

FIRE SEASON 2016–17 — FERGUSON REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

Motion

MS M.M. QUIRK (Girrawheen) [4.01 pm]: I move —

That this house calls on the Liberal–National government to advise on the immediate actions it intends to take on bushfire management prior to the 2016–17 fire season, and the funding of those outstanding recommendations from the Ferguson report and those which are still unresolved from previous reports.

This motion is self-explanatory. Although the Premier released the Ferguson report last week, permitting a three-month period for consultations and submissions, matters are highlighted in the report that have been on the agenda for many years and have been the subject of consideration in reports going back to 2009. It seems to me that they can be acted upon in the interim, prior to the 2016–17 fire season, which is getting very close.

On reading the latest report, my immediate reaction was, to use those immortal words, *deja vu* all over again. Under the Barnett government, a number of inquiries have taken place. In 2009, there was an inquiry into the Toodyay bushfire, which was also undertaken by Euan Ferguson. In 2011, there was the major report on the Perth hills bushfires, which was the first Keelty report. Also in 2011, there was the Keelty report on the Margaret River fires. In 2012, there was a major incident review of the Black Creek fire. In 2015, there was a major incident review of the Lower Hotham fire and the O’Sullivan fire around Northcliffe, and in March 2016, the major incident review of the Esperance fires was released. We are waiting on three coronial inquests—one for the Black Creek fire, in which firefighter and Department of Parks and Wildlife worker Wendy Bearfoot was tragically killed, and the two more recent incidents at Esperance and at Waroona and Yarloop in which, tragically, there were casualties.

I have to concede that over the years a number of lessons have been learnt. A number of the recommendations of the Keelty report, for example, have been pored over for a number of years in the committee, and a number of improvements have been made. I also note that in that time, there have been major structural changes in the creation of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, which succeeded the Fire and Emergency Services Authority. Legislation was introduced to make those changes. I have to say that a lot has been done, but a number of issues that occur in every report seem to have been left unattended. Those entrenched issues might be the most difficult, but they need to be addressed.

I will divert briefly to the Ferguson report. Obviously, the headline issue in that report was the recommendation for the establishment of a rural fire service, and to some extent that was partially alluded to in the Esperance fire report, in which much was made of the difficulty in responding to major bushfires in remote areas. The added complication in Esperance was that a number of incidents occurred concurrently. The notion of whether we establish a rural fire service, as recommended by Ferguson, will be subject to ongoing consideration over the next three months in the process of receiving submissions from stakeholders. I hope that during that period some consideration is given to what form that service should take, how it would be funded, what its relationship and ongoing role would be with local governments, the oversight mechanisms of any such service and its linkages with metropolitan fire services. These things were largely unanswered in the Ferguson report, and I think both the Premier and the responsible minister have come out in the media and said that a number of complexities need to be worked through. All I would say is that we need not necessarily wait for the three-month period to expire to consider those matters. A conscientious, proactive government would be thinking about how we address those issues now and work on them concurrently with the submission period.

A government that had vision and was still enthusiastic in doing its job would also seize the opportunity for continuous improvement and further reform. However, as I said, we need to wait and hear what the further submissions will be, and we need to consult stakeholders, and so I do not want to pre-empt the opposition’s policy on that matter. As I said, we want to discuss the outstanding issues from previous reports dating back to Toodyay. Many of the recommendations were said to have been completed, but that is a term with which Mr Ferguson takes issue. Mr Ferguson regards the way in which the term “completed” is being used in relation to recommendations as contestable. At page 15 of his report, he stated —

Since 2007 there have been a number of significant fires in WA. These have resulted in a number of reports (including two independent inquiries). These reports have made a large number of recommendations. Good progress has been made implementing many of these recommendations. However, the analysis of evidence provided by agencies supports the view that, even though many actions have been deemed as “completed”, the intent established by some of the recommendations has yet to be achieved. For some recommendations, the definition of success, or completion, may be open to different interpretation.

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This failure to satisfactorily complete some very fundamental issues has led to them emerging time after time. I make the observation that, although properly implementing recommendations may not have prevented a major incident occurring, in my view it most certainly would have mitigated loss. I also concede that the challenges of climate change have made fighting fires much more problematic, and in the context of the Yarloop–Waroona fires, weather conditions prevailed that had not been seen for some time and made the challenge of responding that much more difficult. When some recommendations that I believe are doable have not been achieved, we need to look at whether sufficient vigour and rigour is placed around the notion of continually improving and learning the lessons that need to be learnt. The report “A Shared Responsibility: The Report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review” was handed down in 2011 by former Australian Federal Police commissioner Mick Keelty. It was a very comprehensive report and, significantly, it was called “A Shared Responsibility”. Although this title meant well—I know it was meant to imply that it is everyone’s responsibility to be bushfire ready—in the current context, a shared responsibility means that responding to bushfire, making communities more resilient, assisting with recovery and undertaking extensive mitigation and prevention efforts requires a whole-of-government response. In other words, it is a shared responsibility in government. The title applies equally well to all agencies within government.

Even with the additional challenges posed by climate change, at a government level we should not use that as an excuse—all agencies need to perform to an optimal level. Better interoperability between agencies requires all accepting the appropriate level of responsibility and acting on it. That should be our ultimate desired outcome. Instead, there are a lot of fingers in the pie, including the Department of Parks and Wildlife; the Department of Fire and Emergency Services; local government; the Water Corporation; volunteers from a range of services; the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, which stepped in to oversee the implementation of Keelty’s recommendations; the Department of Lands; and the State Emergency Management Committee. I have probably forgotten some. All those departments have some level of responsibility. It requires whole-of-government scrutiny to ensure that all agencies are doing what they should be doing.

It is disturbing that there are recurring themes. Inaction has its consequences. For example, if fuel reduction measures routinely fail to meet targets, that puts more communities at threat, it places greater demands on firefighters and it increases the intensity of fires. Similarly, if crew protection equipment that is aimed at ensuring incident controllers can keep track of fire crews is not installed, that hampers good communications on the fireground and also means that they do not have access to information that is needed to make optimal decisions. If they do not know where their crews are, they do not know where to send other resources and so on.

If fire hydrants are not maintained, are not marked or are absent fire crews waste valuable time looking for water instead of fighting fires. We now have a situation of divided responsibilities. The Water Corporation identifies where hydrants need to be installed and is responsible for maintaining those hydrants, but I understand that the Department of Fire and Emergency Services still has responsibility to mark them. More disturbingly, the Water Corporation has identified a number of hydrants that need to be installed where there are gaps in water supply. The time frame to install those hydrants is over a number of years; I think the number of hydrants is over 1 000. To me, it is pretty unsatisfactory that the Water Corporation has not moved expediently.

If fire crews are held up at a vehicle control point because the person at that vehicle control point has incomplete or inflexible guidelines about permitting fire crews or their equipment through, that is simply inexcusable. If access by volunteers is also hampered by a lack of official photo identification, the question needs to be asked: how is it that this cannot be achieved over a five-year period—that is, since it was first recommended? If the government contributes two-thirds less from consolidated revenue to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, forcing use of what should be funds for frontline services out of the emergency services levy onto administrative expenses, or it refuses sound budget proposals for sensible programs such as the perimeter protection of towns, that is both a false economy and an example of wrong priorities.

If adequate maps are not provided to fire crews, adding to the confusion, miscommunication and chaos at an incident, that is simply negligent preparation. If heavy equipment for land clearing or making firebreaks is readily at hand but is not used because of arbitrary rules about the colour of the vehicle or the lack of an existing contractual relationship, that defies commonsense, especially when the preferred equipment is some distance away. If team dynamics between the different arms of emergency personnel hampers an effective response, a lack of joint training exercises, shared resource management platforms and informed communication about local conditions will also lead to a suboptimal response. If private contractors, hired at exorbitant rates, use compromised safety equipment and they are not in direct contact with an incident controller and stand idle for a week because resources are too scarce, it is a false economy that requires serious reconsideration. All of these inactions or lack of decisions, or the lack of completion of a recommendation, have direct consequences on the capacity to respond to the threat of bushfire at optimal levels.

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I want to talk more fully about a few of those issues. The first of course is the lack of fuel reduction on public land. That target has not been met in the past 12 years. My colleague the member for Cannington asked the Minister for Environment for supplementary information during estimates. I refer to page E57 of *Hansard* on 26 May 2016. The member wanted to know the annual target total, the annual achieved and the underachievement for the last six years of the controlled burn program. In 2014–15, the prescribed burning achieved was 147 082 hectares out of a target of 200 000 hectares; a shortfall of 52 918 hectares. In the previous year, 2013–14, only 78 234 hectares was burnt out of a target of 200 000 hectares; a shortfall of 121 766 hectares. In 2012–13, only 23 468 hectares was burnt out of a target of 200 000 hectares; a shortfall of 176 532 hectares. In 2011–12, 103 165 hectares was burnt out of a target of 200 000 hectares; a shortfall of 96 835 hectares. In 2010–11, 136 746 hectares was burnt out of a target of 200 000 hectares; a shortfall of 63 254 hectares. In 2009–10, 212 017 hectares was burnt. That was 12 017 hectares over the target. In total, between 2009 and 2015, the shortfall was minus 499 288 hectares. In the context of climate change, increasing fuel loads and an increasingly old fuel load, it is not acceptable to miss the targets by that amount. Anecdotal evidence is that prescribed burning is, in many cases, not in the areas that are most appropriate to be burnt—those with the highest fuel load—but rather in areas where the number of hectares burnt could be raised quickly to meet the targets. It may well have been quantitative rather than qualitative burning as well.

The second issue I would like to mention is traffic management. To my recollection this issue first came up in the Keelty report in 2011. Following the Keelty report, work was done to ensure that those who controlled access and egress to areas under threat of bushfires had guidelines on who could enter, who could stay out and who needed to be evacuated. All those guidelines were found wanting by the Keelty inquiry in 2011, so the traffic management working group was set up comprising officers from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority; Western Australia Police; Main Roads Western Australia; the Western Australian Local Government Association; the Department of Health, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support; the Department of Environment and Conservation, as it then was; and St John Ambulance. Following the release of the Keelty report, the working group looked at this issue. Recommendation 32 of the Keelty report states —

The Western Australian Police and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority jointly examine the Traffic Management System developed in response to the 2009 Victorian bushfires and seek its adaptation to use in WA with additional attention to the access and egress by bona fide residents to areas that are evacuated.

At the end of that examination, in February 2012, the working group concluded that the Victorian system was not appropriate for Western Australia. Secondly, the working group recommended —

The Emergency Services Sub-committee, in partnership with the Interagency Bushfire Management Committee, establish a bushfire-specific working group to investigate the appropriateness of a response-phase permit system to allow for pre-approved residents to return to their homes for the purpose of active bushfire defence.

Thirdly, the working group recommended —

The Emergency Services Subcommittee implements a review of emergency traffic management arrangements to examine the implications of response and recovery phase ‘Restricted Access Permits’ across all hazards.

That report was released in 2012. In 2013, I asked the Minister for Emergency Services a question on notice —

I refer to recommendation 32 of the Keelty report ... and I ask:

- (a) has this been done, and if so when was this completed;
- (b) will the Minister table the same; and
- (c) if no to (a), why not?

The minister replied —

- (a) The Traffic Management System was examined as per the recommendation and a report outlining the findings was completed in February 2012.

