million. Is it good for the region? Yes, it secures the region. Why are we not looking at royalties for regions funding to put in a Doppler radar at Manjimup?

Hon Ken Travers: An excellent question. Have you ever got an answer to it, though?

Hon NIGEL HALLETT: I am getting there.

The departments are based in Manjimup, and Manjimup is a SuperTown. It is the obvious place to locate a Doppler radar. Once again, I encourage the royalties for regions program to look at popping a Doppler radar into Manjimup.

We looked at the helicopters. They did not fly at night. I am not sure why they did not fly, or whether there was not a second crew of pilots who could take over. There are night-vision capabilities et cetera. The coolest part of the day is when people can get on top of a fire.

Another issue was the statewide fire ban by the department. Not only were there fires in the south, including Boddington, there were also storms in the midwest. With the storms and thunderstorms up there, powerlines were brought down. Because there was a total statewide fire ban, Western Power was not able to get out into the paddocks to fix the power supply until the ban was lifted. That is some of the red tape that we have to grapple with. As a consequence of this tragedy in the south, these are some of the things that have come to the fore.

Yet another issue was the volunteer fire brigades. Some brigades from as far out as the eastern wheatbelt towns went to the Boddington–Manjimup–Northcliffe area. When they got there, they found that the department did not want to work with them. Some of them turned around and returned. The Cadoux fire brigade turned around and went home. I know one from the Corrigin area also turned around from the Boddington area and went home. That fire could have been contained to a hell of a lot smaller area if they had worked at night.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [11.48 am]: At the outset, I congratulate Hon Nigel Hallett on moving this motion today. I note that almost 12 months ago the honourable member brought a similar motion forward for debate in this house. At that time he called on the state government to urgently re-examine the process by which prescribed burning programs are implemented. Hon Paul Brown moved a similar motion a couple of weeks ago, or perhaps a month ago, about concerns around bushfires. I do not believe that since Hon Nigel Hallett's motion almost 12 months ago there has been much action from the state government on this issue. In fact I think we have seen very little action; hence I dare say the honourable member brought forward the motion on this issue again because this is a very important concern for the community, particularly in the south west corner of the state.

There are obviously two schools of thought or two very different views on bushfires in this state and how we manage them. On one side, the environmental movement is not in favour of targets; yet people such as Roger Underwood from The Bushfire Front on the other side is saying that we should have burning targets in this state. Personally, I tend to veer towards Roger Underwood's side of the debate. For a long time governments of both persuasions have had a notional target of about 200 000 hectares in this state. As Hon Nigel Hallett mentioned, it has been a long time since anything near that target has been reached. I think the last time was probably in about 2009 or 2010 when about 215 000 hectares were burnt off. Since then there have been years when only tens of thousands of hectares have been burnt. Although I have not been down to Northcliffe for a long time, I am told that not much work had been done there for a very long time and that may well have been one of the major contributing factors to the intensity and ferocity of the fire that occurred. There have been a number of significant bushfires in this state over the past few years. There was the fire in Margaret River a few years ago and there was the Perth hills fire. Following on from those two bushfires, the government commissioned the Keelty report, which was a fine report that recommended a series of changes in how we manage firefighting and prescribed burning in this state. At the same time as Mick Keelty put out his report, the government announced some extra funding of, I think, \$20 million-odd to tackle fire management and bushfire preparedness. When that was announced, the government intended to create an extra 28 firefighter positions to get towards our targets. Since then, on 9 October last year, the government introduced the one per cent efficiency dividend across the public sector. The government also announced a redundancy scheme targeting 1 500 employees across the state public sector. Although I am clear that the Department of Parks and Wildlife lost staff through that voluntary redundancy program, I am not clear whether any of those staff were firefighting staff. There is doubt in my mind that the efficiency dividend would have impacted on the department's ability to deal with the massive backlog in the prescribed burning program. The last figures I saw on fires and the amount of hectares burnt in prescribed burning were those provided in answer to a question from the member for

