

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Ninth Report — “Western Australia’s Readiness for the 2011–12 Bushfire Season” — Tabling

MR A.P. O’GORMAN (Joondalup) [10.48 am]: I present for tabling the ninth report of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, titled “Western Australia’s Readiness for the 2011–12 Bushfire Season”.

[See paper 4248.]

Mr A.P. O’GORMAN: Before I start, I comment on the fires that we are experiencing down south and extend our condolences, if that is appropriate, to those people who have lost their possessions and houses. Hopefully, that fire will be under control by the end of the day or sometime earlier and we will have no further loss of property.

This committee began the inquiry after community discussions that followed the tabling in Parliament of “A Shared Responsibility: The Report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review”, which is commonly referred to as the Keelty report. The committee was concerned to report to Parliament before the beginning of the 2011–12 bushfire season on whether the main agencies were better prepared than during last year’s season and how many of the Keelty report’s 55 recommendations have been implemented. Following the Keelty report, the Premier told Parliament that the vast majority of these recommendations can and will be readily accepted by government. According to the latest stakeholder briefing available to the committee and the work of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet’s Keelty report implementation group, only nine, or 17 per cent, of the Keelty report’s recommendations will be completed by the start of this year’s bushfire season on 1 December 2011.

The committee heard that subsequent to the Keelty report all senior staff from the main agencies are participating in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet implementation group. In light of this, the police commissioner said in evidence, “I can say that, yes the state will be better prepared to deal with bushfires this summer.” The committee was also given similar assurances on preparedness by both the new Fire and Emergency Services Authority chief executive officer, Mr Wayne Gregson, and the Department of Environment and Conservation director general, Mr Keiran McNamara. This evidence from senior staff given to the committee is consistent in that Western Australia is better prepared for the forthcoming bushfire season than it was last year.

However, the committee also heard evidence from the United Firefighters Union of Western Australia that the union was concerned about a number of issues, and those issues went to staff training. To quote the United Firefighters Union —

We are concerned with the training levels provided to our middle managers; it is not up to scratch. The station officers ... get trained up and then they go on the trucks and receive very little training for the rest of their career. If they seek to get promoted to the next level as a district manager, who are the ones who get directly employed with the interagency fires, they do it without any formal training.

Further to this, I refer to the lack of staff and to the evidence of the united union of firefighters —

... before this week, appliances are getting decommissioned as we are leading into the [bushfire] season because they have not got enough staff. ... Because they have not resourced the fire service correctly over the last years, they are having a hard time getting those guys on those trucks all the time because of family commitments. ... and they cannot get enough people and they do not want to pay the overtime to get the people who are willing to come.

And referring to equipment —

...at the basic level we do not have enough radios for firefighters. If you look at the Police communications, they seem to be able to be in contact with individual officers anywhere at any time. We are lucky to have one radio or two radios for a full team.... we cannot track them. We believe that every firefighter should have his own radio to be tracked at all times, but that has not happened.

The union’s statements about poor training for FESA were recently backed up by the new CEO who was reported as saying that FESA staff needed more training and that “he was gobsmacked at some of the inadequacies within fire and emergency services” and “was astounded at the lack of training”.

The union made further proposals about additional staff and equipment resources needed in Perth and has suggested that on extreme and catastrophic fire days all FESA staff should be notified and, to again quote the union’s evidence, “should have them sitting on appliances [ready] to respond”. The union concluded its evidence

with a proposal that the state's fire services would be effective and well coordinated only if their control was brought under one agency.

Further to that, yesterday, and after the committee had finalised its report, the union provided the committee with some information about other state services. For example, Tasmania has a single fire service, which was amalgamated in 1979. It has professional and career firefighters; volunteers in small rural towns; retained volunteers with similar equipment; and all training is provided by Tasmania Fire Service. Queensland Fire and Rescue Service has a single commissioner and two organisational arms—career and retained volunteers, and rural fire. Queensland Fire does all the training. The document provided lists the processes in place in each state. The union is pushing the view that one agency should be responsible for fire.