He provided that report as a tabled paper. Then, despite this issue coming up again in a number of inquiries subsequent to Keelty, it seems to be only this year that the State Emergency Management Committee, which from an outsider’s perspective seems to move with glacial speed on this matter, managed to produce the “State Emergency Management—A Strategic Framework for Emergency Management in Western Australia: Traffic Management During Emergencies Guide 2015”. That paper is 20 or so pages and it has some detail. But why has it taken that much time to produce? How will it be promulgated to principally the police, but also local

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government officials, who will be staffing vehicle control points? How is it that the Minister for Police has no idea about the progress of these issues? We found that out yesterday when we asked her a question during question time. The minister was not able even to tell us how police would be trained to operate the system.

The general criticism found in all these inquiries is that there is a lack of flexibility and communication between the incident controller and the person at the vehicle control point. I heard from some members of a bush fire brigade who were going to the Yarloop fires to meet some of their colleagues who were waiting with the appliance at a particular location that they were in their own vehicle and had their gear on all ready to go, but they were not let through the vehicle control point to join their colleagues with the appliance. That happened because the guidelines did not give the vehicle controller sufficient flexibility or he did not feel that he had the discretion to let those people through. There have been numerous accounts of that. Certainly, Mr Ferguson, in his briefing to the Harvey community last Thursday, said that no other issue caused as much angst as the problems with traffic management for those fires. I wonder why it has taken so long, and I would be grateful if the minister could tell us in his response how he expects these guidelines to be properly promulgated. The police officers are in an unenviable position, but they have clearly taken the approach of when in doubt, do not let someone in. I understand the background to that, which goes back to the Boorabbin fire, but the bottom line is that people on the ground need sufficient information to be able to do their jobs in a sensible and measured way. I would like to hear from the minister in his response how he intends to work with his colleague the Minister for Police to ensure that these guidelines can be implemented—I suspect anything will be an improvement on the existing procedures—and how we can have a system that is balanced and measured and enables rapid response and resources to get through to the fireground without needless impediment.

The second ongoing issue, which goes back to the Keelty inquiry, is the allocation and review of the emergency services levy. Mr Keelty recommended an independent review by the Department of Finance.

Mr A.P. Jacob: Where's that? Do you have a page number or recommendation number?

Ms M.M. QUIRK: No; this was a recommendation in the Keelty report. It is an ongoing issue and was one of the few recommendations that were rejected outright. I need to contextualise why it is important that we now need such a review. I am not sure whether the Department of the Premier and Cabinet or the Department of Finance is the appropriate place. I also have problems with Treasury having any sort of access to the emergency services levy. Whatever happens, there needs to be change in the legislation so that the money is quarantined to frontline services or an independent review should be conducted to make sure that the ESL funds that are collected, which have gone up by over 80 per cent under the Liberal–National government, go to frontline services and not to administrative costs. I will not read this at length, but in this year's estimates hearings I received supplementary information on all the things that were not able to be funded by the ESL. They cover an A4 page and include such things as the emergency rescue helicopter, the volunteer fuel card, aviation services and so on. I thank the minister for that. Everything else—a lot of administrative practices and human resources in the department—is now taken out of the ESL.

Euan Ferguson has also misunderstood that this money can go to mitigation. It cannot go to mitigation; it is supposed to go to response. Mistakenly, Mr Ferguson believes that a proportion of this money can go to mitigation. That is not available under the current legislation, but it is true that an absolutely risible amount goes to mitigation—virtually none. In general terms, something like two-thirds of our emergency services expenditure goes to response and one-third or even less to mitigation. To cut to the chase, in 2008 the government appropriation for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, as it then was, was around \$27 million. Last year it was only \$15 million and it is estimated that for the forward systems, it will also be around the \$15 million mark. The percentage of ESL revenue going to total cost of services, according to budget figures, is something like 91 per cent. Members can see from that that the ESL is being spent other than where it should be and other than where it is intended to be spent. It may be that the legislation is a bit loose, but it is quite clear from the second reading speech and the debate that occurred when the ESL was introduced that the intention was to make sure that all arms of firefighting, be they volunteer or career firefighters, would have access to up-to-date equipment, crew protection and other materials they need to effectively fight fires across the state.

It may be that we need an independent review and that the government needs to pull its weight in contributing out of consolidated revenue. It may be that we need to amend the current legislation to quarantine money collected under ESL for emergency purposes and not for administrative purposes. It may be that we need a debate sooner than that because the majority of ESL is collected in the city, which raises the issue of whether that ESL then goes to fund regional firefighting and a separate regional firefighting service, which has been recommended. These are all issues that we need to come to grips with. Certainly, when Keelty recommended a review of the ESL, there was evidence that some of the money was not being used for frontline services. The situation has got worse, and Mr Ferguson makes recommendations in relation to that.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY — Wednesday, 29 June 2016]

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The report also refers to training and joint exercises, which would go towards greater cordiality, I suppose, between the various agencies. That was done quite extensively for a couple of years, but that seems to have petered out. A finding was made, for example, that the Department of Parks and Wildlife did not give local government authorities and volunteers enough opportunities to participate in controlled burns. Again, in terms of interoperability, Mr Ferguson outlined a common resource management system between DPaW and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. It beggars belief that DPaW and DFES do not, for example, have joint tenders on equipment when they are getting the same equipment or that they go their separate ways in the area of providing crew protections. I understand there may be different or varying vehicles, but the notion that each agency is doing everything separately in a different time frame and at a different cost is completely at odds with the sentiment of all these reports that there needs to be much more common enterprise between the two agencies.

One of the interesting findings that Mr Ferguson made was that maps were not sufficient for volunteers to adequately locate where they needed to go. This has come up in the past. I talked to some volunteers from Binningup, I think. Although it is relatively close to the fires, they did not know the area well or where they would locate water sources. Again, that is the sort of thing that beggars belief. Yes, there is stuff we cannot prepare for and we might not be able to predict unusual and exceptional weather conditions, but I would have thought the need for crews to find their way from A to B should be prepared for well in advance. Similarly, the Parkerville inquiry referred to vehicle tracking and vehicle location, and a tender for that went out this year, in the case of DFES. Again, the incident controller had some issues with locating appliances.

The report discusses the lack of preformed teams. As the Esperance report points out that is simply not possible in some remote areas as there are not enough personnel on the ground. Again, that seemed to be a consideration. I can recall that recommendation in the 2009 Toodyay report.

Mr Ferguson made some positive findings for the Department of Parks and Wildlife and its better relationship with volunteers, but some of that information was somewhat anecdotal. Although I am pleased it looks like there has been some progress, I do not know how widespread the issues are—either the good relationships between DPaW and volunteers or the possible deteriorating relationships between volunteers and DFES personnel. Clearly, work needs to be done there. It is difficult to change cultures. Leaders need certain skills, so they need to be handpicked. I am somewhat disappointed and dispirited that these issues continue to arise.

I want to raise a couple of other issues not strictly within the context of the motion, but which relate to issues within the Ferguson inquiry. The first is the handover at the recovery phase. Ferguson suggests that maybe handover at the recovery phase to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, which is usually at incident 3 level for controlling the fire, might be delayed so that it can assist local authorities to transition into the recovery process. That is an interesting notion. I am not necessarily sure that that is totally the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' role and that it may need to be given more resources if it is supposed to undertake that work. However, I think within the context of the Lord Mayor's Distress Relief Fund that needs to be re-examined, because some quite strict criteria is used by the committee to allocate funds and resources that are not strictly on all fours within its guidelines and constitution. It seems to me that there is room, especially in the context of the matters the Esperance services raised with me, that important work needs to be done post-fire to address community needs such as post-traumatic stress, counselling and assisting people with getting all the ducks in a row and their affairs in order, and there is not ordinarily a lot of funding for that. The Red Cross did an exceptional job at Margaret River, but funding through the Lord Mayor's fund was declined for that. I think this is probably timely. There is a lot of money sitting in the Lord Mayor's fund, but there is a narrow notion of what money can be handed out. I think the whole area of disaster recovery has moved on from when the Lord Mayor's fund was first created and there is now much more emphasis on post-recovery and consideration of post-traumatic stress disorder, not only for community members but also volunteers and personnel involved in assisting the community. I would like a bit more analysis of how to alter the Lord Mayor's disaster fund so that very important recovery work can be undertaken with some of that funding. In fact, I think the community would welcome that. Anything that gets the community back on its feet would be welcome. I think the wording in the Lord Mayor's fund is something along the lines of either reducing the harm or reducing the damage, and that can be as much psychological as it can be physical.

Mr Ferguson also mentioned the need for pre-existing tenders and contracts to be in place for the clean-up phase. That is certainly a problem for Yarloop and it is an area in which I think some tenders could be in place so that clean-up and other issues that need to be addressed urgently can be done more expeditiously. Similarly, volunteer registration for farmer firefighting units, contractor firefighting resources and forestry industry brigades is also a sensible recommendation, especially in remote places like Esperance. As I said, in that particular incident there were a number of concurrent fires in the area. We needed every person on the ground and we needed every piece of equipment we could get, and I think that we did not optimise the resources we had.

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Another recommendation of the Ferguson review, which has arisen in the past and which I have spoken about in the context of the traffic management plan, is that of ID cards for volunteers so that when they arrive at vehicle control points they are able to get through. I know there have been problems with getting volunteers photographed and what have you, but in this day and age it should not be beyond the wit, wisdom or competence of government to be able to achieve that. My records show that this ongoing issue has been in discussion for about five years.

Mr M.J. Cowper: They have actually got them in place but they're two years behind.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: So they are catching up.

I now come to communication. The Ferguson report mentions in some detail the greater use of social media and smart phones and the like. The Council on the Ageing has spoken to me about this matter, because of course the two people who died in the Yarloop-Waroonna incident were 73 and 77 years old respectively and would probably not have been great users of social media, computers or smart phones. The representatives of the Council on the Ageing suggested that there is a cohort of people who are simply being ignored when it comes to notification. That is something that I suspect may come up in the context of the coronial inquest, but I think it is a good point. Mr Ferguson suggested that one option would be to have sirens in towns. In any event, when considering the vulnerabilities and risks in a community for the ageing population, it is dangerous to rely principally on the internet and that type of technology to promulgate necessary warnings. Of course, we have situations such as that which occurred in Esperance whereby the phone tower went down and all communication was cut off altogether. I think relying on new technology is putting all our eggs in one basket and we need to think more creatively about how to address the issue. For example, Singapore's Civil Defence Force has block captains who are responsible for warning people in a certain number of houses or units.

Mr J.M. Francis: They also have conscription.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Yes, they also have conscription. They also have in schools the equivalent of a civil defence Waterwise program in which kids learn how to respond to and know what to do in emergencies; they all learn first aid. I think that is an excellent idea, although the temperament of the Singapore population is somewhat different from ours.

I wanted to say in the context of coronial inquests that the coronial inquest for Wendy Bearfoot, the Department of Parks and Wildlife officer who died in Albany three years ago, is only coming on later this year, in late October. We have no indication of when the inquest will be for the deaths that occurred in Esperance or those that occurred in the Yarloop-Waroonna incident. I think it is in everyone's interest that the coronial inquests be expedited in some way. I know there was recent publicity in the paper that stated that the average waiting time for a coronial inquest was two years, but averages can be misleading; all the ones I have knowledge of have gone much longer than two years, and in these cases there certainly needs to be some consideration given to expediting coronial inquests. Frankly, we have a situation in which the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the police are all preparing information for the coroner and a lot of that information would be consistent with what they are doing for major incident reviews or external inquiries such as the Ferguson inquiry. It seems that those officers are revisiting the information time and again. It is not good for their psychological wellbeing and it is also not good for the families of those who have died not to have that closure sooner. We need to look at expediting coronial inquests sooner. That may require appointing another coroner as we have suggested for some time in the general context or giving priority to those inquests that attract a large amount of public interest and concern broader issues that relate to responding to fires sooner.

