

BUSHFIRE RISK

215. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage:

I refer the minister to the alarming news reported in yesterday's *The West Australian* that Western Australia faces a growing bushfire risk.

- (1) Is the minister aware that according to the September 2001 Muller report, which reviewed fire operations in forest regions, there is potential for large areas to be burnt by wildfires that would be uncontrollable during severe weather conditions?
- (2) Can the minister confirm that last year's prescribed burning program covered 75 000 hectares, down from 174 000 hectares in 1999-2000?
- (3) In the light of the information provided by the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the obvious fire risk, what new action is the minister taking to reduce the risk for the coming summer?

Dr J.M. EDWARDS replied:

- (1)-(3) I thank the member for this question. It is an extremely important issue. Naturally, it is very important to the member's electorate. We have recognised that a big problem exists. We had a dry winter this year, and an even drier winter last year. It is for those climatic reasons that the prescribed burning program is behind schedule.

Mr P.D. Omodei: That is a nonsense. Why did CALM not start burning earlier?

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: The Department of Conservation and Land Management started burning earlier. The prescribed burning program has been behind schedule for the past two financial years. It was not behind schedule the year before that because there was good rainfall that year, but it was behind schedule in the previous year. This year, we are hoping to burn around 200 000 hectares of land as part of the prescribed burning program. To date, around a quarter of that has been done. The Department of Conservation and Land Management has made very good progress with the burns it has undertaken. We had a discussion about this issue in the middle of the year, and although I do not have any say in operational matters, I supported the concept of CALM starting its burning program earlier. CALM started its burning program in winter because it was dry and it could be started then. One of the difficulties CALM has already had is that fire behaviour is much more intense for this time of the year than it has been in other years. That is a result of the dry conditions. Throughout the year, CALM has paid particular attention to ensuring that its firefighters are properly trained. Indeed, some of the firefighters have grumbled to me about the training they must go through and the fitness levels they must achieve. We are making sure that the work force is up to speed. We have allocated an extra \$3 million for wildfire suppression. We recognise the need. In addition, \$250 000 has been allocated for extra firefighters and seasonal workers to address this problem.

Earlier in the year, we conducted an internal review of fire that identified some of the problems CALM is facing. We also held a three-day fire symposium to lay out to the community that this is an issue that we need to tackle. In addition, the Environmental Protection Authority will shortly undertake a review of how CALM conducts its burning and the reason burning is undertaken. I was in Sydney when that city was recently ravaged by fire. After discussions with the New South Wales minister, I understand how devastating this problem can be. We are, therefore, extremely disappointed with the member's federal Liberal colleagues, particularly the attitude of the Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government.

Several members interjected.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: That always gets a bite. What a joke. My officers and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority officials have worked very carefully and closely with commonwealth officials. We put on the table what we believed was the best proposal for Western Australia. It included medium-sized helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. The proposal we put on the table, which our experts from FESA and CALM deemed to be the best for this State, was cheaper for the federal Government than its proposal. However, it is concentrating on the east coast. Due to the efforts of members opposite, the federal Government is ignoring our State. Its behaviour is disgraceful. We will keep pursuing that. I implore members of Parliament to take this issue seriously and to recognise the problem that we face in this very dry State.