The union also discussed inadequate information technology equipment on fire engines. Unlike the WA vehicles, the state's fire engines have no global positioning systems on board, as the existing mobile data terminals are being replaced. According to the union evidence, their Victorian counterparts have the ability to print out from their control centre into their trucks a map as well as having an electronic system and radio guidance to attend fires.

To again quote the union's evidence, FESA —

... fire crews have to use a road map to find the fire. At the beginning of last year, I believe, they stopped producing road maps, so FESA actually had a bit of trouble trying to get road maps for the fire crews. As funny as it sounds, it was quite a serious thing, ... that the organisation has not kept up with technology and allowed that to happen.

I refer to the lack of fire stations with two fire engines and pump stations. To quote the union's evidence again, in my electorate —

Joondalup has a fire engine, a light tanker and a medium tanker. We are saying they need the extra fire engine, which gives them an extra four people and also that extra response. ... we had a Joondalup fire engine respond to Kelmscott [bushfire], so there was no [fire engine remaining] in Joondalup. That is quite dangerous. If you look at the area around Carabooda, it is not a lot different to the areas around Kelmscott. ... In any small fire starting there, the time response to get from Duncraig up to the Joondalup area, the fire becomes major and we have another major problem.

On the lack of petrol tankers, the committee was also told that every fire station used to have its own diesel pumps but that FESA now relies on public fuel stations to get fuel using a fuel card. To again quote from the United Firefighters Union —

I attended a chemical spill in the basement of a warehouse in Fremantle; we were there for some eight hours trying to evacuate the fumes from the building. The fire engine ran out of petrol twice, and the card we had would not work. I had to go and beg the attendant at the petrol station to allow us to fill the fire engine to go back to the incident. He was not the owner and he said, "I can't do anything unless you have an authorised card."

On the lack of earthmoving equipment, the committee was told —

FESA does not have its own earthmoving equipment. It is absolutely absurd that we have to try to rely on begging, borrowing and stealing it from either local government or CALM, or trying to get a contractor in. There is skill in putting in firebreaks in a fast manner, and so you need someone who has experience in doing those sorts of things. FESA should have its own earthmoving equipment in reserve.

On the lack of progress by local government, 21 or nearly 40 per cent of the Keelty report's recommendations were addressed directly to the Western Australian Local Government Association or generally to local government. WALGA's chief executive officer sits on the State Emergency Management Committee and is currently involved with the DPC implementation group and working groups. The committee found that WALGA seems to have made less effort to comply with the Keelty report's recommendations than have state government agencies such as FESA and DEC. WALGA is particularly concerned about the impact on its members' insurance coverage if they take action on the recommendations. WALGA is more concerned about what the insurers will do than it is about life and property in local government areas. To quote the evidence from the CEO of WALGA —

Our insurers have asked us to be very cautious about picking up or taking on any responsibility without first ensuring that there are no liability issues ... everyone accepts and appreciates the need for having better communication and education, so that is not an issue. However, there is a concern that if there is any transfer of responsibility, there may then be liability issues. The insurer's legal firm ... has undertaken a very detailed assessment of liability issues in this report.

The other concern of WALGA is that, although its members have an interest and a willingness to implement the Keelty recommendations, it does not have the resources or the funding to implement some of them.

Everybody knows that this has been a very wet year and the weather was also addressed in the Keelty report, which, according to my notes, indicated that evidence it had received from the Western Australian regional office of the Bureau of Meteorology provided data to suggest that the Perth Hills and the immediate area are undergoing significant climate change when viewed over a 30-year period.

The Department of Health report “Health impacts of climate change: Adaptation strategies for Western Australia” notes that there will be more bushfires and that in the south west the number of days with a temperature over 35 degrees will increase from the current average of 27 by a range of one to 20 additional days. Information from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre suggests that for much of Western Australia there will be above normal fire activity because of the likely re-emergence of a La Niña weather pattern.