I want to conclude with the Esperance major incident review that came out in March this year. On page 63, it states —

There are a number of issues with systems and processes that frustrate the response and are regularly identified by agencies and external reviews as issues that need to be addressed. These reoccurring issues should be resolved.

That is really the spirit of this motion —

As with other recommendations, resolving reoccurring issues with systems and processes will be most effective if implemented jointly by all fire agencies.

There are three elements of the recommendation for resolving reoccurring issues with systems and processes:

- IAP formats —

Or incident action plans —

and processes appropriate to the nature of the emergency response

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- Cross agency resource management system
- Live resource tracking system that can be used by all response agencies. Each of these is discussed below.

My observation is not necessarily a cynical, jaundiced view. The observation was made in the context of an independent review of the fires at Esperance.

Mr M.J. Cowper: What is the Labor Party's position?

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Have you not been listening?

Mr M.J. Cowper: No. I have been here for the last 15 minutes; that is all.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I said that there would be three months for stakeholders to comment. We will do some preparatory work on the various issues that are associated with that, but we owe it to the stakeholders to not make a decision before they have an opportunity to comment. We will explore whether we need to separately consult or whether the government will make those comments to the review publicly available. We certainly concede that more resources are needed. I think that very much comes out in the Esperance report. It states that it is very difficult to respond to a bushfire emergency of this size with limited resources. How that is managed is a matter that I need to discuss with my colleagues and relevant stakeholders.

Unallocated crown land is the other issue raised in the Esperance report. On page 45, the point is made —

These fires started on UCL, where multiple agencies are responsible for managing the fire risk

Again, there are different levels of responsibility and different levels of engagement of those agencies in doing what they are supposed to do within their remit. I think the shared responsibility is unevenly born.

To conclude, I was thinking about these issues and, for some reason—I have never been to Alcoholics Anonymous—but —

Mr D.J. Kelly: That is something to look forward to.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: It is something to look forward to, yes. For some reason, *The Serenity Prayer* that is said at Alcoholics Anonymous came into my head when I was thinking about these issues. Certainly in the context of climate change, we need to accept that as inevitable, but that does not let us off the hook altogether. I have slightly changed *The Serenity Prayer* for these purposes —

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
the willingness to fully assume my responsibilities,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean) [4.53 pm]: I rise to make a contribution to the debate on the motion moved by the member for Girrawheen on bushfire management. Obviously, there has been a major fire and a major report—the Ferguson report. This motion goes to the Liberal–National government's handling of the fire and the very substantial report that was handed down with a number of recommendations. One of the issues that I want to address is, obviously, in order for the government to be able to properly respond to this fire and properly be trusted to implement the report, it has to have a minister who can be trusted to be upfront and honest with the public about these issues. I am not confident that the current minister fits that bill. I do not say that lightly. I say that because of his handling of other fire management issues that directly affect my electorate.

In March 2015, there was a fire on land owned by the Western Australian Planning Commission—the Ashfield Flats. That fire on 5 March 2015 came very close to destroying homes in my electorate. People on Hardy Road were very close to losing their homes. One home did catch fire and, luckily, it was put out. Other homes came under ember attack. It was pretty chaotic. Had it not been for the arrival of helicopters, homes would certainly have been lost and lives potentially could have been lost. That is pretty surprising seeing as it is a suburban area, only about seven kilometres from the CBD. How could a fire so close to the centre of Perth get out of control? As the local member, I wrote to the minister on 9 April to simply ask, broadly speaking: what is the government doing to investigate the cause of that fire and how will those sorts of fires be prevented in the future? I got a response back from the minister on 15 May. It states basically that the department was looking into it, and that was about all. He writes, "Thank you for your interest" et cetera. On 8 June, I briefly wrote back to say —

Thank you for your response to my letter regarding the Ashfield Flats,

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I welcome your news that the Department of Fire and Emergency Services will contact the Department of Lands to arrange a site meeting regarding bushfire safety. Can you please advise when the meeting will take place? I would also like to be kept informed of the outcomes from the meeting.

I got a response back from minister on 3 August 2015. In that letter, the minister advises me —

Prior to the meeting, DFES completed an investigation of bushfire land management practices at Ashfield Flats in relation to the fire. The report provides a number of key mitigation strategies that will improve bushfire protection for residents, reduce fire spread, protect wildlife and enhance access for emergency services.

It all sounds very good. I then wrote to the minister on 17 August and again referred to his letter. In part, I state —

The reply refers to a report that provides “a number of key mitigation strategies that will improve bushfire protection for residents, reduce fire spread, protect wildlife and enhance access for emergency services.”

I then go on to say —

Can you please detail the mitigation strategies that have been identified? I would also appreciate it if a copy of the report can be sent to me.

It is pretty straightforward. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services completed a report and I wanted more detail about what the report identifies as possible strategies. I asked whether I could please have a copy of the report. On 22 October 2015, I got a letter back from the minister. That letter states —

As previously indicated, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) have developed a report ‘*Review of Bush fire Land Management Practices—Ashfield Flats Fire*’ however this report is still in draft format and is currently subject to discussions with the relevant landowners.

Once the document has been finalized I will be happy to provide you with a copy.

So, having been told in the previous correspondence that the department had done a report and come up with some strategies, I asked for the report. The minister then sent me a letter saying, “Sorry; I can’t give it to you, because it’s only in draft form, and it’s subject to discussion with relevant landowners, and, when that’s completed, I’ll give you a copy.” The fire was in March, and it is now October, so I began to smell a bit of a rat that something was not quite right—why was the minister not sending me a copy of the report, when he had led me to believe that it had been completed? I therefore made a freedom of information application, and I received a copy of the report through that FOI application. To my surprise, I found that the DFES report into that fire had been completed in May 2015, yet I got a letter from the minister in October telling me that the report was only in draft format and that is why he could not give it to me. At that point, I began to think that the minister was not being upfront about this issue, and that concerned me.

I had a look at the report. The report was quite critical of the way the land on which this fire had occurred was being managed. Bear in mind that this is Western Australian Planning Commission land. This is government land that was not being protected. It therefore appeared to me that, for some reason, the minister was deliberately trying to hide that report from me. The report made 13 or 14 recommendations at pages 12 and 13, which go to areas such as additional firebreaks, community education campaigns, additional water, additional hydrants and clearing of some additional land. I went out to Ashfield Flats after I got this report, and I could not see that any of these recommendations had been implemented. The firebreak between the flats and the homes on Hardy Road, Ashfield, had not been completed. I saw some evidence that the Town of Bassendean had started to build a firebreak on its land. However, I could not see any evidence that a firebreak had been completed on the Western Australian Planning Commission land. I could not see any evidence that additional hydrants had been put in. I asked residents whether there been a community education campaign and there was no evidence of that at all.

I then did some media about what was happening with this report. Bear in mind that this was December last year, well into the fire season. My first opportunity to quiz the Minister for Fire and Emergency Services on this issue was in Parliament on 24 February 2015. I asked the minister about the discrepancy—why he had not given me a copy of the report, when it clearly had been completed in May. The answer the minister gave me was that it was bad advice given to him by his department. The minister said that his department had given him that incorrect advice. I quote from the answer that the minister gave me on 24 February —

I wrote to the member saying that the report was still being finalised. It was in a draft format.

...

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That was the advice that I was provided with by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. I do not know what happens when the other side is in government, but in a ministerial office in this government we do not conduct reports into incidents such as that particular fire; we let the departments do it. We relayed that advice. The advice I was given was that it was still in a draft format, and I gave the member that advice. I accept that the advice from the department was incorrect and I apologise -

The minister then goes on to give me a serve for being wrong about the mitigation measures not having been implemented. The minister said later in that answer —

They have conducted all the firebreaks and they have conducted all the fuel reduction that was recommended in the report. They have done every single thing that was recommended by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services to address the issues of fire risk in that park. Every single thing has been done, and the member has been written to since then to be informed about that.

I knew that was not the case—well, I suspected that the minister was not telling me the truth about the advice he had received from the department—so I asked the minister in estimates, “Can you tell me who gave you that advice that the report was only in draft format?”, and the minister undertook to give me supplementary information. The supplementary information that came back from the minister on 26 May, after I had asked the minister who in the department gave him this bad advice, was as follows —

Advice was provided by Mr Jarad Finneran, Principal Policy Adviser.

The minister did not tell me it was the department. He blamed it on a policy officer.

In the meantime, I had put in a second FOI application to get that advice from the department. What I subsequently got back from the Commissioner for Emergency Services was the actual advice that the minister had been given in response to my letter. I found that that advice was not at all what the minister had indicated. I was provided with the draft response that the minister had been provided with. That draft correspondence was a letter to me saying, “Yes, the report is finished. Here it is, Mr Kelly, for you to peruse.” That is what the briefing note to the minister from Commissioner Wayne Gregson, dated 7 September 2015, said. Therefore, after I had written to the minister and asked whether I could have a copy of the report, the department gave the minister a response that said, “Here is a copy of the report; here is a ministerial briefing note; provide it to Mr Kelly.” However, when I quizzed the minister on this issue on 28 February this year, the minister jumped up and said, “The reason I gave you that incorrect advice is because my department told me that the report was incomplete.”

The minister is smiling. The minister misled the Parliament in February this year when I asked him about this issue. The minister’s department gave him the advice that the report was complete, and it gave him a recommendation that the information be provided to me. That is what the briefing note says. Yet the minister stood in this place and said that he did not provide me with the report because of advice given to him directly by his department. The minister misled the Parliament. When I asked the minister in estimates, I gave him an opportunity to clarify his position. The minister did not do that. I asked the minister a second question in this place, and he did not clarify his position. The minister maintained the deceit that he had failed to give me that report because of advice from his department.

Withdrawal of Remark

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr N.W. Morton): Member, you cannot refer to a member and use the word “deceit”, so you have to withdraw it. Find some other terminology.

Mr J.M. Francis: Nobody is listening to him, not even his own side.

The ACTING SPEAKER: I am not going to have a debate about it. That is my ruling, so if you just withdraw that.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I withdraw that.

Debate Resumed

Mr D.J. KELLY: I think that is an interesting interjection from the minister—“Nobody is listening to him.”

