

**PROJECT VESTA - HIGH-INTENSITY EUCALYPT FOREST FIRES**

*Statement by Minister for the Environment*

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah - Minister for the Environment)** [2.14 pm]: On 2 November I had the pleasure of releasing the findings of Project Vesta, Australia's largest and most comprehensive research project into the behaviour and spread of high-intensity eucalypt forest fires. The project brought together scientists and technical expertise in forest fire behaviour from the Department of Environment and Conservation, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, and New Zealand. It was supported by the Australasian Fire Authorities Council and its members across Australia and New Zealand, as well as the local shires of Harvey, Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Mundaring.

It took seven years to plan and carry out Project Vesta. It included more than 100 experimental fires and 6 000 detailed measurements of fuel load and fuel structure at two sites in the south-west forests of Western Australia.

Project Vesta has led to the development of a new fire behaviour model that predicts the rate of spread, intensity and spotting distance of bushfires in dry eucalypt forests burning under high fire danger conditions. The research has also provided a better basis for assessing the benefits of fuel reduction burning and other fuel management treatments that reduce the difficulty of suppressing fires and protecting assets as well as more accurate mapping of the threat of wildfires to communities and local assets.

It is expected that the cost of the research will be outweighed by the potential savings to towns and communities and the environmental assets that can be achieved through improved fire management - fuel hazard reduction and bushfire suppression - in the years to come.

At the launch, one of the Project Vesta research leaders, Phil Cheney, an internationally recognised expert on bushfire behaviour, said that Project Vesta could have been carried out only in Western Australia because of the Department of Environment and Conservation's expertise in forest fire management and its strong scientific base, which is provided by its science division under the leadership of Dr Neil Burrows.

I place on record the state government's appreciation of the Project Vesta team leaders - Phil Cheney and Jim Gould from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and Dr Lachie McCaw from DEC - and the DEC fire crews who undertook the fire control tasks associated with the experimental burns conducted under dry summer conditions in forests east of Harvey and west of Nannup. I also take this opportunity to remind the community of the ever present danger of bushfires. The fire season is upon us and people are urged to do what they can to protect themselves and their properties from the ravages of fire.

The department's indicators suggest soil conditions in the south west are tracking on the five-year average. However, dry periods, such as those we have been experiencing in the past two weeks, mean that the bush can dry out rapidly. DEC is progressing with its prescribed burning program and, as of last Friday, it had completed or begun 80 burns covering an area of around 70 000 hectares in the south west forests. Many of these burns will create low-fuel buffers to protect towns and communities as well as areas of high conservation and other values.