

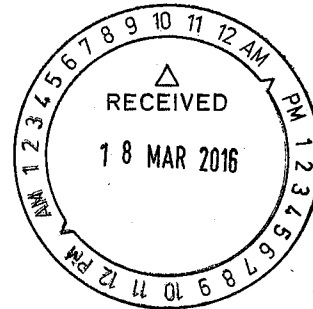


The Hon. Rick Mazza MLC
Member for the Agricultural Region
Parliament of Western Australia
Shooters and Fishers Party



Hon Simon O'Brien MLC
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Chairman *Simon*



Petition No. 108 – Operations of DFES

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission on this important petition.

As you are aware Western Australia has had a horrific fire season this year with the loss of property and lives. In the last five or six years there have been fires at Boddington, Northcliffe, Walpole, Roleystone, Toodyay, Parkerville, Esperance and more recently the Harvey, Waroona and Yarloop fires. As a result of the Waroona/Yarloop fires more than 2000 rural residents from across Western Australia signed the petition questioning the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' (DFES) fire management practices.

The government review that is currently being undertaken by Euan Ferguson, is another bureaucratic review. As the committee is no doubt aware there have already been two bureaucratic reviews in the past several years which have done little in making effective changes to manage fire fuel loads or implementing response measures that are effective in bush fire incidents. In my view it's time for a parliamentary review, consistent with what was called for in the petition.

There appears to be a real problem with how DFES communicates imminent danger to the community. I am troubled by a recent media report that stated that *fire authorities... admitted Yarloop residents were only mentioned in an emergency alert 25 minutes before a firestorm tore through their tiny town on Thursday, killing two people.*¹

There are substantial limitations imposed on bushfire personnel and the community to make on the spot judgements for applications such as back burning or the use of appliances to immediately take action to control the threat of fire. I note that the Yarloop Volunteer Bushfire Brigade has made strong claims in the media that they were abandoned by the

¹ WA fires: Yarloop residents 'given 25 minutes notice' before fire wiped out town at <http://www.watoday.com.au/wa-news/wa-fires-yarloop-residents-given-25-minutes-notice-before-fire-wiped-out-town-20160112-gm3xhh.html>



hierarchy to defend their town.² I am ill at ease with the assertion that DFES are the most experienced firefighters on the ground.³ Many volunteers have a wealth of experience and local knowledge that provides an invaluable level of expertise that has been gained over generations of experience in dealing with bushfires.

I have received a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence that the relationship between DFES, Volunteers and DPaW is not the best. I'm not convinced much has changed since Mike Keelty found that the 'fractured relationship' between FESA and DEC was well known not just in WA but across the country and the animosity between them was 'palpable'⁴

I am disturbed about the restrictions applied to people who are prevented from obtaining supplies for themselves, their family and stock and then return to their properties after the fire threat is over. I note the petitioner's (Ray Hull) comment in an online farm weekly article that *they also raised issue with fire ground access ahead of the fire as farmers evacuated stock and after the fire as they attempted to access their properties and manage stock and provide care for injured stock.*⁵ *The unnecessary road blocks were nightmarish to say the least.*⁶

I am confident the committee sees the value in independently examining all of the claims made in the media reports since the devastating Yarloop fires. In my view the DFES should be limited in managing bush fires and a stronger alliance should be developed between DPaW, local government and volunteers. The way DFES manages bush fires has produced poor outcomes, we can't continue to replicate the mistakes over and over again. The current system is broken and needs urgent repair. Fires in rural areas are fought by volunteers and farmers who have a strong sense of community, they know their terrain and they take a lot of pride in what they do for their community. I agree entirely with the call from Mr Hull for *DFES to be removed from managing fires in rural areas and to leave it to the people who know the land.*⁷

² WA bushfires: Fire Commissioner Wayne Gregson has 'no regrets' over handling of South West fires at <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/western-australia/wa-bushfires-fire-commissioner-wayne-gregson-has-no-regrets-over-handling-of-south-west-fires/news-story/e97a5003c45093f60a40bc5db7c58503>

³ WA bushfires: Fire Commissioner Wayne Gregson has 'no regrets' over handling of South West fires at <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/western-australia/wa-bushfires-fire-commissioner-wayne-gregson-has-no-regrets-over-handling-of-south-west-fires/news-story/e97a5003c45093f60a40bc5db7c58503>

⁴ FESA faces major overhaul in wake of Keelty report at <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/western-australia/wa-fire-boss-sacked-after-scathing-bushfire-report/story-e6frg13u-1226117291263>

⁵ Petition puts heat on fire management at <http://www.farmweekly.com.au/news/agriculture/agribusiness/general-news/petition-puts-heat-on-fire-management/2751720.aspx?storypage=2>

⁶ Petition puts heat on fire management at <http://www.farmweekly.com.au/news/agriculture/agribusiness/general-news/petition-puts-heat-on-fire-management/2751720.aspx?storypage=2>

⁷ Petition puts heat on fire management at <http://www.farmweekly.com.au/news/agriculture/agribusiness/general-news/petition-puts-heat-on-fire-management/2751720.aspx?storypage=2>

The most alarming media report I have read states that *despite a State Government commitment to establish an "open and independent" review, special inquirer Euan Ferguson has no plans to publicly release any submissions or hold any public hearings.*⁸

I am sure the committee is disturbed that *Mr Ferguson's decision to keep private all hearings and submissions undertaken so far contrasts sharply with the Government's pledge for an open inquiry, set out in the preamble to the inquiry's terms of reference.*⁹

The issues raised in this letter have not been taken to the Ombudsman.

Yours sincerely



Rick Mazza MLC
Member for Agricultural Region

15 March 2016

⁸ Waroona bushfire inquiry: No plans for public hearings or release of submissions, inquirer says at <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-05/little-public-information-on-waroon-bushfire-inquiry/7223710>

⁹ Waroona bushfire inquiry: No plans for public hearings or release of submissions, inquirer says at <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-05/little-public-information-on-waroon-bushfire-inquiry/7223710>