

**PRESCRIBED BURNING - HILLS AREA**

*Grievance*

**MR M.J. COWPER (Murray)** [9.19 am]: Many years ago, when I joined the police force there were two senior sergeants, Senior Sergeant “Boomer” Anderson and Senior Sergeant Pat Wilkinson, who used to bring me in and say words to the effect -

Several members interjected.

*Point of Order*

**Mr R.C. KUCERA:** I must say that it is very difficult to hear the member speaking at the moment.

**The SPEAKER:** It is quite true that interjections are disorderly. When interjections stop people from listening to the member for Murray, who I am sure will make a very entertaining and interesting contribution, they are highly disorderly. The conversation between the Minister for Education and Training and the member for Cottesloe is interesting, but not as interesting as the member for Murray.

*Debate Resumed*

**Mr M.J. COWPER:** Thank you, Mr Speaker; I appreciate the sentiments. I will start again. Senior Sergeant “Boomer” Anderson and Senior Sergeant Pat Wilkinson were two of the people who shaped me from the time I joined the Western Australia Police. They brought me in one day and said, “Constable, get to the point; what do you want to do, and what do you want to know?” I have always remembered that, and what I want to know from the minister is: who gave the edict to the Department of Environment and Conservation that there will be no prescribed burning in the hills around Perth for the next three weeks? I am led to believe that no prescribed burning will be carried out in our hills, which would mitigate the danger of fires like those that occurred earlier this year in the Dwellingup area, because it may interfere with the air quality in Perth. I am not sure if this has been confirmed, and maybe the minister can confirm it for me, but I am told anecdotally that the reason there will be no prescribed burning in the hills around Perth is that the Red Bull Air Race is about to be held. From my perspective, the Red Bull Air Race is a great event, but I am concerned that the suspension of prescribed burning will be at the cost of the safety of people in my electorate and other Western Australians who live in fire-prone areas.

I am aware that some prescribed burning has been carried out this spring. To members who are not sure how prescribed burning works, the Department of Environment and Conservation sets targets every year to reduce the fuel load that creates fire hazards in the forests. With the exception of one year, the targets have not been met in recent times. In fact, some areas of bush near Dwellingup have not been control-burnt since the 1961 fire that destroyed much of Dwellingup. Earlier this year I spent several days fighting wildfires in the hills. Sixteen houses were lost in my electorate, and we also saw tragic loss of life at Toodyay. In the wash-up after those fires, and with the support of the minister, I asked for a briefing about the prescribed burning program so that we could consider this issue. After the 1961 fires that destroyed Dwellingup, a royal commission was held into the circumstances surrounding that event. The number one recommendation of the royal commission report was that a prescribed burning program be conducted on an ongoing basis.

A number of factors come into play in considering the prescribed burning program. Lands managed by the Department of Environment and Conservation are not the only places where prescribed burning is required; we also have to contend with privately owned land, and compel those people to carry out prescribed burning. When we were fighting the fires earlier this year, some of the things I saw people doing on private property beggared belief, considering that they live in fire-prone areas. I acknowledge that some private landowners need to take some of the responsibility. However, as a government agency, the Department of Environment and Conservation must do all it can to make sure that prescribed burning is carried out. I am aware that some prescribed burning has been carried out, but that has happened at the far end of the forest, on the other side of Worsley. I think the area is called Saddleback, or something like that. It is at the far end of the forest, and I am sure that it has been done strategically so that it will not impact on the air quality around Perth. I would hate to think that someone’s concern about the way the air quality around Perth presents to the rest of the world would have some bearing on the way in which we go about protecting the people of Western Australia.

We need only look at the accounts of the California bushfires on the front page of today’s *The West Australian* to see the devastating impact of wildfire. It is true that the Red Bull Air Race is important, and brings in a lot of money, and I support it, but the cost of wildfires to California in life and property is frightening.

**Mr C.J. Barnett:** One billion dollars in San Diego alone.

**Mr M.J. COWPER:** One billion dollars and counting. I am sure that they will not know the real cost for some time. I would be interested to know, if the minister has the figures, the cost of the bushfires near Dwellingup

earlier this year. Some 167 volunteer fire units did a fantastic job. I have commented before in this place on the great job they did. The support crew was a cast of thousands, including the farmers themselves, doing the jump-overs. There is not much that frightens me in this world, but when I was at John McKay's property at about three o'clock in the morning, and all I could see around me were the red and blue flashing lights of the volunteer fire units and fires everywhere, including flames shooting 40 metres up red gum trees, that scared me. When I hear the people in my electorate tell me that they have heard that there will be no prescribed burning for the next three weeks, or whatever the period is between now and the Red Bull Air Race, I want to know who has given that edict. Was the decision made within the Department of Environment and Conservation, or did the edict come from the government? If it did, some serious questions need to be asked.

