

## **BUSHFIRES**

### *Statement by Minister for the Environment*

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah - Minister for the Environment)** [12.04 pm]: The very serious bushfires currently raging across southern California are a timely reminder to us of the need for vigilance and extreme care as we enter our bushfire season. The latest reports from California indicate that more than 500 000 people have been evacuated, 1 600 homes have been destroyed and a further 68 000 homes are under threat. These fires are on a scale that we have not seen in Western Australia. Indeed, our fire prevention and preparedness programs, particularly in terms of fuel management, mean that it is unlikely we would experience such extensive fires in the south west.

California is not the only area that has suffered from extreme bushfires. Members may be aware that the 2007 fire season in Greece was the worst on record, with 76 people killed and 270 000 hectares burnt out. I inform the house that one of Australia's foremost experts on bushfires is a member of an Australian team of six fire and emergency specialists that is going to Greece to advise the Greek government on bushfire preparedness and response. The Department of Environment and Conservation's Principal Fire Operations Officer, Terry Maher, leaves for Greece on Saturday. The Australian assessment team will work with Greek authorities to identify lessons that can be learnt based on similar experiences in Australia. The team members have expertise in large-scale emergency management, aerial firefighting, bushfire incident control and operations, after-fire recovery, training and community information systems. Mr Maher has more than 35 years' experience in fire management, particularly in combating wildfires in forests and other fire-sensitive environments. He led the Western Australian contingent that was part of the Australia-New Zealand team of fire managers that went to the United States in 2000 to assist with wildfires in that country and has been a driving force behind the introduction of aerial fire-fighting into Western Australia in the mid-1990s. The fire assessment mission is expected to enhance the collaboration on bushfire management between Greece and Australia. Mr Maher's involvement reflects the high standard and professionalism of our bushfire managers and crews in Western Australia. I also want to particularly acknowledge the fire crews and managers from the Department of Environment and Conservation, along with their colleagues in the volunteer brigades and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, for their efforts in the lead up to the bushfire season.

Although winter rains this year were significantly above last year's, in the south west the forest areas are drying out quite rapidly, and without further rain over the next three weeks or so prescribed burning activities could again be curtailed.