The minister does not care about this because he does not think he has been held to account for misleading the Parliament. He can get up in response to this and outline why what I am saying is not true. The trouble with this government is that no-one on that side is held to account for misleading the Parliament. What I have outlined to the minister is a clear example of where he has misled the Parliament. That is why I do not trust him to handle the Ferguson report with the integrity required. What I think happened with the Ashfield fire is that it was fire on government land that the government had not properly managed. People’s lives and properties were put at risk on that day. DFES properly did a report into that and was quite critical of the management of that land and it

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made a host of recommendations. When I asked for that report, someone in the minister's department between the department saying, "Here is the report" and ere is a copy for Mr Kelly, made the decision to tell me that I would not be given the report—I presume because it is critical of the government—and to make up a fantasy that the report was only in draft form and to somehow cover up the mistakes that were made. The minister can say that no-one is listing, so who cares. I know the minister misled the Parliament and I know he cannot be trusted, and the minister has to wear that. I am giving him an opportunity in this place in this debate to outline where I am wrong. Not only did the minister jump up on 24 February and say that all those five mitigation strategies had been put in place, he made the same assertion last week on 21 June in this place. He asked what the problem was because this was all ancient history. He said that fire mitigation issues have been put in place. I challenge the minister. There were 13 or 14 recommendations and I understand some of those recommendations have still not been implemented. The minister has misled the Parliament about whether or not he would provide the report to me, and it appears to me that he did that to cover up for the Western Australian Planning Commission. The minister also misled the Parliament about whether the measures that his department had recommended have been implemented. The minister stood up here twice and asked what Mr Kelly was worrying about, because every single one of the fire mitigation measures have been put in place. On 24 February the minister said the following —

They have conducted all the firebreaks and they have conducted all the fuel reduction that was recommended in the report. They have done every single thing that was recommended by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services to address the issues of fire risk in that park. Every single thing had been done, and the member has been written to since then to be informed about that.

When I asked the minister a question last week, he went even further and maintained that all that had been done prior to the fire season having concluded. On 21 June the minister said the following —

All the mitigation that was raised in that report had been carried out before the last fire season.

I was there at Ashfield Flats and I could see that it had not been done. The minister can think it does not matter whether he misleads his Parliament or not, but trust is important for a minister. I certainly do not think that the minister can be trusted to do his job, because when it came to a fire like the one in Ashfield, he was prepared to cover up and on two occasions he misled this Parliament.

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [5.14 pm]: I am thankful for the opportunity to talk to this motion. I would like to reflect on a fire in Western Australia that occurred before the fire in Waroona referred to in this report. My speech will relate to fire management around 17 November in Esperance. Although it was a different geography on a different day, there are some synergies in what we can learn—and it is about what we can learn. Sometimes it is pretty easy to look back and say in hindsight what could have been done, recognising—this is no excuse—that we had climactic conditions that were basically hell on earth. We had three fires running at the one time: one that was threatening the town of Esperance, called the Merivale fire; another threatening farmland to the east, the fire in the Cape Arid National Park; and the third fire, which started on the Sunday west of Esperance, that was threatening farmland to the west and the town of Scaddan. We had a 41 degree day and we had a howling north easterly–north westerly wind; it was changing throughout the day. To put it in some context, there are fire index measurements that take into consideration the temperature, the wind, the dryness of the vegetation and the dryness of the soil. There is one index that measures grass fire—a grass fire index. Again, the fire I am referring to was a different sort of fire than the Waroona fire, which is the subject of this motion; however, the grass fire index on that day was something like 271. When that is put into context, a bad fire on a bad day, particularly the fires we experienced on Black Wednesday and Black Saturday, were around 110 to 120 on the index; this fire was 271 on the index. As that fire went through on those three fronts, we basically had ground zero; there was nothing left. In fact, after the fire I made a tour west into the Scaddan area and on the ground could just see a steel stake and some metres away some electrical insulators, but nothing in between—no vestige, no ash, nothing that could tell me that there had been a wooden pole between that stake and those insulators. That was the temperature of this fire. That fire burnt out 250 000 hectares, with 70 000 hectares being cropland and pastureland. There was the unfortunate loss of four lives on that Tuesday, 17 November, from which we as a community, as members can understand, are still recovering. A report into the Esperance fire, commissioned by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, was done by the Nous Group. The report, as we have heard from Euan Ferguson, is about learning lessons in a systemic way. I am not about to play the a blame game about who did what and what did what in a situation in which we had three serious fires on a day from hell. Decisions will be made that might not be perfect.

I have not fought many fires, and I am not an expert, but as a 16-year-old farm kid I was co-opted into the Coomalbidgup fire brigade. About 60 kilometres west of Esperance is a little place called Coomalbidgup, which is Aboriginal for "kangaroo watering hole", and there is a swamp there. We now call it a wetland, but when I was a kid we called it a swamp. There was a bush fire brigade, and my dad was in that brigade. We had

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a serious fire north of Esperance. We used to get a lot of north winds, and this fire was threatening not only the Esperance land development lands but also the smaller settlers, of which my dad was one, in a place called Lort River, which he settled in 1957. I remember being co-opted to fight this fire and, being a farm kid, I had a few practical ideas. I was part of a fire team.

Mr J.M. Francis: How old were you?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I was 16 at the time. I was part of a team fighting a fire that raged for around two weeks. I enjoyed it, but there were some very frightening times, with heat, smoke and changing winds. I eventually suffered from heat exhaustion and dehydration. They put me in the truck because I was no good; I could not do anything. They tried to feed me up with water, and I thought I was going to die

Mr J.M. Francis: You were soft back then!

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Soft!

The only positive thing about this, and I remember very distinctly, was that, about halfway through this process—not when I was sitting in the truck suffering with heat exhaustion—I was paid. As a kid, I got some sort of stipend for this. I was very much valued as part of the team. Against all the fear, the difficulties the suffering and the heat, there was a recognition that I was part of a team.

That is a bit of an aside, but I want to share with the house that this is a very difficult area. Fighting a fire is a war, and people can lose, and they can die. We must put all that in context. I am not about to say that this guy should have done this and that guy should have done that, but let us step back and take a look at some of the systemic issues in fighting a fire and, though it is not very extensive, my experience of living through this fire with the community. I spent a lot of time at the incident control centre and spoke to a lot of volunteers, professional firefighters and incident controllers. They were very generous in giving me the small amount of time to keep me up to date. I did not want to get in their way, and I did not want to make this a political exercise, because that is not what it is about. Three systemic issues for me came out of the experience of those fires. The first was early intervention, the second was fire mitigation, and the third was communication on the fireground.

I will deal first with early intervention. There was the issue of early aerial fire suppression. The Nous report on the Esperance fire, not the Waroona report but the one that preceded it, mentioned some of the regulatory and bureaucratic difficulties in recognising the geography. Esperance is 720 kilometres from here, and a significant distance from Bunbury, Albany, Manjimup and the south west. I think, in her very comprehensive summary, the member for Girrawheen touched on trying to mobilise enough appliances, including aerial support, for a fire that is very distant from here. There were fires raging in other places in Western Australia, particularly in the south west, while our fires were raging, so the question of aerial support was problematic. Other fires needed attending to. The question that we need to attend to in the future is: if we have appropriate aircraft in the region, which are essentially crop dusters that can be converted in about half a day to water-bombing, is there some way that we can use those appliances, while we are waiting for the cavalry, if you like—while the squadron is coming?

In a lot of areas, not only in my previous area of medicine, early intervention is critical, but it saves a lot of pain afterwards. I understand that aerial control is not the only method. We still need troops on the ground as well. In some jurisdictions there is the matter of predetermined dispatch, so that essentially they see the smoke and fly, rather than wait for the fire to develop into a level 3 wildfire, at which point nothing will stop it. I think the Premier said that about the Yarloop wildfire, and the member for Murray–Wellington might say something about this as well. Once there is a wildfire, as human beings, firefighters or whatever, we do not want to be anywhere near it because it kills. It did unfortunately kill four people, but I will touch on that later. Firefighters of various brigades were fighting the Scaddan west fire, and once it developed into a wildfire, they just ran for it; they had to. They headed east along Griggs Road to try to outrun that fire. It is important to learn about early intervention, and what regulatory things we need to change with the Civil Aviation Safety Authority to deal with impediments that do not allow the two local aircraft to be used.

Mr M.J. Cowper: Are they air tractors, or what?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: They are 602 field crop sprayers. The question is whether they can be appropriately authorised. Some work is being done now with the local government jurisdiction to look at the possibility of using them, even when the fire is not a Department of Fire and Emergency Services fire, if you like, in that terminology, but is a local government fire, in terms of who manages the fire in its initial phase. Is there the possibility, when that fire is under the jurisdiction of the local government, for the local government to mobilise the aircraft and provide predetermined dispatch and early intervention in trying to mitigate the development of a true wildfire?

Mr J.M. Francis: Member, I undertook to follow that up with the commonwealth Civil Aviation Safety Authority. I have done that; I wrote to the authority a few weeks ago. We will see what happens with that.

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Dr G.G. JACOBS: I appreciate the minister's efforts in that area. One of the problems is that if it is in a local government jurisdiction and they authorise the planes to fly, that local government will pay. We will have to work through that issue. As I said previously, when a fire is upgraded in severity and the squadron is coming from the south west, the local appliance can be retired to allow the authorised squadron from the south west to do the job.

Fire mitigation was wanting, as was the need for the creation of a firebreak, particularly to contain the fire in Cape Arid National Park. The fire in Cape Arid National Park fell under another jurisdiction. It came under the Department of Parks and Wildlife; it did not come under the Department of Fire and Emergency Services or a local government. DPaW mobilised two D10s with an 80-metre chain to log an area that had previously been cleared; or "chained", if you like, which is the technical word. That had not been done for many years. That work commenced. However, when the fire was downgraded, the bulldozers stopped, even though there was much more work to be done on the eastern boundary. The job needed to be completed.

We hope not, but there is always the potential for another fire at another time. This firebreak would be a good mitigation barrier for the future. There was a question about who was going to fund the bulldozers to continue the work. Twenty-five grand was spent to get the bulldozers there, but who was going to pay for further work to complete the mitigation job into the future?

[Member's time extended.]

Mr J.M. Francis: It was resolved, was it not? It did happen.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: It was resolved, but I will tell the minister how it was resolved.

Mr J.M. Francis interjected.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Yes, and I lost even more hair! I spent eight hours negotiating with DPaW, DFES and local government about who would fund it. The bulldozers were already there but they were going to pull them out. It was resolved eventually. The Shire of Esperance funded the fuel and Brett McDonald from McD Contracting Pty Ltd funded the leasing of the bulldozers from the original contractor, and threw in the labour. McD's and the shire funded the cost to complete the firebreak. It provided a fire mitigation barrier. It is not the only answer; no one thing is the answer. In fact, the mitigation break protected farmland and national park reserves on unallocated crown land. Whose responsibility is that? Is it the responsibility of the shire and the local government to fund that? All I have heard from DFES and DPaW is that they do not do fire mitigation. But, hang on, it is essentially government land and does the state government not have a responsibility for some of that fire mitigation? I will leave that question with the Minister for Emergency Services.

The third part was communication. As the member for Girrawheen said, there was a problem with terrestrial communication. All 21 mobile phone towers within the region of the fire field went down because the power went off. There is a battery backup, but the battery backup lasted a maximum of three hours. In and around the management of the fire field, there was no ability to get people in there with generators. Telstra had generators ready, but it could not get people into the fire field to crank them up and restore power. Horizon Power did a great job replacing over 500 wooden poles with steel poles—which was a good move—in three weeks. Communication was critical in fighting the fire. It also implicated the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' very high frequency network. It is really important to look at how we can minimise the power issue and the mobile phone towers issue. It was brought up with the Prime Minister when he was in Esperance. We should look at longer life batteries or technologies that allow us to maintain power for a length of time until resources and backup can restore power permanently.