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

Fremantle last year. The question was asked during the year, so it was not a 30 June figure, but only 72 000 hectares had been burnt that year. As part of the question, the member for Fremantle asked about the number of employees, both permanent and seasonal, who had been allocated to the burns to get towards that 200 000 hectares. At the time she asked the question, 288 staff were tasked with assisting to reach that target. Before the time of the Keelty report, the number of employees was about 270, so even though the government promised an extra 28 firefighters in this space, the answers provided to Parliament showed that we did not in fact get those positions, or if we did get those positions, they have now gone—we have not had them since then. I recognise that this is a difficult job and I want to congratulate those workers in this area who help protect the state and regional communities, and who carry out prescribed burning. We have seen tragic loss of life over the past few years, but thankfully we did not see any in Northcliffe. It is a difficult job and we have to ensure that those workers are properly resourced.

There is a school of thought that the 200 000 hectares should be burnt. The other school of thought is that that should not be the case and that there should be targeting of burns. I agree that the burns should be targeted. Although it is said that these notional targets for burns are simplistic, I do not think that is the case. However, the burns should be targeted. It should be ensured that burns are done around human settlements and that they are a priority. I am not so sure that that has been the case in the past few years. We have to redouble our efforts. That is why Hon Nigel Hallett's motion today is very, very important. He calls on the state government to re-examine the burning program. Although he already did this a year ago, I hope that as a result of his motion today the government finally takes heed of the issue, listens to it and undertakes work to ensure that the resources we have are focused on the right areas and that there is a focus on saving and protecting lives and regional communities. It would help the community to have full maps showing where burns have happened—not just recently, but historically—available on a website so that we in the community can see the last time a burn happened nearby and we can be vigilant and bring attention to the fact that community X has not had a burn for a certain number of years. We could all encourage the authorities, the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the government to put more focus on the area. The full publication of maps showing burn history is important. Transparency in this area is vital; it is essential. I urge the government to take on that initiative. There also needs to be accurate information on how canopy-to-canopy fires caused by lightning strikes, which I think is what the Northcliffe fire was, will be halted by prescribed burning regimes that reduce ground leaf litter and fallen branches. Hon Joe Francis, the responsible minister in this area, has also raised this issue. This is an important issue. We should not be hiding behind any closed doors. We should be talking to the community about how vitally important this transparency is.

HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural) [11.58 am]: I know that this is the third time the issue of prescribed burning has been brought to the house, but I commend Hon Nigel Hallett for raising it again today. It is an example of what we should be doing with this issue—that is, raising it regularly. There is no doubt that in a few weeks' time there will be some rainfall, the green will come back again, everybody will breathe a sigh of relief and the issue will be put on the backburner, so to speak, until next time. However, the reality is that we are only a few months away from the next fire season and unless we do something about increasing our effort on prescribed burning and make sure there are plans in place to increase that effort, the same experiences we had this fire season will be repeated. This last year has been one in which there have been a lot of fires. A lot of fires were in the fringe metropolitan areas from the north of the city to the south. Of course, the Waroona bushfire threatened that community where there was a lot of fear for a number of days as firefighters tried to combat the fire. There is no doubt that fuel loads were one of the main issues in trying to deal with that fire. There was the Lower Hotham fire and of course the Northcliffe fire. Regarding the Northcliffe fire, when Hon Nigel Hallett and I visited the area, it was incredible to see 30-metre-plus tall karri trees absolutely burnt to the top. Volunteer firefighters told us that the crowning fire flames were at least at another 20 metres above that. It is just an incredible example of what a wildfire will do. The ground was white. It has been estimated that the temperature reached 1 200 degrees, basically sterilising the ground. It will take a long time for this area to recover.

