NUMBAT HABITATS — PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM

21. Hon TJORN SIBMA to the minister representing the Minister for Environment:

I refer to a prescribed burn undertaken by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions in Perup on 25 March, and subsequent reports of that burn's impact on one of two endangered numbat habitats.

(1) What specific planning and actions were undertaken by DBCA, and on what dates, prior to the prescribed burn, to protect the endangered numbat population?

(2) Will the minister table that information; and, if not, why not?

(3) What specific post-burn review was undertaken; how was that review undertaken, and when; and did that review estimate the impact on the numbat population?

(4) Will the minister table that information; and, if not, why not?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON replied:

I thank Hon Tjorn Sibma for some notice of the question. The following answer has been provided to me by the Minister for Environment.

(1)–(2) The DON 100 Weinup prescribed burn was a strategic burn that aimed to reduce fuel loads and protect nearby properties and biodiversity values from the impacts of bushfire. A comprehensive prescribed fire plan was prepared that met the requirements of the ISO 31000 international standard for risk management. The prescribed fire plan identifies a number of pre-burn, burn implementation and post-burn actions related to numbat habitat. DBCA has advised me that it recognises the high environmental values of the Weinup prescribed burn area, including the area providing important habitat for numbats. Managing the numbat habitat was a key consideration during the planning and implementation of the prescribed burn.

In July 2019, Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions staff met with adjacent property owners who had reported numbat sightings and physically marked the location of any known dens within and adjacent to the burn. In August 2019, known locations of dens were mapped. The burn was undertaken outside the period when numbats have young in their dens—typically from winter through to November. This approach was taken so the younger animals were mature enough to access refuge areas during the burn and post-burn periods. Marked dens were raked around by DBCA staff and protected by wetting down adjacent areas with fire hoses.

The burn was staged over an 18-month period commencing in spring 2019, and was carried out by burning a number of different cells at different times to achieve a mosaic of differing burn intensities across the area to maintain biodiversity, including fauna habitat. This was also achieved within the final cell where prescribed burning commenced on 25 March 2021. There are also identified actions regarding post-burn monitoring that are still programmed to occur over the coming months.

DBCA has invested significant resources into protecting numbats and their habitat over the past 20 years, with dedicated feral animal control and a partnership approach to a numbat breeding and release program with Perth Zoo. Managing numbat habitat, including through fire management, is also a key component of this ongoing strategy to protect numbats in the wild.

(3)–(4) DBCA is undertaking an operational in-field review of the DON 100 Weinup prescribed burn. I am advised that underlying soil dryness in portions of this burn area may have been a contributing factor to some areas having a higher fire intensity than was planned. Lessons learnt will be incorporated into future operations, which is consistent with DBCA' s adaptive management approach. DBCA has advised that all known numbat dens that DBCA and adjacent property owners identified prior to the burn were protected. In addition, DBCA has confirmed that it observed numbats before, during and after the prescribed burn. DBCA does not consider that this prescribed burn has impacted overall population numbers of the numbat, but has provided longer term protection of the habitat from the occurrence of severe summer bushfires that would likely result in longer term impacts to numbat habitat.