The community would love to thank BlazeAid for all its work in the reconstruction after the fire. Many hundreds of kilometres of fencing were destroyed. BlazeAid worked for months in Esperance to reinstate fences. The Lord Mayor's Distress Relief Fund worked exceedingly well for us. Something like \$1.65 million was raised through the Lord Mayor's appeal. All that money went back into the region. Also, the state and federal governments triggered the Western Australian natural disaster relief and recovery arrangements. That helped our restoration.

In the last few minutes I would like to illustrate some synergies between Esperance and Waroona. I will leave it to the member for Murray-Wellington to go into a lot of the detail. I would like to draw the house's attention to page 257 of Mr Ferguson's report. For me, neon lights flash. I refer to the paragraph about two-thirds of the way down the page, which states —

The creation of a service sitting wholly within the structure of DFES is also not recommended by the Special Inquiry. As outlined in this Chapter, DFES has not demonstrated a sufficient capability to manage rural fire, and as an agency adopts methodology and approaches which are unsuited to the rural

fire context. It is also a unionised environment, and does not sufficiently involve or utilise volunteer bush fire brigades, which are the backbone of rural fire management.

That is the message that I am getting from it. It is not about blaming anybody; it is a systemic issue about looking at how we fight this war. It is a war. How do we reduce and mitigate loss, particularly the loss of life?

Recommendation 17 relates to the emergency services levy. There have been questions about the levy increasing over time and how that levy is spent. A few local fire brigade volunteers have asked me whether that money is really spent and do we get value for money in spending it to fight fires in the regions?

I want to finish with decommissioned fire appliances. The minister will recall that I have grieved to him about this on quite a few occasions. It seems that Mr Ferguson backs me up in the arguments that I have been putting to the minister for some time. Opportunity 18 states—

... in consultation with the Association of Bush Fire Brigade Volunteers, to review the policy for disposal of ‘retired’ firefighting vehicles to first make disposed vehicles available to landowners who are sponsored by the local Brigade. Such vehicles to be subject to a limited decommissioning process.

As the member for Girrawheen said, we need every appliance, especially when we have fires of the savagery and multiple sites, as we had in Esperance.

On traffic management, I recount a story very quickly. I got a call on the Tuesday night, which was 17 November, when this fire went through and devastated Scaddan. Unfortunately, the fire caught up with three backpackers and one local farmer, who was actually a fire brigade member, along Griggs Road. With the heat and the smoke, unfortunately, they died in their cars. I was rung by my previous electorate officer, who is the mother-in-law of this fellow who has a farm in the region. She said, “David is out there and he doesn’t know what to do. He wonders whether you could help.” I asked her what the problem was. She said, “David is there with a group of farmers and there are these two incinerated cars with people in them, and they don’t know what to do.” She told me that they had called all sorts of people to come and help, particularly the police, because they could not do anything. They did not want to move or touch anything, and they could not leave the field. They wanted to know what to do. Of course, this was an issue of management. The whole firefield was locked down to everybody—even the police. These poor people were sitting there with these incinerated people in cars, and they could not get any assistance because the firefield was locked down. This is an issue around traffic management. The fire had already been through the area and it had scorched everything. Surely these other emergency support services, like police, could go in there in that situation. Importantly, recommendation 14 states that we need to review the whole process of traffic management after a fire has been through in order to support people such as David who sat on Griggs Road not knowing what to do in the tragic situation he found himself in.

Minister, the report contains some very important recommendations, but I have to say, member for Girrawheen, that the ink is hardly dry, so we cannot immediately say what we are going to do. I am sure that we will say what we want to do, and I am sure that the minister will work through these issues. I am with the member for Girrawheen and the whole Parliament: we need to look at these systemic issues and make a difference. These are tragic events and unfortunately they are likely to recur. We hope that we can mitigate the loss of property, but particularly the loss of life. I commend that we follow these reports, but the government needs time to review them so that we can make a difference to mitigate loss.

MR C.J. TALLENTIRE (Gosnells) [5.43 pm]: I rise to support the member for Girrawheen’s motion and, indeed, support the member for Eyre’s comments. This is a very frightening situation. How we manage fire in our Western Australian ecology is a very complex issue. Unfortunately, it seems that we are destined to face this problem, often with tragic overtones, again and again. I want to focus on what I think is a very important aspect of this debate—that is, a recognition that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to responses. I heard the member for Eyre talk about the need for the fast-response approach. That is certainly something that I have heard from the community as well. People who live on the south coast close to those Esperance fires have said that the fast-response approach could have saved much damage and tragedy. I am interested in the discussion about different types of aircraft. I recall back in the 1990s, a Canadair aircraft, made by Bombardier in Canada, was trialled to demonstrate the aircraft’s scooping ability and very fast turnaround. At the time, I wrote to that then Minister for Emergency Services, Bob Wiese, member for Wagin, to suggest to him that he contact European governments with Canadair aircraft. I had already been in contact with the fleet based in Marseille, which at the time was doing nothing during our summertime. In December, January and February, the Canadair aircraft were in an aircraft hangar and available to us. But Mr Wiese, in his wisdom, did not want to follow up on that idea. I put it to members that that is another option that is available to us. This resource is around. I know that the Skytrains and the big helicopters are leased and come in from overseas and what have you. The fast response capability is definitely there.

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I really want to address the issue of the different ecologies we are dealing with. We have so many ecosystem types. I know that earlier today the minister met with Peter Cosier from the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists. The meeting was primarily about having a system of accounts, rather like we have budgetary accounts, for the environment. I know that the minister had a briefing on accounting for nature. When we talked about that, we talked about the need to have accounting for native vegetation. In that discussion, we asked: what scale could we do that at? Recognising that mapping of vegetation complexes has been done across WA and that there are over 1 000 different vegetation complexes on one scale, we said that that would be too fine a scale and we would have to move out to perhaps 100 different vegetation types. I would put it to members that those 100 different vegetation types have 100 different fire mitigation strategies associated with them. Very broadly, the difference between what we would want to use as fire management mitigation practices in the jarrah-marri forest in the Darling Range—not far from here—is totally different from what we would want to do on the south coast on kwongan-type vegetation and different again to what we would want to do in the Great Western Woodlands located towards the south coast and through up to the goldfields. Those are three different vegetation types for which we would want to have very different fire management practices.

In the media today I heard discussion about the government's failure to meet its 200 000 hectare burn target, and I think the government needs to be challenged on that question. I am very interested to follow this discussion. It goes back to the estimates committee hearings looking at the 2014–15 budget, when the Minister for Environment said —

Although we have that goal of 200 000 hectares, our priority is those burns that may protect assets and settlements, which, by their very nature, are much smaller burns.

I picked up on that point, and said, “Let's have a look at this” and asked the minister, “What sort of key performance indicators are you generating?” I asked that in May 2014. The minister replied —

That is a very good question, and that has always been one of the difficulties with the 200 000-hectare target. I will ask the director general to give a little more background ...

The point is: where does that 200 000-target apply? We are not referring to the whole of the south west on a line from Kalbarri to Esperance. I think that target applies very much to the higher rainfall zone. That needs to be understood. I do not think that was part of discussion that I heard on various media reports in the last 24 hours. I was reassured by one of the minister's senior officials, Mr Peter Dans, at the 2014 estimates hearings, when he said that there was a plan in place to look at and develop a system of priority burns. After all the effort and prompting Labor members have done during the estimates process and other debates on fire, I wonder where that system and where that work had gone.

I was relieved to hear in May this year the minister read a ministerial statement titled “Department of Parks and Wildlife—Prescribed Burning Program” in which the minister defined and clarified what the 200 000 hectares should look like. The minister's statement, which refers to three zones, reads —

Zone A extends away from the urban interface to a distance of 3.5 kilometres, zone B extends a further 7.5 kilometres and zone C comprises the remainder of the department-managed landscape.

The critical point here is the burn targets within those zones —

The annual prescribed burning targets for the three zones are 20 000 hectares, 40 000 hectares and 140 000 hectares respectively.

We are beginning to realise that within what we can broadly define as the higher rainfall area, there is that assessing and determining of priorities. We are getting away from the idea of mitigation. We need mitigation and in certain places we need prescribed burning, but we are getting away from the idea that it is a one-size-fits-all approach. We are learning this stuff as we go along; there is no escaping that. No-one has all the answers on this. It is complex because we are dealing with so many different circumstances. Then we have the overlying complexity of climate change—a drying climate, and then the drying of the various vegetation complexes, the changes in rainfall patterns as well as the concurrence of incredibly dry conditions with incredibly strong winds. These are conditions that we have not met before. Unfortunately, we are going to meet them with increasing regularity. The government of the day is always going to have a huge challenge managing fire.

Other aspects of the minister's statement outlined the desire to keep a certain percentage with a recent burn target of fewer than six years, and I will clarify that. The minister stated —

The second measure is the proportion of the landscape on which it is less than six years since it was last burnt. This is based on research showing that prescribed burning is effective in significantly reducing the frequency and size of bushfires in the forests of the south west when at least 45 per cent of the landscape is maintained at less than six years since last burnt.

I contrast that with some of the science, and a lot of science has been done in this area. Although I say that we are learning as we go, there is a massive amount of science. I point members to a collection of papers by eminent

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scientists in the area titled “Project Vesta, Fire in Dry Eucalypt Forest: Fuel structure, fuel dynamics and fire behaviour”, which was published in 2007. It was compiled by some notable scientists, fire ecologists and foresters—Gould, McCaw, Cheney, Ellis, Knight and Sullivan; and the introduction states —

The reduction of wildfire behaviour immediately following fuel removal by burning is obvious:

In other words, if we remove the fuel load by burning it, we will dramatically change the fire behaviour should there be a subsequent burn. It continues —

there is no surface fuel to burn, and crown fires collapse within a few metres of the perimeter of the burnt area.

It goes on to a critical point —

Reduction in fire behaviour in subsequent years is not so obvious.

That is where I begin to question this whole theory around the six-years-since-last-burnt idea. Maybe that is the best science we have, and admittedly these reports were compiled in 2007, but there is still a question mark over how effective that burning off is. I know that ecologists talk about the downward spiral we get when we burn because we open up areas to weed incursion; the weed species are much more flammable than native species and then we have to burn almost on an annual basis. I do not think anyone would really want to see the whole of the south west burnt on an annual basis; it would be a complete denial of what we have got. Instead, we have to find a way of working within the parameters and the ecology that we have and recognising the human variation in types of ecology. This is an extremely complex area. That is why I am concerned, when I hear about various reports, that we are not yet taking that on board.

Much of the work that needs to be done in the future is around the science. Of course, Ferguson has put forward merging the volunteers and the professionals and creating different bodies. I recall when I was with East Gidgegannup volunteer bush fire brigade that we had a difficult relationship with the professional firefighters. There was a view that the professionals were great when it came to dealing with house fires, but it was the volunteers’ job to look after the bushfires and, indeed, paddock fires as well. I imagine the situation has moved on from my time with the volunteer bush firefighting unit at east Gidgegannup in the mid-1990s. I have no doubt that things have moved on. This issue of making sure we have a strong, fast attack capability relates directly to the support that we have in that volunteer base, but it also requires a well-supported, well-resourced professional organisation—an organisation that has access to aircraft, whether it is the Dromaders, or eventually the Canadair-type aircraft that are available for fast response. I can recall when I was living in the hills just how essential it was to have four-wheel drive LandCruisers with I think 500 litres of water on the back. It happened to me three times. We had a tenanted property next door and on three different occasions—each time with new tenants who were caught out or had fires that they thought were still permitted—they allowed those fires to take place, and it was a frightening situation for us and one that was immediately responded to by the LandCruiser with the 500 litres of water. People could phone up and it would arrive immediately, and then the fire was put out. It was a fast-response approach. In the Perth hills, it was possible to do that. The vehicle would probably have been there within about 15 minutes of detecting the smoke so good was the paging system that alerted people on call to come out and fight the fire. They were there within 15 minutes, and that was just enough time to put out the fire to avoid a catastrophe such as a huge fire taking place. This concept of fast response is absolutely critical.