The meeting at Pemberton Mill Hall was well attended with more than 200 people; indeed, some people were spilling outside. They expressed a lot of community concern and passion and almost universally agreed that there must be an increase in prescribed burning. Representatives from the Department of Parks and Wildlife attended the meeting and gave an example of how the department's prescribed burning program has gone over a number of years. It is very concerning to note that whereas 350 000 hectares were burnt annually in the 1960s—I hazard a guess that a lot of that came about after the royal commission into the Dwellingup fires, because prescribed burning was one of the recommendations—the number steadily declined to a target of 200 000 hectares in the 1990s. Of course, fewer than 100 000 hectares are now burnt annually. The Department of Parks and Wildlife representatives explained that 200 000 hectares amount to eight per cent of the forest. After a quick calculation, that is a rotation of about 12 years on average, so a lot of areas are not burnt for some time. If we are looking to reach half that, we are talking about an average burn cycle of between 25 years and 30 years, which increases

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

fuel loads. The school of thought in the 1980s and 1990s referred to by Hon Stephen Dawson objected to prescribed burns as a method of managing our forests. The people I spoke with at Pemberton said that a lot of those people do not turn up at meetings. A lack of prescribed burning means serious environmental consequences. Some environmentalists come from the school of thought that the department should not prescribe burn because it will harm the environment.

Let us explore some of the things that happened during the wildfire at Northcliffe. It was explained to us that because fuel loads reach a metre-plus—some of those areas were estimated to have not been prescribed burned for 50 years—the intensity of the fire ringbarked all the old-growth trees and they died. In addition, karri trees shed their bark on an annual basis and that bark builds up around the base to form an oven, which kills them. We have lost a substantial number of old-growth trees in 100 000 hectares of the south west. A couple of weeks ago, I drove along the back road from Harvey to Quindanning on the Harvey–Quindanning Road. About 20 kilometres into my journey, I came to the location of the Lower Hotham fires. It was just black; it looked as though a nuclear bomb had gone off. Everything right to the top of the trees was gone. When there is a prescribed burn, there is a cool burn trickling on the forest floor, but the canopy is retained and things recover quite well and animals have a chance to escape. The destruction was unimaginable. When I got out of the vehicle, I did not hear one bird or insect—it was completely sterile. That can be the effect of wildfires. As it was explained to us, one of the really alarming environmental outcomes of a fire such as the one in Northcliffe is that little birds, such as wrens, robins and wagtails et cetera, cannot escape. Many such birds were caught in the updraft of the Northcliffe fire and killed and dropped out into the ocean. Thousands and thousands of dead birds were reported along the ocean shoreline. That is one of the environmental consequences of not conducting prescribed burns. There is also the threat to lives and property. The Department of Parks and Wildlife used global warming and a drying climate as a reason for not doing prescribed burns on a regular basis and said that the window of opportunity for burning is smaller. I do not see that as a reason to not prescribe burn; rather, that is a reason that we should increase our efforts to prescribe burn. A drying climate suggests that we will have more chance of wildfires and lightning strikes for a longer period of time. When we do have that window of opportunity, we should redouble the effort.

The Department of Parks and Wildlife's workforce has diminished substantially. Thirty years ago, 530 people were involved in fire mitigation while the number now is 290. We have let the program drift. We need a good plan for prescribed burning because it is probably the only way that we can manage our forests. It was interesting to listen to old Jim Muir—I call him old because he is 94 years of age—who was one of dozens of Muirs in the hall that night.

Hon Ken Travers: A young bloke!

Hon RICK MAZZA: Just a young bloke!

