

Response to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee Report: *Western Australia's Readiness for the 2011-12 Bushfire Season*

This joint response is provided by the Minister for Emergency Services, Minister for Environment, Minister for Planning, Minister for Police and Minister for Local Government.

General Progress in Implementing Keelty Report Recommendations

The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee's (CDJSC) Report on *Western Australia's Readiness for the 2011-12 Bushfire Season* was critical of the speed at which the recommendations of the Keelty Report were being implemented. It stated that only 9 out of 54 recommendations (or 17%) would be implemented by the start of the 2011-12 fire season on 1 December 2011.

In drafting the Report, the CDJSC relied on a Stakeholder Briefing that had been released on 13 October 2011. This Stakeholder Briefing was not the current version and between its release and 1 December 2011 there had been significant progress in implementing Keelty Report recommendations. Stakeholder Briefings are distributed regularly to all interested parties, enabling them to inform, influence and support the bushfire management reforms.

It is simplistic, and perhaps misleading, to simply count the number of 'completed' recommendations as a measure of readiness for the bushfire season or progress in implementing the Keelty Report recommendations. For example, the implementation of many recommendations involves a number of activities or steps that may well reflect significant progress notwithstanding that implementation might not be entirely complete. Also, in many cases the bushfire review working groups, established to oversee implementation of specific recommendations (with state government, local government and volunteer representation), have identified the need to look beyond simply implementing the literal wording of a recommendation to achieving the real intent and potential of the recommendation. This means that recommendations that could easily have been designated as complete are still being implemented.

It is also important to note that all relevant government agencies, the WA Local Government Association and volunteer associations are in agreement over the approach being taken to implementing the Keelty recommendations. In particular, early in their considerations the working groups agreed on which recommendations needed to be implemented before the current fire season and which could be implemented with less urgency. For example, it was collaboratively determined that some changes to policies and procedures needed to be made prior to the commencement of the current season, while other changes would have been problematic (and possibly counter-productive) to make immediately prior to this bushfire season as they would have required significant operational changes and training to be effective.

In addition, the volunteer associations have strongly expressed a united view that it is important to ensure appropriate consultation and that timeframes should be extended to allow for this. They have stated to the Government that, while there is an imperative for some measures to be in place for the current bushfire season, there is also a need for a long-term perspective. The agreed view is that implementation of the more fundamental recommendations should not be compromised by undue and ultimately counterproductive haste.

It also has to be taken into account that, while there has been and will continue to be significant input by all parties into implementing the Keelty Report recommendations and associated reforms, ongoing responsibilities need to be undertaken commensurately. Since July 2011 to the date of writing, there have been over 3,900 bushfires to which the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA), the Department of Conservation and Environment (DEC) and/or volunteer bushfire brigades have had to respond. Some of these bushfires were major fires, including those at Ellensbrook, Milyeannup, Carnarvon and, most recently, at Babbington. Subsequently there have been Post Incident Analyses and a second Keelty Review, also consuming significant agency resources.

Currently 27 of the 55 Keelty Report recommendations have been 'implemented or substantively addressed'. Of the remaining 28, 18 were designated for completion after the current bushfire season, but have nonetheless been the subject of considerable collaboration and progress.

Actions and reforms to date include:

- The significant improvement in the working relationship between FESA and DEC. This had been formalised by a signed heads of agreement between the agencies dated 4 November 2011.
- A major state-wide exercise involving state government agencies, local governments and the community was conducted on 8 November and will inform future planning and responses.
- A number of important changes to key policies and procedures to provide more effective and coordinated responses to bushfires.
- The State's utilities giving a high priority to identifying and reducing the bushfire risk to critical infrastructure, to better protect essential services.
- Improved arrangements for communicating the loss of home and possessions to persons gathered at evacuation centres have been developed with a view to increasing privacy. In addition, a debrief of residents evacuated during the Roleystone fires has been conducted.
- Significant work had been undertaken in providing additional information and education about bushfire risk and management to those in high risk areas.
- An assessment of existing bushfire risk identification and management systems in WA.

These recommendations no longer require oversight by the Bushfire Review Implementation Group, comprising relevant Government chief executives and chaired by the Director General of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, established by Cabinet to oversee consideration and implementation of the Keelty

report recommendations. Their ongoing maintenance and review has become part of the core business and responsibilities for identified agencies.

There are a number of other reforms which involve legislative change. While the thrust of these reforms have been agreed to, legislation will take some time to be developed and enacted. Relevant recommendations include:

- The creation of FESA as a department.
- The creation of a Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner.
- Authority for the chair of the State Emergency Coordination Group to declare an emergency situation.
- Clarification of police responsibilities during bushfires.
- Improved management of fire hydrants.