I am wary of the workload that is imposed on the volunteers. I recall how we would inevitably have that pager with us and we would hear about a fire on the Swan coastal plain—a vehicle dumped in the Gngangara pine plantation—and volunteers were required to turnout to put out that fire. People volunteer on the basis that they will be working mostly in their own area, and, of course, people want to help in other areas, too, but primarily their interest, knowledge and confidence is mostly in their own area—the area that they know. They know where the different water sources are and the road layout, and from a safety point of view, it is very important that, wherever possible, we ensure that volunteers work in the areas that they know properly and that we do not have to send people kilometres away—many hundreds of kilometres away in some cases—to areas where they are not familiar with the terrain. They will not have the same knowledge of how the vegetation burns. It is interesting how people develop this understanding of what the ecology is like in a particular area and what the burning patterns might be at different times of the year. I would say that I have a reasonable understanding of how a fire will move in a jarrah-marri forest, but I would be quite lost if I was trying to fight a fire on banksia woodlands. Unfortunately, those banksia woodlands are very fire-prone areas. If members think of areas such as Lancelin and Jurien, they will understand that the risk there from lightning strike is high. Many fires in those areas are caused by lightning strikes on those hot, dry, windy days; and perhaps there is a hint of a storm in the area and that is why the lightning has occurred. But we seem to be getting an increasing number of dry storms going through, where not a drop of rain falls. People can see the clouds gathering, but no torrents of rain follow to put out the fire.

Sitting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm

MR M.J. COWPER (Murray–Wellington) [7.00 pm]: We are dealing with private members' business, item 12 on the notice paper, which is about bushfire management. The member for Girrawheen has moved —

That this house calls on the Liberal–National government to advise on the immediate actions it intends to take on bushfire management prior to the 2016–17 fire season, and the funding of those outstanding recommendations from the Ferguson report and those which are still unresolved from previous reports.

That is what we need to focus on. The wording of the motion is not too bad inasmuch as we can get bogged down in some of the stuff that occurred during the fire, which has been well documented by Euan Ferguson's report, "Reframing Rural Fire Management: Report of the Special Inquiry into the January 2016 Waroona Fire". I will comment on the Ferguson report. One week ago I got my hands on it and was able to get some trusted friends with vast experience in operational and frontline firefighting to go through it. We walked through it together and spent quite a number of hours discussing the recommendations and points. We did not get to the end of the report. We got about 90 per cent of the way through it, and it was about 10 o'clock or 11 o'clock at night and we had to get back home. We concluded at that point that it was a very good report and that it was what we were hoping for. We gave it about an eight out of 10.

As a result of this report, a huge weight has lifted off the shoulders of a number of people. Members can appreciate that a number of leaders in rural Western Australia take on various roles. One of the most important is the captain of the local fire brigade. Those people are in every town and sometimes there are several in a district, and that is certainly the case throughout the south west. I pay homage to all people who put themselves forward as volunteers in service to their communities. Albeit it is on a voluntary basis, they still take their role very seriously. Fortunately, with the exception of perhaps Dwellingup, there has never been a natural disaster—how do I say it?—that has been so catastrophic. I have personally lived through cyclones. I went through floods in the Fitzroy Valley in 1984 and cyclone Orson and cyclone Emma. They are all very tragic and do a lot of damage, but this fire, I must say, was by far the most catastrophic natural disaster that I have ever been involved in. People take ownership of the responsibilities that they hold, particularly fire chiefs, fire captains and district fire officers, and all the way down through the various roles and responsibilities that exist within each of the fire services.

When we lose a town and, indeed, two lives, people get very down on themselves. We have had to keep a bit of a keen eye on a number of our volunteer firefighters. I will make mention of a fella by the name of Kerry Argent, who is not a firefighter but a volunteer. He runs the Cookernup town hall. Kerry and his lovely wife, Cheryl, ran the relief out of there that came through thick and fast during the whole organisation. He looked after the welfare of not only the community, but also the volunteers, and he recognised that this would be an ongoing issue.

I was able to assist him with a number of things. We had a number of gatherings at the town hall at Cookernup, which also captures Waroona. The whole purpose of that was to get the community back out in a collegiate manner, listening to each other's stories and helping each other. To do that, Kerry organised a number of events, which I was able to help him with. They were great events and, in fact, they have been getting 120 to 130 people. Members might think that is not a lot, but when the community comprises only 300 people, it is the vast majority of the community. We have had a pizza night and a beef and gravy night. We are also having a breakfast and a pie night and various bits and pieces. Although they are only social events, they have a very important role in making sure that we keep an eye on those people who have been traumatised by the events. It has been very successful so far.

This report has lifted a weight off the shoulders of certain individuals. The fire captain at Yarloop is Mr Daryle "Darkie" Wilson. How do I describe him? He is the heart and soul of the fire brigade, but he certainly carries with him a lot of the responsibility of having lost his own fire station and also the town. But given the nature of the report, it—vindicates is not the word—demonstrates to everyone far and wide who were not familiar with what the brigade had to endure that he and his crew did the best possible job they could have done under the circumstances, along with the crews from Cookernup. They were able to save their town; the fire virtually burnt the whole way around it, but they managed to save their portion, Cookernup. I also recognise the other brigades in the Waroona, Murray and Harvey shires. I will name them. On the edge of the fire was Coolup, Waroona town, and the chief fire control officer there is John Twaddle; at Yarloop is Daryle "Darkie" Wilson; Cookernup, Bryan Green; then we move down to Uduc, which is now "Bear"—I am trying to think of his real name; Harvey Hills, which is Mr Doug Buist—I have gone a bit foggy on it. We have the crews out at Preston Beach, including Clint Vagg, one of the officers there; and Peter Macdonald at Lake Clifton. They are the actual fire crews that existed within the fire ground, so to speak, and they all did a wonderful job with the support of many others from right across the length and breadth of Western Australia, and also Australia. But the nature of this fire was so catastrophic that there was not a lot they could do given the circumstances.

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I recommend that everyone reads this report. Every member should have a copy of this and they should read the report inasmuch as it puts everyone on notice. I have mentioned this previously. Do not be mistaken: this fire situation will be repeated at some time in the future—hopefully, not in the near future. The important part that we need to focus on from here on in is: what will we do about it? This document is a blueprint. I say to members in this place in a collegiate manner that there is no future in sitting on one side of the chamber throwing barbs at one another when this is a deadly serious business. We need a proper response capability to deal with such catastrophic fires that will no doubt happen in the future.

The report makes a number of findings and provides a number of opportunities about which some members have spoken. I would like to touch upon some of the things I believe need to be considered. No matter which government takes control of this issue, it will be an issue for all flavours of government from here into the future. No doubt in the course of time there will be changes of government, but the issue will remain.

Another aspect of this report is that it tells the story of the interaction between the Department of Parks and Wildlife, the career and volunteer firefighters, and the people who support those organisations. I will say categorically that the DPaW firefighters in the forest are the experts at fighting forest fires. I have no doubt; I have seen it with my own eyes. I have seen them charge into fires with loaders, with the CO₂ canisters on their back, with fires and flames shooting over the top. I have seen them cutting firebreaks and displaying extraordinary bravery—we could call it stupidity, but it depends how we look at it. I have seen career firefighters very meticulously demonstrating their great skill in setting up a wall to protect themselves and assets from an approaching fire. I have also seen volunteer firefighters with brigades of volunteer farmers and their humble farmers' mates working in concert with each other. I have seen the bush fire brigade chasing down fires on a pincer movement and the farmers with the little units watching for hop-overs and sparks ahead of the flames.

Quite often, the flames I have seen, particularly in my electorate of Murray–Wellington, have been pushed by katabatic winds that come off the Darling Scarp. The report details the preconditions that attended this particular fire and made it catastrophic. It mentions the dry, hot winds that gathered over the wheatbelt of the south west that moved east on a hot day. As the sun goes down, the easterly winds start to pick up, and we are all familiar with that. Anyone who has lived in Western Australia knows about the winds that come from the east in the summer, particularly in the evening. The wind pushed the flames to an incredible level. This all started with a lightning strike—an act of nature—in the Lane Poole Reserve at the back of Dwellingup. There were two fires. One was a bit further to the east from the other. A decision was taken that Euan Ferguson described as being the right one. I think we can be comfortable with that description; however, there is still a lot of conjecture about whether the fire further to the west should also have been attended to. In any event, when the fire got to the Murray River, it took on a whole lot of new fuel loadings and it grew—it is all detailed in the report—from a fire that could be managed at a certain level. With the benefit of hindsight it was decided that the fire threat level should have been upgraded to higher than, I think, level 3. That did not happen until sometime later.

We are not here to pick holes in what did and did not happen, but right there is an issue I would like to touch upon and I hope both ministers might be able to take it on board—that is, the use of aircraft. We have aircraft called Air Tractors based in Manjimup, Bunbury and Jandakot. They are wonderful machines. Air Tractors are made in Texas. They have a 1 350 horsepower—I think one is 1 350 and the other is 1 400 horsepower. Some of them are single-seaters and the others are two-seaters. They have the capacity to lift 3 000 litres of water and suppressant, be refuelled, and take off from a fairly short runway and sent on their way to deal with a fire. Of course, they operate only during the day; as soon as the sun goes down these planes cannot operate for safety reasons—they cannot see where they are going, et cetera. The pilots of these planes come from Jandakot and sometimes stay over at Dwellingup; there are some facilities for planes to land there and there is overnight accommodation for the pilots. As members can appreciate, they are there from sun-up to sunset, so they are putting in 12 to 14-hour days and need some respite.

The capacity to turn these planes around in a fast manner is very much a key point for dealing with fires in the future. The key thing we have learnt from this fire is that when a fire breaks out, we need to be on that fire with everything we can possibly get. There is a question of cost, and of course, these planes do not come cheap, and the government has spent a lot of money bringing them together, along with the Skycranes and the Helitacks. That costs a whole bunch of money, but compared with the \$155 million this fire cost us, it is not a lot.

I would like to see an expansion of our aerial capabilities and I will talk about the key strategic location of an airfield called Wheeler field, owned by a friend of mine, Mr Raa Wheeler. He grew up in Boddington and then bought some land and moved down to Coolup. He is a keen aircraft enthusiast and has a couple of planes of his own. He also has a runway that runs north-east, south-west, is 1.4 kilometres long, and has been used for more than 10 years for the purposes of refuelling, rewatering and reloading aircraft. Over the last 12 months, something like 1.5 million litres of water have come out of his airfield. Were it not for that field, they would

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have to go to up to Dwellingup or back to Jandakot or down to Bunbury, and members will appreciate that all that would take time. The six Air Tractors were able to be turned around in about seven minutes. The efficiency of the volunteers and pilots, and the manner in which they operated those aircraft, was actually a delight to see. That part of the operation was fantastic. They jumped on a number of outbreaks but unfortunately, over the course of about two weeks a number of other fires started.