He described with passion his experience as a young boy in the 1920s in the karri forests, which many of the early settler families had to manage themselves, and how beautiful the forest was with very little scrub in the bottom compared with what it is today. To use his words, he is disgusted with the management of the forests. I think we have to take heed and listen to him. We have let that slide over the past few decades. We need to move forward to improve our efforts so that we have regular prescribed burns. It is no good saying that all we need to do is burn around assets, such as towns, and leave the rest of it. The bottom line is that there are vast forest areas and if we allow fuel loads to build up, we will continue to experience those environmental disasters that I described earlier. The fire in Northcliffe became that much of a threat that we needed the assistance of 147 volunteers from Victoria, 161 volunteers from New South Wales and 82 volunteers from Queensland with the military providing a tent camp for everybody. I take off my hat to those firefighters—the Western Australian firefighters and those from around Australia—for putting their lives on the line. They put a lot of effort and work into fighting those fires. Some fires cannot be fought because of their intensity, and all firefighters can do is contain them and hope for the best. A fire with between 30-metre and 40-metre crowning flames cannot be put out with a hose. They have a lot of work ahead of them. We should assist them by making sure that there is prevention rather than a cure for keeping those fuel loads down.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! The amount of background noise is quite audible. I, for one, would like to hear what Hon Rick Mazza has to say on this important subject matter.

Hon RICK MAZZA: Thank you, Madam Deputy President.

Another thing that struck me during the meeting and from coming into contact with people from Fire For Life is that although these people are volunteers, they speak with passion and experience. Some have grown up with it because they come from a farming family and have had to look after the forest themselves. That is something I really admire. The effort and passion of the volunteers and the way they are getting political about this is also something that I admire. Fire For Life's belief is that it would be of great assistance to burn in two 12-hour shifts

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

by bringing in external Department of Parks and Wildlife crews to assist. It also suggests that a reasonable-sized burn would require an incident controller, an operations officer, a logistics planning officer, administration support, a runner, six strike teams, one section commander, two trucks, one machine and one operator, and accommodation for external crews plus resting and meals at a cost of \$73 000 per shift. A lot was said about night burns, which is something we should consider.

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [12.08 pm]: I thank Hon Nigel Hallett for again bringing this motion before the house. As other members have said previously, in June we dealt with a motion that was moved by Hon Nigel Hallett and in February we dealt with a motion moved by Hon Paul Brown, which reiterates the importance of this issue to members on this side of the house. In each debate we have raised different issues and pursued different avenues.

Obviously, this fire season has been difficult. I do not think I need to put this on the record, but I support a prescribed burning program in Western Australia. We focus a lot on the Department of Parks and Wildlife because it is responsible for the largest swathes of unmanaged reserves and unallocated crown land in the state, but we should not forget the parcels of land that are not managed by Department of Parks and Wildlife and that remain the responsibility of other agencies and private landowners. The Keelty review reinforced the strategy that Department of Parks and Wildlife was taking with the management of its burns. This issue was also pursued by the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations in July 2014, which also questioned the department's ability to meet its targets. Hon Rick Mazza mentioned the drying climate and the limiting factor of adjusting to the new international standards that were applied post the Margaret River fire and the Keelty review.

Resourcing restraints have been well canvassed today, and the local member and the Minister for Regional Development, Terry Redman, have made reference in the last few weeks to wanting to support an increase in the burn program with royalties for regions money. The Minister for Environment, Albert Jacob, has made similar comments, so I think this debate is a good one to reinforce that position. However, I want to talk about some of the other ways that we need to understand and manage risk in the environment. As a former firefighter, I know that there is a pyramid of risk, if you like. Obviously, life is at the top of that pyramid. A person's life is number one. The life of others is number two and then after that is property and the environment. That is always the way that firefighters look at any sort of emergency situation as to how they manage risk from a response perspective, but also from a mitigation perspective, and what is most important for them to target first.

The Keelty review referred to the tenure blind approach to risk management, which is quite a sensitive issue. It is something that I think will be well canvassed in the government's response to the concept paper on amalgamating the emergency services acts of Western Australia, which I expect the Parliament or the public will see later this year. That will be contentious, and it will be complicated and costly. Understanding the risk is probably the cheap part; actually mitigating risk will be more expensive. In my contribution in February, I talked about the role that local governments have to play in this. I do not want to be critical of local governments, but the Keelty review and some of the analysis since then has identified a real weakness within the state's emergency management plan—Westplan—Bushfire—and the responsibilities of local government as they relate to risk management planning. The state needs to take a greater role in supporting local governments to ensure that they have the planning processes in place to undertake and maintain that work.