I will move on to talk about some of the report’s recommendations. To more accurately reflect the nature of evidence given by witnesses and to build upon the recommendations of the Keelty report, the committee has addressed the progress on all of those events when implementation is not anticipated before the forthcoming bushfire season. It is anxious that the inquiry recommendations articulate a framework for continuous improvement for bushfire seasons to come. To restrict our recommendations to this year’s season may signal a lack of urgency to finish the good work initiated after the Keelty report was tabled.

The committee’s report recommends urgent changes to the Emergency Management Act 2005, the Bush Fires Act 1954 and the Conservation and Land Management Act 1984 to ensure a more effective response from the state’s main firefighting agencies. The report’s 21 recommendations included the following: the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and the Minister for Environment report to Parliament by December each year as to the state of readiness of the main state government agencies tasked with fighting bushfires; the Minister for Emergency Services introduce by the 2012–13 bushfire season psychological testing of all FESA career staff and bushfire and rescue volunteers; and the Minister for Emergency Services ensure that a whole-of-government equipment register of the firefighting equipment held by FESA, DEC and local government authorities is in place for the 2012–13 bushfire season. A further recommendation was that in implementing the Keelty report’s recommendation 42, the Ministers for Emergency Services and Environment jointly report to Parliament by May 2012 on the likely impacts on, and implications for, the future bushfire operations of the state government of the drying climate in the state’s south west region. The next recommendation is that the Minister for Emergency Services commission an independent report to Parliament by June 2012 on the best practices in other jurisdictions to increase the rate of residents who are likely to be affected by a bushfire who properly prepare their properties before the bushfire season.

There was also a recommendation about WebEOC, which is a program that runs during an event. Every aspect of the event is recorded on the web. It seems to be a relatively cheap mechanism for recording some of those things. Recommendation 14 states —

The Minister for Emergency Services ensure that FESA has the funds to implement the installation and use of WebEOC for use during the 2011–12 bushfire season and immediately put in place common protocols with the Police and DEC to record significant events during a bushfire.

The committee was very strongly of the opinion that all agencies should be on the same wavelength. They should get the same information at the same time. The police have WebEOC in place. I believe DEC is also in the process of introducing WebEOC. We think that FESA should be brought online with WebEOC rather than looking at any other type of web-based facility to record information about incidents.

The final recommendation I will mention, recommendation 5, states —

The Minister for Local Government have urgent discussions with the Western Australian Local Government Association ... as to why they are not supporting the full implementation of the recommendations addressed to local government in the Keelty Report. The Minister ensure that by May 2012 WALGA and its member councils have the resources to fully implement the recommendations.

It is important that WALGA, as one of the agencies that supports the bush fire brigades in our community, actually grabs the Keelty report with both hands and runs with it, but to be able to do that and to allay the fears of its insurers, the government should provide some resources to WALGA to undertake those recommendations as per the Keelty report.

I thank the committee staff, Dr David Worth and Ms Jovita Hogan, for their effort on this. This was an additional inquiry that we thrust upon them while we were still doing a housing inquiry. Both of them have performed admirably and have managed to pull together this report in a very short time with very little additional resources. I also thank the other members of the committee: the member for Ocean Reef, who is the deputy chair of the

committee; the member for Morley; the member for Girrawheen; and the member for Pilbara. All the committee members worked very hard on this report. I congratulate them on being able to get this report out before the start of the 2011 bushfire season. Once again, as I said, it is unfortunate that we are delivering this report this morning against the background of a major bushfire in our south west. We hope that is brought under control as quickly as possible and that there is no further loss of property and that those people in the south west get back to their normal living habits. I commend the report to the house.

MR A.P. JACOB (Ocean Reef) [11.04 am]: I would like to make some comments on the report as the deputy chair of this inquiry. Because I ran out of time when speaking about the inquiry’s housing report the other week, I begin by acknowledging Dr David Worth and Ms Jovita Hogan for their excellent work in pulling this report together. They have done an outstanding job in bringing this report together in such a short time. Any critique of the process or the content of the inquiry which may follow in no way reflects on them.