[Member's time extended.]

Mr M.J. COWPER: Those people were able to come to the fore and demonstrate their worth. When there was a fire deliberately lit at Lake Clifton, just off the Forrest Highway, I can tell members that within a very short time we had a number of aircraft in there, doing what they do best, which is putting out that fire. It burnt only about 10 or 15 acres, but an ignition point could be clearly seen. There are people in our community who are of real concern to all of us. It is one thing to have a natural disaster start a fire and cause damage, but it is something else knowing that someone is willingly going out and setting fires. Of course, that is, unfortunately, a condition of human nature that we have to deal with in today's society.

There is also a product colloquially known as "tomato sauce". I do not know what its actual name is; the minister might be able to help me out with that, but there is a product referred to as tomato sauce. It is brought in in a tanker and mixed in with the water and acts as a fire suppressant. I have spoken to the pilots firsthand, and the way in which they deliver that package of water and the tomato sauce mixture is different from how they would deliver water or some other surfactant that they use from time to time. It is expensive, but it is worthwhile investing in and we need to use it more broadly.

We also need to streamline the air desk operations. In recent years, until about the last five years, these aircraft were coordinated and implemented through a particular process. The member for Eyre said that a raging fire is not something that can be tactically operated from a desk chair in St Georges Terrace or anywhere else. We are very much reliant on the eyes on the fireground, with the capacity to respond in a timely manner. We have to give autonomy to the people who call in certain things. I know, for example, that a fire broke out in Dawesville. It was seen by one of the pilots, who requested permission to go and attend to it. He was still obviously operating in another fire field but he thought that if he could get on top of that one, it would save time in the long run because it would not get a foothold. Eventually, he was given permission to go and water-bomb that fire, and it was suppressed quite rapidly. That created a problem with various disjointed organisations and departments about who was going to pay, because it was within the bailiwick of some other aircraft that had been contracted to do it. The response has to be streamlined; there must be an immediate capacity to respond in a timely manner.

Aircraft are very much part of the capacity for the future, but we also need to look at attracting volunteers. I have personally been a volunteer in the State Emergency Service, volunteer marine rescue and bush fire brigades in the past. All who live in fire-prone areas must take some responsibility for educating themselves about how they may do this in the future. I would like to see some training done through the length and breadth of Western Australia, providing good and proper training for volunteers, with Department of Parks and Wildlife interaction to pass on many years' experience of dealing with forest fires, down to the people who live in fire-prone areas. We should give them perhaps a two or three-day course in which they could learn various basic fire mitigation strategies to prevent themselves from being burnt out. We know that an age-old discussion has taken place about whether to stay or go. People want to defend their properties, but before they can do that, they have to have done some precursor work. That would mean having the capacity to provide water supplies for about half an hour independent of a power supply, clearing around their homes and doing things to mitigate approaching fires. At the end of the day, if they have completed that small course, and maybe even had someone inspect their premises, they would be certified. They could perhaps put a sign or a target on their front gate, so that when the emergency services and police come by, they can see that this person understands the nature of fire and the risks they are taking, and that, if they want to stay and fight, they need to have taken steps to give them the capacity to do it. If we think that we can leave people there with a 12-millimetre garden hose with water trickling out the end and expect them to fight a fire, we are dreaming.

A report done long before this one, by Mr Mick Keelty, was titled "A Shared Responsibility". That responsibility has to be shared by government, by the various bureaucracies and departments, and by local government. It must be shared by every person in this state. The notion that we can sit back and expect the government to save the day is not right, and it is not right to expect volunteers to put their lives on the line every time. We need to work in concert with each other. We need to have greater focus on being more community spirited. One thing that has come through in all of this is that we have communities like Brunswick Junction and people like Francis Burgoyne, and the great crew that he had. The Colts football team of the Harvey-Brunswick-Leschenault Lions are virtually the young brigade guys coming on. Francis has a great group there, with Stephen Fry and a bunch of really good young people. At Harvey, the fire station is called Harvey Hills but they call them

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the Harvey girls! I am sure the Minister for Emergency Services looks forward to going down there very shortly to cut a ribbon on the new fire station that has been built there. I saw it a couple of days ago—it is looking good.

When I was up in Kununurra the other day, I went out to Packsaddle to see some friends. I helped them a few years ago when I was the shadow Minister for Emergency Services. We got some power connected to the then new power station at Packsaddle. They dealt with a fire there two weeks ago. It was a bit of a hills fire, but no less it was still something they kept on top of. How fires are dealt with in that part of the world is totally different from how fires are dealt with in Shannon or in Walpole or, God forbid, in Denmark, where I used to be in charge of the police station. God forbid if a fire got through that place! That place would burn to the ground. There are fuel loadings down there of 90 tonnes per hectare. I think the standard is 10 tonnes per hectare. Here we are splitting hairs about endangering some rare orchid or bird or something. When I went to the back of Logue Brook Dam, up Scarp Road, I saw trees that had exploded because of the intensity of the heat. The trees exploded because of the moisture inside them. They are dead. I got a bit upset before when I made the comment that there was not a single bug, creepy-crawly, bird, anything, alive at all. It was quite surreal to see it. Thankfully, there has been a break in seasons and things are looking a lot better. It will take years to regenerate the sections of the forest that burnt this year.

Another issue is how we interact with the land through those hills that are being regenerated by Alcoa. That will be an ongoing issue. At the back of North Dandalup—I own property in that area—they are regenerating the jarrah forests at the back of the mining area. They cannot do anything with those forests for 25 years. It will be 25 years before they can put a controlled burn through it, otherwise they will kill the trees. When mining sites are rehabilitated, they go through with rather large bulldozers and rippers to plant the seed. It used to be done by plantings; now a seed processor is used. It becomes quite problematic to try to get around the terrain. We will have this ongoing issue about fuel loadings.

The Ferguson report made a number of recommendations. We have to get real about fuel loadings. I understand that smoke might trigger asthma in some people. Let us look at the lessons that we obviously did not learn from 1961 and the lessons from the fires that occurred at Lake Clifton, where a number of homes were lost. We need to also look at the lessons from the fires at Margaret River, Kelmscott, and at Waroona last year and again this year. There is much to be learned from this report. As I say, no matter which government takes power next year —

Mrs M.H. Roberts: Or which party takes government.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Member, this is nothing to be frivolous about. I am saying that for whoever takes government next year, this will be a red-hot issue. It is absolutely clear to me that we need a separate fire service. These volunteer firefighters I spoke about feel less involved and less engaged. It is thought they have fewer skills and that they are not as professional as career firefighters. I take exception to that. That is some people's view; it is not everyone's view. We need to build capability to have some connectivity between the Department of Parks and Wildlife, local government and the volunteers in country areas to respond to the topography of the area. The best people to know about that are the people who live there. They have a vested interest because they have skin in the game. When a firefighting crew is sitting one kilometre east of Yarloop and crew members' homes have burnt to the ground, do not tell me they do not have a vested interest; they will give it everything. A number of other hardships occurred out of this fire that members probably do not know about.

I turn to the cost of trying to rebuild the town. I have been trying to get various ministers to come forward. The Minister for Regional Development said that he would bring some royalties for regions money to us, and we are waiting to see that money. We need the new sewerage system up and running; there needs to be some renewal in the town site. I have raised this with the Premier in this place on a number of occasions, but we now need to see some serious investment in social housing in Yarloop, we need a sewerage system and we need to start building confidence. We want land values up so that people can borrow against their assets; at the moment it is worth nothing. They cannot go to a bank and get money to rebuild because at the moment there is no demonstration of renewal. I think this and any future government needs to show leadership for a number of years in Yarloop.

MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah) [7.39 pm]: I was not at Parliament yesterday because I had an appointment in Bunbury. I am the chair of one of the local school boards, and it was a day when training was provided on presenting to become an independent public school. I drove to Bunbury via Waroona to pick up the principal of Mandurah Primary School, and our conversation, through Waroona, Yarloop and Harvey, was of course focused on the disaster that had occurred earlier this year. We saw the devastation at Yarloop, the loss of two lives, and of course the damage to numerous properties. The member for Murray–Wellington's comments were heartfelt—I could tell. I think I have said before in this place that the response to those fires that devastated Yarloop and parts of Waroona and Harvey earlier this year by the communities of the Peel and south west regions was remarkable.

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I do not think anyone really understands, unless they have been through it, what fire does. Yesterday in my Bunbury meeting I sat with the principal of Northcliffe District High School and the community member who is the chair of its board. There was discussion around the fire experienced by the people of Northcliffe in 2014. I know I will repeat some of the comments of the member for Murray–Wellington, who I think responded admirably as the local member to the challenge his community faced. I have said that publicly before. I do not think anybody in this place really knows what it is like unless they are directly affected or indeed see the anguish, courage, remarkable tenacity and mateship demonstrated by those fighting the fires. Those unique qualities of humanity come out when a community is challenged. The community member from Northcliffe made a comment that struck me, and I wrote it down. The member for Murray–Wellington talked about how a community comes together from tragedy, anguish and devastation. There are also elements that bring people together and she said in the context of the Northcliffe fire, and I quote her —

The fire burnt away all of our differences and made us focus on what makes us the same.

I thought this was a remarkable comment. She talked about the fact that her community is an interesting community because it is small and people come to live there for different reasons. She said that even though the fire was as devastating as it was—the Northcliffe fire was a forest fire, given the nature of the vegetation—she said it “burnt away all of our differences ...” From the ashes, if you like, of what happened there, that community is rebuilding and, I suppose, using the terrible tragedy of a fire as a catalyst to not only rebuild their community, but also learn from it and grow. I think that is truly remarkable.

Most of Yarloop is blocked off, but we went through yesterday when it was pouring with rain. It is amazing with this country of ours that a few months later we can have water-logged paddocks and huge bodies of water on the sides of the road and these stark contrasts between blackened vegetation and, as the member for Murray–Wellington said, scorched earth and yesterday it was soaked by great rainfall. It makes me realise the wonderment of this place we call Western Australia and this continent we call Australia that we can have these contrasts literally only a few months apart.

When people go through Yarloop, they can think about its tremendous history. I found it fascinating that on Anzac Day, less than two months after the fire, a service was held in a place, as the member for Murray–Wellington pointed out to me earlier this year, that had two Victoria Cross awardees. Little towns like Yarloop are dotted throughout Australia, and in the First World War they gave so much to the nation through Australian servicemen who served overseas and never came back. Yarloop is but one of many little towns throughout the country that did that. In the context of the history and wonderful heritage of Yarloop, it was and is people’s home. We cannot discount at any time what it means to lose everything, or what it means to be a person or group fighting to make sure that someone else is safe—sometimes they might not know them, but they are fighting to save their property or indeed their lives and livelihood. It is truly remarkable that we have this tremendous element in our communities as epitomised by people in the Esperance fires and many others that the member for Girrawheen highlighted earlier on when moving this motion.

The motion is a plea to the government to make sure that we do not just relive these experiences into the future. The timely warning we heard tonight from the member for Girrawheen, the member for Murray–Wellington and others is that, unfortunately, the likelihood of this happening again is very high. None of us hope this will occur, but the nature of a whole range of factors says we will see more of these fires in the future. We need to learn from the terrible disaster that these fires bring to individuals, livelihoods, families, communities and regions. We need to learn from that.