The Government made an early and strong commitment to work with the community in the assessment and implementation of the Keelty Report recommendations, and not to ride roughshod over them. This commitment is being honoured and, while open and genuine consultation is time consuming, in the long-term it will result in a more effective and enduring reflection of Mr Keelty's intentions and recommendations.

Interoperability of Agencies

Through the bushfire review working groups, there is a strong focus on co-operation between and interoperability of government agencies. The heads of agreement between FESA and DEC will be a catalyst in achieving this.

Government agencies have increased joint exercising and, as noted earlier, a major joint exercise involving government agencies, local governments and the community was held on 8 November 2011. As part of this, six exercises ran concurrently in different regions.

Interoperability has also been improved by DEC facilitating joint operations with volunteers and local governments to conduct strategic prescribed burns in bushland adjoining urban areas. These burns have also involved FESA officers where possible.

The recent Carnarvon fires also provided a good example of improved interoperability between state government agencies under very difficult circumstances. Significant support was provided by local governments, volunteers, pastoralists and local companies and contractors.

The various bushfire review working groups continue to examine and address a variety of issues which will further improve interoperability between government agencies and go beyond the Keelty Report recommendations. These include:

- The development of an integrated, tenure-blind, approach to bushfire risk identification and management.

- A review of advisory and consultative arrangements for inclusion in the proposed FESA department.
- Identification of communications, equipment and skill development issues which will contribute to improved co-ordination in responses to bushfires.
- Encouragement of greater staff mobility between FESA and DEC.

Integrated Fuel Load Assessment and Management

There are a number of Keelty Report recommendations that deal with fuel load identification, mapping and management. Bushfire risk identification and management is a critical issue and one that requires a strategic and measured approach in order to achieve an effective long-term solution.

In this regard, the Bushfire Review Implementation Group has established a project team to develop proposals for an integrated bushfire risk management system. The project team consists of state and local government representatives and a volunteer representative. This project covers a number of Keelty Report recommendations, but will go beyond these individual recommendations to develop a comprehensive and integrated bushfire risk management system for WA.

Two of the bushfire review working groups are focused on bushfire risk mitigation and management, and the project team will report to these working groups.

Declaration of Bushfire Prone Areas

In relation to recommendation 3 of the Keelty Report, it is not within the power of the Department of Planning and the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) to transfer responsibility for declaring bushfire prone areas to the WAPC, as this action requires amendment of legislation including the *Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1960*. Furthermore, the project team established to develop proposals for an integrated bushfire risk management system will be examining the appropriate body to declare areas bushfire prone. Amended legislation may then follow the outcome of this decision.

Involvement of Volunteers

Volunteers are playing a critical role in implementing the Keelty recommendations. They are represented on the Bushfire Review Implementation Group and all of the working groups. Their input and understanding of bushfire mitigation and response is integral and highly valued. Issues such as volunteer access to training, equipment, exercises and recognition of their role have been or are being addressed.

Public Information

The statement in the CDJSC Report that agencies are making 'slow progress' in implementing the Keelty recommendations relating to public information is incorrect.

This is an area which was given high priority by the bushfire review working groups before the 2011-12 bushfire season and substantial work has been undertaken to provide bushfire information to the public. For example, work undertaken on the recommendations listed on page 63 of the CDJSC Report includes:

- Recommendation 7 – FESA has increased its distribution of *Prepare. Act. Survive* (PAS) in high risk areas; 94,500 copies of a revised PAS have been distributed and the document is under constant review. In order to reach more people, other methods of distributing this information have also been adopted.
- Recommendation 8 – local government does and will continue to include bushfire information with rates notices, with many councils also providing additional information at other times of the year using alternate methods.
- Recommendation 9 – bushfire information was sent to real estate agents in high risk areas. Fact sheets were distributed to over 10,000 tenants in rental properties in high bushfire risk locations.
- Recommendation 10 – the Education Department has incorporated bushfire education in the school curriculum in high bushfire risk areas and is working with non-government schools to do the same.
- Recommendation 12 – use of mobile message boards was reviewed and found not to be a viable option. An alternative and more comprehensive total fire ban communication strategy, including the use of fixed message boards, has been agreed upon and implemented.
- Recommendation 33 - work has been ongoing between FESA and the ABC, and considerable work has gone into enhancing emergency warning messages.

Implementation Timelines

A number of the recommendations in the CDJSC Report contain timelines. As stated earlier, many of the recommendations in the Keelty Report require a collaborative approach that is thoroughly researched and takes into account the views of all stakeholders. While it is recognised that the recommendations need to be implemented as soon as possible, stakeholders agree a measured approach is required to ensure effective long-term solutions are achieved.