It is very important that, before we mitigate risk, we understand it. In my contribution in February to a previous motion, I talked about the focus on Department of Parks and Wildlife lands. If members look at some of the tenure management maps surrounding some of our town sites in Western Australia—the immediate property, forests, landholdings and adjoining town sites where the highest life and property risks are—they will see that they are not DPaW-managed lands. I accept the argument that a lot of the hinterland is, and if a big fire with a head of steam and speed rushes through, some way of slowing down or stopping that fire is needed before it hits those high-risk areas. It is important we manage those hinterland DPaW-managed lands, but it is also important to understand what happens when a fire starts in a gazetted town site within fuel loads that are on private landholdings, on part of a river system or on Water Corporation land, right in amongst our high-risk property and infrastructure. In my view, we need to start with that pyramid of risk in mind and consider life, property and then the environment, in that order. It was good to hear the shadow minister's contribution today in his support for the prescribed burning program in this state.

A few issues were canvassed by Hon Nigel Hallett and he touched on the emergency services levy. I think the emergency services levy has been one of the great reforms in this space. One of the risks associated with the emergency services levy has been—it was flagged at the time—a greater expectation from members of the community about the service they get as a result. That was a concern then and that concern has been realised

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

over time. The emergency services levy is perhaps an avenue by which the government should consider how it can better resource our agencies and our local governments to understand and mitigate risk in our communities.

Hon Nigel Hallett talked about some financial issues. I think all regional members will be getting feedback from their communities and local fire services from across the state about some of the issues, particularly around the logistics relating to those big fires: how firefighters were fed, how they were transported, how they were used when they got there, how they were rostered on and off, and where they were accommodated. I encourage Minister Joe Francis and Minister Albert Jacob to really spend some time—it will also be costly—to make sure that consultation happens across the state post the fire season to take all of those views into consideration. I am talking to some of those volunteers and I think there would be reluctance by some volunteers and some groups to respond to these large-campaign fires next fire season based on their experience this fire season. We need to listen and we need to learn from that experience. Communication issues were raised. I am not sure that I have ever been to a fire at which communication issues were not a problem, whether it was in the form of radio communications, telecommunications or the communications from the leaders and bosses at control points and how they tasked crews. It is something that we continually need to work on and progress. Sometimes that is difficult. There are many different agencies, different command structures and sometimes different communication protocols. We are fixing some of that with the implementation of the Western Australian emergency radio network, but there is still some way to go.

Hon Nigel Hallett talked about firefighting helicopters, which is something that I have had a bit of experience with. I was involved in the air reconnaissance unit when I was employed by the then Fire and Emergency Services Authority. I can tell members that flying at low level in a helicopter at night would not be my cup of tea. The minimum safe level at which to fly in a fixed-wing or rotary aircraft is 1 000 feet above ground level. In reconnaissance aircraft, we were operating at about 100 feet, even with forward looking infrared. It is not a comfortable place to be for too long. We need to add to that night-time operations. My view, and I think the view of agencies across Australia, is that it is simply not safe to put our aerial crews into those situations. There probably is a space for night-time operations, but it is probably in different topography with different fires—perhaps in the rangelands where firefighters use large fixed-wing aircraft that can drop from a height and there are not a lot of obstacles to navigate.

I want to conclude on total fire bans, which Hon Nigel Hallett raised. I share his concerns about Western Power and its inability to operate on total fire ban days, as it is contrary to risk management. When there is a fault, Western Power is prevented from going into the field and investigating that fault because a total fire ban is in place. That fault, if left unchecked, could actually result in a ground fire. We need to do something that is based around allowing a standing exemption for Western Power to operate.