In speaking to this report, I wish to acknowledge that much of the Margaret River community is currently tackling this very issue on the ground. Many Western Australians continue to be faced with the very real risk from one of nature’s wildest forces as I speak. About 10 years ago, I had the opportunity of working at the coalface in tackling bushfires at the Carramar fires, where many homes were lost, and also at the Nowergup fires. I have seen the amazing dedication that both our career firefighters and volunteer firefighters bring to their role as well as the work done by all the other important roles that are required in the management of these high-stakes situations. I have also seen firsthand the effects that these incidents have on the community that they impact and how many residents often rise up and show the very best of human spirit in these circumstances. As we address this report, I would again like to acknowledge and thank those people who are on the ground right now working to save property and ultimately lives in the south west and working to try to contain one of the more terrifying forces of nature.

In speaking to this report, I was very sceptical about this particular inquiry from the outset. Mr Keelty in his report admits that even he could have done with more time. He held almost 50 hearings with almost 100 witnesses over three months. We were initially going to have only four hearings on the first terms of reference that came through. This was only extended to six at my request, specifically to include the union, whose comments, I think, gave the most to the inquiry. We also sought to pull this whole inquiry together in only a short handful of weeks. Indeed, I bring to the house’s attention that this is the seventh such report in Western Australia in the past seven years.

The Keelty report was tabled only three weeks before the commencement of this inquiry, yet this inquiry’s terms of reference had the audacious premise of seeing how many of Keelty’s recommendations had already been implemented. These are recommendations for which Keelty had given government two years to report back on their implementation. But here we as a committee were saying, “It’s been three weeks. What have you done?” I am concerned that we are sailing dangerously close to saying, “Forget Keelty. Here’s how we think we should be doing it.” When the local public recommendations in the Keelty report are taken out, the state government is already more than one-third of the way through implementing Keelty’s recommendations. Ultimately this inquiry has found that the government is doing quite a good job in progressing the recommendations of the Keelty report. I encourage the government to continue to focus on the timely implementation of these reforms.

The last thing that we needed, I believe, was another review. What we actually need is some clear air while the government implements the very good roadmap that has been provided to it by the previous six inquiries. I again point out that the government is making very timely progress on the implementation of the recommendations of the previous six inquiries. In fact, many of those inquiry recommendations were already almost all the way through implementation. Another inquiry in the middle of this implementation process, in my opinion, only serves to confound the process.

Whilst I acknowledge that the chapters of this report have been structured to reflect the terms of reference, the recommendations before us today are wildly outside the inquiry’s terms of reference. Even at a fundamental level, the premise for this inquiry was to look at the preparedness for the coming fire season, yet out of 21 recommendations that were brought down, only one, recommendation 14, complies with that premise. I would say that recommendation 10, which is the WebEOC one, is quite a good recommendation, but again I believe this is already well down the path of being implemented, and it should be able to be implemented for the coming fire season. I strongly hope that it is.

The rest of the recommendations can, in my opinion, be more or less summarised as a rehash of the Keelty recommendations, with slightly curtailed time frames. I do not disagree with the overall intent and direction of this report and, as such, I do not have any intention to produce a minority report. However, with the exception of recommendation 14, I do not think that this report has come up with anything particularly new or even constructive for the upcoming fire season which was not already well known to us all and well down the path of

being implemented, and which had not been already picked up in the previous six reports. I encourage the government to continue to focus on the implementation of the Keelty report. It is my hope that this committee's inquiry will not be too much of a distraction as the government continues to progress Keelty's important recommendations in a timely manner.

In closing, we are all very aware that the fire season has already come upon us, and my thoughts and prayers go out to the Margaret River community and to the more than 400 emergency service workers and volunteers on the ground right now, trying to tackle these fires. It is my hope that the focus will continue to remain on ensuring that our emergency service workers and volunteers are well resourced and equipped to tackle the challenges which are before us right now and those which will most likely arise over the coming bushfire season.

Debate interrupted.

[Continued on page 9860.]