

STATE FORESTS, FIRE HAZARD

**633. Mr OMODEI to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage:**

I refer the minister to the extreme fire hazard facing Western Australian production forests, national parks and reserves, particularly in our State's south west region, which has experienced the driest 12 months on record, and ask -

- (1) Can the minister confirm the recent warning of the Department of Conservation and Land Management that up to two-thirds of the State's forest - or about 700 000 hectares - is carrying heavy fuel loads, which could lead to high intensity fires over the next eight months?
- (2) Will the minister acknowledge that, as a result of the Government's decision to lock up forests and remove resources and equipment capable of containing fires, Western Australia's production and old-growth forests are now subject to a greater threat than ever before?
- (3) Will the Government accept responsibility for any losses as a result of wildfires which sweep through our south west forests uncontrolled, due to the Government's lack of a fire prevention policy?

**Dr EDWARDS replied:**

- (1)-(3) I thank the member for the question. Fire hazard is an issue of concern to all members of Parliament. Members who come from regional areas can see how dry the countryside is, and that there is a very real risk of fire. I live near the airport, and periodically I see the Department of Conservation and Land Management's water bomber aircraft fly overhead, and hope they do not drop their load of water on my house. The issue of fire hazard is very serious at the moment given that, up until the end of July, Western Australia had experienced its worst drought since 1914.

I have had many discussions with CALM on this issue. Earlier in the year, CALM put to me a plan for a restructure of the southern forest region. I sent it back, asking what the department was doing about fire, and the availability of staff to fight fires, given the prevailing climatic conditions. As a result of that, CALM increased the number of staff full-time equivalents in the southern forest regions, so that the capacity will be retained.

CALM's programs have been examined, particularly the reasons for control burning, and priorities have been established according to those reasons. The first priority is to carry out prescribed burning to protect communities and property. The second priority is the silvicultural reason - to protect the forest resource. The third priority is the protection of habitat, which is a lower-grade reason. The member for Warren-Blackwood made a comment about locking up the forest, but he is overlooking the fact that setting aside areas to be protected is not done by simply building a fence and ignoring those areas. They must continue to be managed, and CALM is carrying out its usual program of burning.

Mr Barnett: Where is the money coming from? Where is the budget?

Dr EDWARDS: The money is available for this program. In fact, this year's budget includes \$3 million to fight wildfires. Under the previous Government, every time a wildfire occurred, and CALM expended more money than it had, the department went cap in hand to Treasury to recoup its expenditure. The present Government has allocated an extra \$3 million this year, because of the possibility of fires.

Exactly a week ago I was in Collie, where I launched one of the new spotter planes. Spotter planes are flying over the forest to make sure fires are detected quickly. Fire officers are also surveying the forests from towers to provide early warning of any fires detected. Everyone in Parliament should be worried about this issue, because we cannot control our climate, and we have had a very dry winter. Measures are in place, however, and the Government is taking the problem seriously. It will do everything within its power to keep the situation under control.