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West) [12.18 pm]: I would like to thank Hon Nigel Hallett for keeping prescribed burning front and centre of the government's agenda, although I would have expressed the first paragraph a tad differently than he has it. I was down south when the Northcliffe fire was raging; one feels absolutely helpless as a politician, because we know we cannot go into the area to do anything while the fire is raging. I listened to Sue Daubney from Bannister Downs—the Daubneys have a large dairy down there—who was talking about how the cows needed to be milked and how the milk needed to get to the producers. If it was not for Wade DeCampo, I do not believe that would have happened. Wade DeCampo is the young shire president in Manjimup and he was absolutely fantastic during that Northcliffe fire. I do not think he had much sleep, as he put people, their possessions, their properties and their animals first. He needs to be credited for doing that.

Our south west is a very fire-prone area. We have many fires every summer. Some get away, as this one certainly did. John Tillman, who works with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, also does a fantastic job. He was born and bred in the area, knows the area well and acts as a liaison between communities and firefighters. My congratulations go to all the fireys around the state, who did an amazing job. They work under pressure and in very dangerous circumstances with the local fireys.

There is still some friction over who takes charge and control during a large fire. That has more to do with it being a confronting situation and a dire emergency. The local people know where every back road is and they resent people who perhaps do not know the area coming in over the top of them. There was some talk after the Northcliffe fire about people not being allowed through roadblocks. That was probably done for obvious reasons but when locals who know the back roads are stopped from going through the roadblocks, it can be pretty traumatic for them, especially if they want to save their animals.

As a member of Parliament for some 14 years, I have been to many fires and debriefings in my electorate. I know that the government strongly supports prescribed burns as the main tool to reduce the impact of bushfires. It is crucial that we continue with our prescribed burns. Reducing fuel loads through a mosaic of burnt and

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

unburnt patches is essential to protect our communities. Our communities are on the edge of forests. Northcliffe is slap-bang in the middle of a forest. Further south to Windy Harbour is the D'Entrecasteaux National Park. When fires are started in the park, they burn for miles, which is what happened with the Northcliffe fire.

There has been limited prescribed burning in the vicinity of Northcliffe. A variety of fuel types and ages ranging from three years to more than 20 years was burnt by bushfire. This fire was started by a lightning strike in the area that was treated by a prescribed burn in December 2009. At the time that was burning, the Department of Parks and Wildlife was dealing with another 12 fires caused by lightning in the area from Walpole to north of Manjimup. That is a very heavy load on local firefighters. More firefighters have to be brought in. When a big fire rages out of control, it is very frightening for the community.

A number of factors have contributed to the decline in prescribed burning achievements in the Pemberton area over the past two decades. The government has said that a significant area of young karri regeneration forests located in this area are susceptible to fire and may be killed by fire. Prescribed fire within these regeneration forests can only occur after 15 to 20 years of regrowth. I suggest that the policy officer who wrote that needs to add a bit more to that statement or go back to school. The drying trend experienced by the state over the last few decades has resulted in southern forest types adjacent to karri forest drying more rapidly than in the 1980s and 1990s—we all know that—thus increasing the difficulty of safely implementing the planned prescribed burn and avoiding unintended fire escapes. Prescribed burning has become more complex, with the growth of communities, rural subdivision and interface, in particular with our fruit and viticulture industry. I know that it is a difficult balance but I would put the safety of the community first and foremost above any of that, given that the community must be taken into consideration as well because that is their livelihood. I am not discounting that. Certainly, safety comes first.

I would have liked to attend the meeting at Pemberton but I was in Parliament that day and I could not get a pair. Two members did go—Hon Rick Mazza and Hon Nigel Hallett. I understand it was a very good meeting. I am very pleased that our politicians were represented at that meeting because I understand that about 200 people were in the hall. Hon Rick Mazza mentioned Jim Muir. Hon Nigel Hallett mentioned a name that starts with “H”.

Hon Ken Travers: Hallett!

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Yes, I know, but I have forgotten the name of one of the key protagonists at that meeting. It is not going to come to mind. Hon Rick Mazza mentioned Jim Muir. Jim is certainly one of our elder statesmen in Manjimup. He has been a fantastic community member for many years and he certainly is not afraid to speak his mind. I am pleased to hear that he was there and still speaking his mind at the age of 93.