The motion the member for Girrawheen has moved is a plea to advise the house and, ultimately, the wider community on what immediate actions we will take, particularly because in a few short months the rains will abate, the ground will start drying out and we will be faced once again with another fire season. It will be upon us before we know it. The plea from the member for Girrawheen is absolutely timely. Indeed, the request for information about the actions that are intended from not only the Ferguson report but also those unresolved recommendations and actions associated with other reports on previous fires is timely, appropriate and necessary. No-one would wish on any community the pain and trauma of the experience of a fire. I can only imagine what it would be like. The closest I have been to experiencing what that would be like is through the experience of my very close friends the Pearsons, who were involved in the Dwellingup fires of 2008. They had lived on the scarp at Dwellingup for less than a year when they lost everything. They lost their house, and their daughter Shelby and their son-in-law Craig Douglas also lost everything. The house went. The thing that is remarkable, and I saw it as I travelled through Yarloop yesterday, is the behaviour of fire. One house can be totally destroyed and burnt to the ground but then something next to it, which looks as flammable if not more flammable, survives; that is how indiscriminate fire can be. In the case of the Pearsons in Dwellingup, they lost everything. They had gone shopping to Mandurah Forum in the morning and noticed some bad fires and plumes of smoke up on the hill and decided to head back home. By the time they had got through Pinjarra, the roads

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were blocked, the fire was going and they never saw their home again. They lost everything—their family heirlooms, the family history and photographs. Every single thing that was them, they lost. Thankfully, they did not lose their lives. Their daughter Shelby escaped literally within minutes of the fire coming up the scarp. I remember her telling me she packed the boys—she has four young sons—in the car, the two dogs went in and she was out through the front gate, heading to Dwellingup. Within 15 minutes their houses were gone. I cannot fathom what that could mean.

This motion is timely. The comments of the members for Eyre, Girrawheen and Murray–Wellington are very timely. We are not condemning the minister, but this is a plea for him to advise the house and the wider community what immediate action he will be taking. We recognise the report has been handed down, but very swift action has to be attached to the recommendations of this report. We need to know what he is going to do, but also why there are still unresolved actions to some of the unresolved issues associated with some of the previous reports. This house has received three reports on disasters from previous fires.

I listened with great interest to the member for Eyre, because he talked about a very different fire that did not have different conditions but involved different topography and vegetation and yet four lives were lost in that fire.

That in itself is also a tremendous tragedy. It is our responsibility as parliamentarians, as members of the community and as representatives of our community to be absolutely responsive to this issue. I think this is an excellent motion that the member for Girrawheen has brought to this house. It is timely and very important, and one that we should all consider an absolute priority.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse) [7.45 pm]: I would like to add some comments in response to the motion. The electorate of Vasse covers some parts of Yallingup that have significant fuel loads. It is also an area that has many volunteer firefighters who assisted in response to the Waroona fires. The Waroona and districts out-of-control bushfire tragically killed two people and devastated the town of Yarloop. It is a sombre lesson on the importance of reducing fuel loads on both crown and private land in the south west. The ability of the Department of Parks and Wildlife to conduct prescribed burns and for landowners to clear firebreaks on their own properties is critical in ensuring that another naturally occurring fire does not become a major catastrophe in the south west region. Over 200 000 hectares of bushland in the south west, located primarily in state and national forests, need to be burnt each year but, unfortunately, until recently, fewer than half of this target was ever reached. In addition, local government green tape and state and commonwealth environmental legislation continue to place onerous restrictions and penalties, including imprisonment, on private landowners to clear firebreaks or remove excessive regrowth from their land.

Prior to last year's strategic burns, I hosted a meeting with the Minister for Environment and the director general of the Department of Parks and Wildlife regarding an area of significant concern in Yallingup. This area has not been burnt for at least 30 years. There is an appreciation of the challenge of reducing the fuel loads in this area, which is complicated by the topography, the flora, our drying climate, local weather conditions, an expansive land mass area and fuel loads on neighbouring private properties. Much work has happened since that meeting and there have been boundary works in the Yallingup area. The department has almost completed some prescribed burns in preparation for further prescribed burns, and there has been some preparation on the ground and planning for the spring burning season. There will be further liaison with the local brigades when this happens, but it is taken very seriously. I appreciate the significant challenge in trying to mitigate the significant bushfire risk when a blaze starts in a high fuel load area. Since that time we have seen a commitment of \$20 million from the Liberal–National government through the royalties for regions program to add to DPaW's efforts in reducing the fuel loads. From July 2015 to June 2016, the department completed 44 prescribed burns in its three south west regions, which has increased its burn rate to 154 000 hectares. That is an improvement on last year's rate, but certainly much more needs to be done. These additional funds were delivered and have made a significant difference to the burn targets that we are trying to reach. Given that those funds were delivered mid-season and it is anticipated that they will be significantly utilised this year, it is expected that much work can be achieved in the Yallingup region.

As many people will tell members, prescribed burning in high growth forests is a significant and expensive job, but it is also essential. It is also essential that private landowners lessen the threat of bushfire on their properties by installing firebreaks and having well maintained gardens. It is unacceptable in today's environment to delay prescribed burns because of community concerns over the amount of smoke in the air, as is local councils imposing fines on landowners for clearing regrowth or installing large firebreaks. Far too often, I hear that this is the case. Many lessons need to be learnt from the tragic fires at Waroona to ensure that such devastating events do not occur again. Changing our attitudes towards prescribed burning is one of the most important things.

The Ferguson report acknowledges the importance of fuel management as well as the challenges and complexities in meeting such targets. It acknowledges the Department of Parks and Wildlife's role in the rapid

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containment of bushfires and the significant impact reducing fuel loads has on reducing an event under extreme weather conditions. The report also provides some recommendations regarding hazard reduction efforts around settlements and critical assets, guidance to landholders about reducing fuel loads and suggestions that DPaW should work with the Forest Products Commission to explore various policy options for thinning in forested areas. The report reinforces the fundamental relationship between proper fuel management and the challenge of balancing that against bushfire risk reduction. It highlights the fact that this is not only a challenging issue, but also a critical one. I have encouraged people from my electorate to make a submission in response to this report, in particular, the many volunteer firefighters who made an outstanding contribution. They supported not only the prescribed burn efforts in the area, but also fire-fighting in the Vasse electorate and in other regions such as Yarloop, Waroona and Northcliffe.

Following a thorough investigation and discussion with all the stakeholders involved, I look forward to the government's response to this report's recommendations.

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services) [7.52 pm]: I was not sure whether I would get a chance to start my reply to the contributions tonight. I will make the most of the seven minutes on the clock. I thank everyone for their contributions, particularly the member for Girrawheen for moving the motion. Bushfire management is nothing that we shirk from as a government. We need to be very much on top of it, proactive, and open about what we are doing. I will not go through all the speakers, but I also thank the member for Murray–Wellington. Obviously, he was significantly involved in activities around the fire down in his electorate. He has been a very passionate advocate—it is sometimes a little bit difficult—for the people he represents. If members of Parliament in this place looked at the way the member has stood up for what he thought was right, regardless of the consequences, I think we could all learn a lot of lessons. Well done, member for Murray–Wellington. I think his electorate should be very proud of his endeavours.

I realise that I have a very limited amount of time and I know that the Minister for Environment would also like to speak. The bottom line is, without making it too basic in the short time left, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and local volunteers in the volunteer bush fire brigades—who are the responsibility of their local governments—were primarily responsible for combating the bushfires that ravaged this state. It is not just Western Australia. In the last fire season, significantly catastrophic fires ravaged areas in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia also Tasmania. We have been part of interoperability changes with crews between different jurisdictions; they have come over to help us and we have gone to help them at various times. Only about six weeks ago in the northern hemisphere, there were amazingly catastrophic fires in the northern part of the United States and in Canada. It is the result of something significant happening to the climate, but we need to look just at the state of Western Australia and the south west. When there are obviously shorter and more intense periods of weather conditions during winter, obviously there is a larger fuel load. Clearly, as Mr Ferguson pointed out, we need to come to terms with the fact that this is not going to get easier; it is going to get harder, so we need to get better at what we are doing.

Without dwelling on it too much, obviously two key recommendations were controversial, if I may say so, but they also will take some time to address. The first of these recommendations—this is not necessarily in the order of priority—was that the government should consider a rural fire service. The member for Murray–Wellington pointed out to me earlier behind the Chair that he likes the term “country fire service”, because rural fire service predominantly refers to the agriculture sector, whereas country fire service covers everything. All those things need to be considered. My view—obviously the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition, as I read his press release last week, support this view—is that if we are to consider going down such a path, we need to take our time to get it right. My view is pretty simple; if it is going to make a material difference to the way we organise resources in the state of Western Australia, whether it be combat or mitigation, we need to give it serious consideration.

The other recommendation which has escaped a bit unnoticed by the media—I think we have concentrated on the rural fire service—and which is probably the more significant one is to move resources away from the response to mitigation to fuel load reduction. As the member for Eyre would remind me, prevention is better than cure. If more of the risk is removed, the fire will be less intense, and that is something that we have to look at.

That brings me to ask the questions: If we are to have a rural fire service or a country fire service, or whatever we might call it, what is it going to do? Is it going to take assets out of the Department of Parks and Wildlife? Is it going to have some kind of command-and-control structure over very passionate, independent country bush fire brigades that want to stay independent and may want their own department? Some even say that they want their own commissioner, but they do not want to come under direct command and control. Will any resources of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services be reassigned? The funding model is the least of the issues that we need to consider. The bottom line is that a lot needs to be considered. If we start a new government authority

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effectively, we do not want to take the minimalist view, which is just to have another bureaucracy for the sake of having someone else in the incident management team. It needs to do more than that if that is the answer. They are the key points I would make about that issue.

As to the rest of it—I will not have time to go through it all—my priority, as I have said publicly in the last week, is to do what can physically be done between now and the next fire season that will make a difference. It is no good doing things that will not make an awful lot of difference. I know that the member for Girrawheen talked about the amalgamation legislation. In the next few minutes, we will move on to different emergency services-related legislation that might, in dire circumstances, make a difference. But, at the end of the day, if it means that more water can be put on a fire faster, I am interested in it. If it means that fire crews can be kept safe, we can better utilise the resources on the fireground and we can come up with a solution that will address the other big issue, which is access to and from the fire zone, I am interested in it. I remind the house that there are two extremes with access to and from fire zones. I carry this note in my wallet with the names Trevor Murley, Lewis Bedford and Robert Taylor, who lost their lives on 30 December 2007 at Boorabbin because they argued their way through a checkpoint. I do not think any person in this place wants to be the person at the checkpoint who makes the decision that causes people to lose their lives. A coroner's report came out in 2009 that was pretty harsh on what happened out there. I am not saying that we cannot come up with a better system; of course we can. We need to make it more accessible and more flexible, but we still need to maintain safety, because firegrounds are battlefields. They are full of burning trees, live powerlines, restricted visibility with smoke, moving emergency services vehicles, and a host of other things, not to mention the heat and the flames and everything else that goes with it. They are dangerous places in which to operate.

As for all the other things, my intention, as I have said, whether it is to try to expedite the roll-out of the vehicle location system, whether it is to try to look at access to firegrounds, whether it is to try to do something about maintaining the safety of volunteers, whether it is coordinating the resources and the trucks, or the training, or whatever it is, is to do whatever I can do between now and the start of the next fire season.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.