

PUBLIC HEALTH BILL 2014

Report

Bill reported, with amendments.

WAROONA–YARLOOP BUSHFIRES — FERGUSON REPORT

Statement

HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West) [6.19 pm]: Last week Euan Ferguson released his report on the Waroona bushfire. I congratulate him because I think it was a very frank and honest report into the Yarloop and Waroona blazes. I also thank the residents, many of whom were under stress as they lost their homes and businesses, for contributing to this report by telling their stories, some of which were in the form of written submissions and some were in formal hearings. As stated in the Ferguson report, the current arrangements are failing the cornerstone of rural fire management in Western Australia. It is not about picking at a government; it is about a total look by government at this problem. We have to respond quickly to it. The creation of a separate rural fire service as an interim management measure could happen relatively quickly.

Euan Ferguson also addressed the dangerously high fuel loads across many parts of the state. He noted in his report —

... the annual burning targets in every zone, in almost every year, have not been met.

I do not believe we can wait another three months for the government to respond to this report, when we consider that the report was released in April and it is now July.

I think we can re-empower our local communities and utilise the extensive experience of our local brigades and also adjust expenditure away from fire response towards prevention and fuel management. I also believe that the Minister for Emergency Services must, as a matter of urgency, do everything within his power to restore the confidence of the local communities and protect the towns and forests from future destructive bushfires. The minister has the power to redirect Department of Fire and Emergency Services funds to local shires and, in conjunction with the volunteer bushfire brigades, assume control of firefighting services and reduce heavy fuel loads within local municipalities. DFES must take the lead and provide extra funds to local brigades to secure the urban interface of every south west town. As a minimum, a one-kilometre radius, or buffer zone, around urban areas is required.

Judging from this report and the discussions in this house, there is no doubt that the whole firefighting system in Western Australia needs to be overhauled. Although I appreciate that the recommendations for strategic change will take time to implement, we can, in coming months, ramp up the prescribed burning program and reduce the unacceptably high fuel loads in many parts of Western Australia. If we appointed an interim rural fire chief, he could start working on fuel reduction and fire preparedness leading up to the 2016–17 season. As was quoted in the Ferguson report, fuel management around Yarloop was a disaster waiting to happen. He also identified that land directly north east of Waroona had not been control-burnt for some 40 years. With this amount of fuel on the fire, firefighters are rendered pretty powerless. They have to tackle fires burning under heavy fuel loads in extreme conditions and it is virtually a mission impossible.

We have a number of highly qualified and respected fire experts in Western Australia who could manage fire mitigation over the next three to six months. It would be a small price to pay for their wealth of knowledge and experience. People like Roger Underwood, Rick Sneeuwjagt and Peter Keppel, who is currently based in Manjimup and is not retired but is on the point of retiring, would look at doing a bit of extra time. They have decades of experience in bushfire research, prevention and control.

The Yarloop–Waroona fire was estimated to have cost some \$155 million. We also must address the issue of access to crown land. After the disaster in the Esperance and Yarloop–Waroona fires, access to crown land and reserves is a key issue for local landholders. Farmers want and should be able to prepare and maintain permanent firebreaks in bushland bordering farming properties. It is imperative that firefighting brigades be given permission to move machinery, vehicles and equipment onto crown land before this coming fire season. These fires would certainly have been much smaller if this had been allowed. It is a simple commonsense approach that will save property and, most importantly, lives. The use of private resources, such as farmers, foresters and contractors, cannot be overlooked. The inquiry discovered that the town of Yarloop had one of the highest ratios of earthmoving equipment to resident populations in Australia, but it was not called upon. An equipment and asset inventory by local shires could play a major role in reducing loss of property and life. As noted in the report, discouraging the use of private units on the fireground is disempowering and fails to build local resilience.

The role of local government will be crucial to the success of a separate fire service, and I commend the Shire of Murray for taking the initiative in allocating funds to upgrade the Wheeler airfield. During the Waroona fire, the Wheeler airstrip accommodated over 440 aircraft movements and allowed for the supply and

transportation of 1.2 million litres of water into the fire zone. I think we owe it to the members of the community who have lost their homes and been severely affected to act quickly, and this will ensure that further communities are protected in this coming season.

I reiterate that we must address the dangerously high fuel loads in the south west as quickly as we can by appointing an interim fire chief to work specifically on fuel reduction burning; redirecting DFES funds to local shires to reduce fuel loads in conjunction with volunteer bushfire brigades; establishing a local government inventory of private equipment to be used in firefighting operations; and reducing red tape and streamlining the permit process to carry out fuel reduction burns on crown land. Given that fuel management was one of the most common issues raised during the inquiry, I believe the government has an obligation to undertake some of these changes immediately.

The PRESIDENT: I had Hon Jim Chown next. To explain, I think it is fair that we give the backbench an opportunity to get the call in these debates.

Hon Sue Ellery: And across the house.

The PRESIDENT: And across the house. Then I will go to the Leader of the Opposition.

Hon Sue Ellery: That is not across the house.

The PRESIDENT: We cannot be perfect.

Hon Jim Chown: But we try to be.

The PRESIDENT: We try to be. We try to be close.