Prescribed burning during the key period of fruit maturity still requires careful consideration to minimise any impacts on individual growers. The Department of Parks and Wildlife continues to work with fruit growers. On the back of the Margaret River fires, the government required Parks and Wildlife to completely rebuild its process to ensure burns are in accordance with international risk management standards. Sometimes I think that the government is damned if it does and damned if it does not, especially when fires burn out of control. There is always more that can be done but in an emergency situation, the person on the ground in command makes those decisions on the day. We cannot please everybody in an emergency situation. Implementing that change caused interruption to the prescribed burning program. However, this was absolutely necessary to ensure that safer practices were put in place as well as to rebuild community confidence. In 2012, on the back of the Keelty inquiry, the Liberal government provided an additional \$32.9 million over four years to support the fire management capacity, including the employment of additional fire management specialists.

I turn to the second part of Hon Nigel Hallett's motion. The government has come back and said that Parks and Wildlife's current program aims to maintain 40 to 45 per cent of forest with a fuel age of less than six years, equating to a planned annual target of 200 000 hectares. As we have heard, sometimes it reaches that target but it has probably been about five years since that occurred.

HON KATE DOUST (South Metropolitan — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [12.28 pm]: I congratulate Hon Nigel Hallett for raising this issue again. I note that he raised this matter on 19 June last year and we had a very useful discussion about it. Hon Paul Brown canvassed a similar debate only a few weeks ago—on 26 February this year. This is a very serious issue. The fact that the member has had to raise the matter again clearly demonstrates his frustration as a member of the government—as a backbencher in government—at not being heard. The fact that today a number of other backbenchers have stood to support him and have expressed their frustration and concern about the way in which bushfires have been managed in the state—in fact, some members have been quite critical of what they have seen in those circumstances and the commentary coming from the departments—I do not understand why on these occasions not a single minister from the government has jumped to their feet to provide the member with a response, to provide him with a way forward and to

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Stephen Dawson; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Martin Aldridge; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon
Kate Doust

explain what the government is going to do to deal with future bushfire programs. It is indeed disgraceful, it is contemptuous, it treats members opposite as fools and totally disregards the communities of the south west and other areas that have been continuously hit hard with bushfires. It pays no heed to that very important meeting that was held in Pemberton, and the work being done by the bushfire group. It is unbelievable that a government backbencher puts forward a very sound motion expressing a view and calling upon the government to take action, and the minister representing the minister responsible has not bothered to get to his feet to articulate his view on this matter, express support or say what the minister is going to do. I daresay that we will move into another bushfire season, and the member will be no clearer about what the government intends to do to mitigate and prevent disasters similar to those that occurred in Northcliffe and other parts of the state this year. As I said in the debate in February, this has been one of the worst bushfire periods in living memory, and this government is failing to address the issues. Shame on the government for not responding to Hon Nigel Hallett. He has been very courageous in raising this issue again. He and his colleagues who work in those areas must be extremely frustrated.

Hon Martin Aldridge: Why don't you say something about the issue instead of bagging the government?

Hon KATE DOUST: I am saying something about the issue.

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order, members! When the Chair calls the chamber to order, members must come to order. It is not an invitation to continue a slanging match across the chamber.

Hon KATE DOUST: In the short time I have left, I have to say that the reason we have these debates is very important. It is a very important vehicle for the backbench of government to be able to raise matters of concern. There would be a full expectation from those people that the responsible minister would rise to his feet and provide an answer or some guidance about what the government intends to do to deal with that motion. It is not all that dissimilar from a grievance made in the Assembly. Government backbench members are not being treated with respect. Government backbench members, whether Liberal or National, need to have a serious think about how these matters are managed, and they should have a serious discussion about the lack of respect they are given by their own frontbench by the lack of response to these serious issues. It is not only about what happens in this chamber; it is about what happens in our communities, and I am concerned about what will happen in the future about the lack of engagement in better managing bushfires.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.