After the fires earlier this year I had a briefing from the Department of Environment and Conservation, and I was shown maps of prescribed burning areas. The DEC officers did a very good job in that respect, with the colour coding. I was told I would receive copies of those maps, but to this day I still have not received them. I would be very appreciative if the minister were to remind someone that I received an undertaking that those maps would be provided. It is very important. The fire chiefs from Dwellingup and the Shires of Murray and Toodyay were with me, and we had a very informative discussion with representatives of the Department of Environment and Conservation. For those members who do not know, prescribed burning can be carried out only when the prevailing weather conditions are suitable. The winds need to be from the south or south east and temperatures in the low 20s, and the moisture content of the forest must be neither too high nor too low. Those conditions usually occur only in spring and autumn. That is the only window of opportunity for carrying out prescribed burning in a satisfactory manner.

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah - Minister for the Environment)** [9.27 am]: I thank the member for Murray for his grievance and I acknowledge that this is an important issue for all of us. We must all ensure that we are prepared for the coming fire season. We need only look at what has occurred in other parts of the world. In particular the focus is now on the state of California and the devastating loss of life, property and biodiversity that has occurred there. Earlier this year, we saw the devastation of wildfires in Greece, where more than 80 lives were lost and untold damage was done to property and natural resources.

The member has raised an issue about the prescribed burning regime, and has made an accusation that no prescribed burning is taking place, but I can tell him that as of today -

**Mr M.J. Cowper:** That is not what I said.

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** That is what the member is asserting; he is saying "I've been told". He needs to make sure that he gets his facts straight, because I can confirm to him that at this very moment - today - 15 major prescribed burning operations are being carried out from Mundaring, in the Perth hills, to the south coast of Western Australia. This is a very serious issue, and I am a little disappointed with the member's opening remarks, because I respect him and his concern for this issue. I was a little disappointed with the tone in which he began his grievance. It does not do him any good. The prescribed burning regime is very important.

**Mr C.J. Barnett:** What do you think this place is?

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** I did not speak to the member for Cottesloe; this is not his grievance. He just pipes up whenever he likes. The facts are that the department aims to -

**Mr C.J. Barnett:** Pompous little twerp!

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** Pompous! That is the pot calling the kettle black! The member for Cottesloe is probably the most pompous person who has ever sat in this place. However, I will not engage with that, because this is a very important issue.

As the member is aware, and as I am sure was highlighted during the briefing that I arranged for him early this year, the department has a target for prescribed burning of around 200 000 hectares each year. Of course, a range of variables influence when those burns can take place, as the member has already highlighted in his grievance, and how they are engaged in. It is important to note that the weather conditions, such as prevailing winds, influence the decisions as to when prescribed burns can take place. The decisions are obviously collectively made from intelligence from local communities, input from local government, and various other sources, and a very clear and determined process is in place for when these prescribed burnings are undertaken.

Last year, as the member is probably aware, Western Australia had one of its driest winters, which impacted on the number of prescribed burns that could be carried out in the last season. Just under 140 000 hectares were burnt under the prescribed burning target for last year. The very low rainfall in WA in the winter of 2006, and a range of other prevailing weather conditions, impacted on the prescribed burning target of 200 000 hectares. Since 2003 the Department of Environment and Conservation has largely been able to achieve that

200 000-hectare burning target: in 2003, 192 000 hectares were burnt; in 2004-05, 213 000 hectares were burnt; in 2005-06, 194 000 hectares were burnt.

The prescribed burning program has a range of objectives. The first objective, obviously, is the protection of persons and property, and ensuring that whatever can be done about the matrix of prescribed burnings is done. That objective is a primary concern. The other objective is to protect the important biodiversity characteristics and values of WA's native vegetation, and to ensure that the prescribed burning regime will create areas where important biodiversity values are maintained.

As the fires earlier in the year in Toodyay and in the Peel region highlighted, the state government must ensure that all stakeholders understand the importance and responsibilities that the community has in ensuring and maximising the protection of property and, ultimately, and most importantly, lives.

**Mr M.J. Cowper:** Is there any edict about the Red Bull Air Race or -

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** I have just had a note about the Red Bull Air Race. If the member had given me some notice of that question I would have been able to quantify -

**Mr M.J. Cowper:** Notice of it!

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** Notice of that question, because I would have liked to have answered it specifically, as the member has mentioned the Red Bull Air Race. There is no restriction for the next three weeks -

**Mr M.J. Cowper:** So those 15 burn programs are going to happen continuously?

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** As I have already said, those burns will continue, depending upon the weather conditions.

**Mr M.J. Cowper:** But whereabouts, minister?

**Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN:** I am happy to provide the member with the information. It has been proposed that restricted burning will not happen near Perth from 1 to 4 November because there would be smoke in the city. I am prepared to give the member a further briefing on the information that he has specifically asked for about the next period of burning.

**Mr M.J. Cowper:** I invite the minister up to Dwellingup in the beautiful -

**The SPEAKER:** Minister, take a seat. The member for Murray's grievance is over. The member for Kimberley.