

SPRING BURN-OFFS

Grievance

MR MURRAY (Collie) [9.38 am]: My grievance is directed to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage. I wish to raise my concerns about the spring burns that are supposedly held in the summer and autumn periods but which are now being held more and more in the spring. I make it clear from the outset that I am not against these burns; it is the timing of them that concerns me. It concerns me greatly that the forests are lit when all the birds are in their nests, and the wildflowers are at their best and have not seeded. These fires wipe out generations of small birds and animals, which do not get a chance to get away. This has been a dry year, so the fires have been intense, and they have caused all sorts of problems for the ecosystem in our state forests. Again, I point out that I do not oppose the burns as such; it is the times at which they occur that concern me.

Another thing that occurs is that when the flowers have not got to the seeding stage, the fires burn them off, and there are no seeds for the next year. People may say that the next year the flowers look better, and that is true to a degree, but it is not necessarily the case. The reason they look better in some cases is that one species has not had the chance to propagate properly because there are no seeds.

Another major problem at this time of the year is logs that are partly alight and smoulder in the centre. During summer the logs burst into flames and a bushfire is created. It is often the result of spring burns. Last year the Department of Conservation and Land Management was a major contributor to the cause of wildfires due to its practices. Only two weeks ago, a major spring burn was held at Nannup. I was travelling on the South Western Highway; there were no prevailing winds and visibility was reduced to about 50 metres because of the smoke. I received many complaints from people who suffer from asthma and other respiratory problems about how that affected their health. People in the hills were quite lucky as they did not get the same concentration of smoke as people in Perth and Bunbury. These things must be taken into account. The rains and winds of autumn temper fires. It would be preferable to have fuel reduction burns during autumn.

Country towns in the south west have worked very hard in building up their tourism industries. I was very disappointed when I drove into my home town to see that both sides of the road had been blackened by fire. Fire had consumed vegetation up to the road verges. It is contributing to the destruction of a tourism industry that people have spent a lot of money on. People are encouraged to visit the south west and see the wildflowers and the bush. By the way, people should watch out for snakes; I have seen plenty of them on the roads. The bush is at its best at this time of the year and to see it blackened by fire is a major concern to the shires and people who have spent a lot of money on tourism in an attempt to keep the smaller towns going. These concerns have been brought to me on numerous occasions by a variety of people. I hope the minister takes note of concerns in the community about what is happening in those areas.

DR EDWARDS (Maylands - Minister for the Environment and Heritage) [9.42 am]: I thank the member for Collie for his comments and for raising the issue in the House. Fire is a difficult issue. A few weeks ago, Perth experienced a smoke haze and people became more aware of the problem. It is even more difficult with wildfires that cause lives to be lost, property damage and environmental damage, as happened in Sydney in 1994. The city experienced devastating fires. The Department of Conservation and Land Management is very aware of the associated problems of burn-offs. Recently, the department conducted an internal review of fire management. It is now conducting workshops with its staff to ensure that proper objectives are set for burn-offs. A fire management symposium will be held early next year to explain the issue to the community and present scientific reasons for when, where and why burn-offs are conducted. It will also include community views and work out the best way forward. Following that, an independent review of fire management will be conducted. I assure the member for Collie that there will be opportunities for people such as him, who represent people in areas subject to burn-offs, to contribute to the reviews.

I will comment on the Department of Conservation and Land Management policy that underpins burn-offs. CALM's policy is primarily to protect community and environmental values on land that it owns. It uses fire as a management tool for its own objectives. The department has a moral and legal responsibility to ensure that wildfires or prescribed burn-offs on CALM land do not impact on other property. Some burn-offs are conducted to protect nearby private property. Prescribed burn-offs are used for community purposes as fuel reduction burns and in regenerative forestry operations. In some instances, burn-offs are used for conservation. The annual prescribed burn-off program averages 200 000 hectares of low fuel protection burn-offs, approximately 20 000 hectares of jarrah and karri forest silvicultural burn-offs, and depending on the year and the circumstances, 5 000 to 20 000 hectares for habitat and ecological values and, or, research purposes.

CALM is very aware of the impact of smoke from its fires. In recent years it has had a very strict protocol between the Department of Environmental Protection and the Bureau of Meteorology to ensure that all

meteorological data is taken into account and that burns are conducted on days when there is likely to be the least smoke impact on communities.

The member spoke about spring and autumn burn-offs. Generally speaking, the fuel in spring burn-offs is more moist than in autumn burn-offs. That is as obvious as spring follows winter. A very dry winter has followed a very dry summer. That helps to explain some of the conditions mentioned by the member. A spring burn-off is generally less intense than an autumn burn-off. A spring burn-off results in a more patchy burn-off. More habitat for fauna is preserved. For fauna, a spring burn-off is better than a more intense autumn burn-off because autumn is often preceded by a dry summer.

I take on board the comments about wildflowers made by the member. A burn-off in spring during the wildflower season looks more devastating because the previously flowering wildflowers are destroyed. Research has been undertaken into the ecological impacts of spring and autumn burn-offs. I assure the member that, on the basis of scientific papers given to me, the impacts are not as devastating as he believes. Regular spring burn-offs may result in an impact on seed populations. Burn-offs are managed to try to ensure that that does not happen; it is a factor taken into account.

The department has a prescribed burn-off program in the Collie area. This year the department has undertaken more than it planned. In most years the department does not conduct as much burning off as it plans. The plans are worked out in accordance with the risk of fire. A master burn plan sets out the program based on the analysis of that risk. Underpinning that, a wildfire threat analysis establishes the most important areas to be burned and at which times. The department thinks through whether burn-offs should be in spring or autumn. Some recent burn-offs in the Collie region were started later in the day because staff are aware that conditions are drier than usual. Starting the fires later in the day reduces the scorching of trees and provides more protection. I acknowledge that there will always be problems. I have examples of the trouble to which the department has gone. In the Collie area, a landowner was worried about a particular tree. During a prescribed burn-off, precautions were taken around the base of the tree to protect it. The tree caught alight but the fire was quickly extinguished and the tree was saved. Reasonable communication exists between the community and the department. Advertising has been undertaken in the Collie area to let people know about burn-off programs and where they can go to see the maps of the areas proposed to be burned.

Burn-offs will always be a contentious issue. If not enough is done preventively, people may get caught out by wildfires. If that results in a loss of life there will be major recriminations.