BUSH FIRES AMENDMENT BILL 2022

Introduction and First Reading

Bill introduced, on motion by **Mr R.R. Whitby (Minister for Environment)**, and read a first time.

Explanatory memorandum presented by the minister.

Second Reading

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Environment) [12.41 pm]: I move —

> That the bill be now read a second time.

I am pleased to support the Bush Fires Amendment Bill 2022. This bill is an imperative part of the government's response to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Recommendation 13.1 of the royal commission stated that state and territory governments should expedite the development and implementation of the Australian Fire Danger Rating System. It should ensure that there is national consistency in the visual display of fire danger ratings and action to be taken in response to each rating. Recommendation 13.2 of the royal commission stated that state and territory governments should deliver education to ensure that the public understands the new Australian Fire Danger Rating System, the potential danger attached to each rating, and the action that should be taken in response to each rating. On 30 November 2021 this government responded to these recommendations in the affirmative, noting that Western Australia was on track to implement the Australian Fire Danger Rating System in 2022. The purpose of this bill is to instate the nationally agreed and consistent Australian Fire Danger Rating System and corresponding fire behaviour index thresholds.

Climate change is influencing the frequency and severity of dangerous bushfire conditions in Australia and other regions of the world, including through influencing temperature, environmental moisture, weather patterns and fuel conditions. There have been significant changes observed in recent decades towards more dangerous bushfire weather conditions for various regions of Australia. The current rating system in Western Australia is based on science that is over 60 years old and does not contemplate this evolution towards more dangerous bushfire conditions that we are experiencing at an increasing rate. The new Australian Fire Danger Rating System will utilise modern scientific models to not only provide greater accuracy in predicting the way in which a fire is likely to behave, but also be easier to understand for government agencies, business and industry and, of course, the wider public. The Australian Fire Danger Rating System is a key component in addressing the lessons we have learnt in recent years. In particular, we know that consistent and straightforward messaging is key for the safety of our communities, because, after all, fires do not recognise state and territory borders.

This government is committed to strengthening the planning for and management of bushfires within our state and beyond. This new rating system is the result of several years of national collaboration and development to keep Australia and, indeed, Western Australia, as safe as possible in the face of the ever-increasing threat posed by bushfires.

I am sure that I do not need to remind honourable members of the devastation wreaked on the state of Western Australia by bushfires in the last 12 months alone, let alone the preceding decade. The 2019–20 bushfire season made international headlines with catastrophic conditions ravaging Australia, and, of course, the life-altering fires we solemnly refer to as the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in the summer of 2009 that led to the greatest loss of life from fire, in Australia, in modern history. This tragic event will forever be fresh in Australia's memory and has warranted a dedicated and determined response for change, now within sight by virtue of the new Australian Fire Danger Rating System.

The Australian Fire Danger Rating System aims to improve public safety and reduce the impacts of bushfires in four important ways. Firstly, by improving the scientific accuracy behind fire danger predictions. This will provide benefits such as more accurate fire danger information, increased confidence in predictions, improved management outcomes and reduced economic losses. Secondly, by improving the way that fire danger is communicated. This will provide benefits such as a more informed public, resulting in fewer lives lost, less property damaged and reduced community recovery costs. Thirdly, it will provide government and industry with better decision-making tools. This will provide benefits such as better proactive fire management, better firefighting outcomes, improved community safety and reduced over-warning costs. Finally, it will build a truly national system. This will provide benefits such as reduced development costs, better resource sharing, less chance of public confusion and improved national outcomes.

By passing this bill the government will ensure that Western Australia is a true contemporary of all other states and territories in the implementation of this new rating system. Western Australia will be better prepared for the threat of bushfires by being an active participant to this modernised system, which draws upon over 60 years of scientific advances in the field.

I commend the bill to the house.

Debate adjourned, on motion by **Mr P.J. Rundle**.