

BUSHFIRES — ESPERANCE — CORONIAL INQUEST

Statement

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural) [5.37 pm]: In 2015, I witnessed firsthand the devastation of the Cascades, Merivale and Cape Arid fires near my home town of Esperance. The fifth anniversary of that event has just passed. Although the community is moving on to the best of its ability, the fires have left a significant scar on the community. These fires burned through 322 000 hectares, tragically taking four lives and doing enormous damage to thousands of hectares of crop, 4 500 head of livestock and countless infrastructure—buildings and so on.

On the fourth of this month, I raised questions in this house regarding the government's response to the coroner's inquest, which was tabled in Parliament just over a year ago. By happenstance, or maybe as a direct result of my questions, the Minister for Emergency Services tabled the state government's response to the recommendations the very next day. It makes for interesting reading, and I want to make some observations about it. In the first instance, I think it is appropriate to acknowledge that the government has taken sensible, if somewhat slow, steps towards a more proactive fire mitigation approach, and there has been some progress in improving mobile firefighting capability and the construction of fire sheds and additional communications, as we heard about today in response to the question by Hon Rick Mazza. Given the time available, I will focus my comments on the recommendations that the government has not supported but has simply paid lip service to.

Recommendation 1 of the coroner's report states —

... DFES immediately take steps to create and fill the additional positions of a District Officer, Area Officer (Rural Competencies) and Bushfire Risk Management Officer to supplement the current Area Officer in Esperance.

The government's response was —

DFES has employed a Community Emergency Services Manager for the Shire of Esperance, and as an interim measure, seconded a Natural Hazards District Officer from the Kalgoorlie office to the Esperance office.

The reality is that the coroner actually recommended three new positions, leading to a total of 4.5 full-time funded DFES positions in Esperance. At the time of the fires, there were 1.5 FTE funded positions; there are now 2.5 funded positions. The supposedly new position is actually an existing role relocated from Kalgoorlie to Esperance, and the person is still doing the work they were doing in Kalgoorlie. It is bizarre that the government supposedly supported the coroner's recommendation but has chosen to provide only one additional FTE, which is not a new FTE and is not doing work for the local community. Recommendation 4 of the coroner's report states —

... State Government give consideration to giving a higher drafting priority to the Consolidated Emergency Services Act.

The government's response —

The State Government will review a higher drafting priority to the new amalgamated emergency services legislation in the second term of the McGowan State Government.

The government is in no hurry. It is a year since the coroner presented this report and we have been crying out for clarity on this legislation, because it is a major change to the legislation. The government's position is not to give it a higher priority, but to review giving it a higher priority after the election. That is no response.

Recommendation 5 states —

... DFES fund an additional two light tanker appliances and one heavy duty appliance to be used by the Esperance volunteer Bushfire Brigades, at their discretion. The appliances should be provided on a permanent basis ...

The government's response —

DFES is committed to undertaking a review and potential expansion of the summer season firefighting fleet allocation across the south west land division ... based on a risk to capability assessment.

The reality is that during the fire season, the Esperance community, and other communities, can apply for access to vehicles in the high season fleet, but approval and access is not guaranteed. This is not an ideal situation and not the standard recommended by the coroner. There has been some progress on general upgrades to bush fire brigade trucks as part of the normal vehicle replacement process, but that has nothing to do with the coroner's recommendations. In addition to the appliances recommended by the coroner, Esperance also requires four light appliances that can be utilised as rapid-response vehicles. At the moment, locals are using their own vehicles in this capacity, because they do not have light tankers.

Recommendation 9 states —

... the WA Government ... undertake an assessment of established airstrips in the ... Esperance Shire ... with a view to identifying airstrips that can be enhanced to permit operation by water bombers. Once a suitable site has been identified, priority should then be given to funding the necessary upgrades to make the airstrip(s) suitable for that purpose.

The government's response —

The State Government supports an assessment of airstrips in the Shire of Esperance.

DBCA has the operational capacity to assist DFES and local government with the identification and assessment of existing airstrips to determine suitability for aerial suppression operations.

That is not a commitment. The government is not doing anything. Essentially, the six lines in the media statement actually say that we have done nothing on that. This is an incredibly important issue because a lot of airstrips located on private land would make water bombing far more efficient when necessary. The government needs to step up, take control of this really important issue and get on with identifying the airstrips that are available and how they can be made appropriate.

Recommendation 10 states that the government should —

... give priority to funding ... a Wheatbelt based aerial fire suppression response for the full fire season commencing in the Wheatbelt and concluding in Esperance.

The state government's response is that it supports this measure in principle. That is great. The government supports it in principle but it is not doing anything about it. I have raised the availability of water bomber capability directly with the minister responsible, as it is one of the most important issues raised by volunteers, especially when it comes to the control of fires in land managed by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. The current arrangements are inherently inefficient and leave plenty of communities without capability. There is already capacity, for example, in Esperance for water bombing, but because of exclusive contracting arrangements, those aircraft cannot be used, and that needs to change. It is disappointing that the government's response does not deal with the most critical recommendations of the coroner's report. I think the Esperance community, and indeed all our communities, deserve better. As we enter the fire season, these issues come to the front of mind.

In closing, in the limited time I have left, I will directly quote the coroner's report so that members can get a clear picture of what happened on that day, why the coroner made the recommendations that she did and why the government's response is so inadequate. The report states —

Weather conditions recorded around this time showed a wind velocity of 101 km/hr, temperature of 43.2°C and 0.8% relative humidity.

The people on the ground said that they —

... had never seen conditions like this with a fire raging, and after the fact ... came to understand that they were the most extreme fire conditions recorded in Australia to this date.

...

The fire front was estimated to be 5 km wide at its largest. As the bushfire travelled across the crops it was unstoppable, burning everything in its wake.

The speed of the fire was amongst the highest ever recorded. The fire jumped all of the mitigation work and firebreaks, despite the efforts that had been put in to trying to contain the fire. The fire was also circling around and restarting after fire crews had doused it, which was unusual and made it even harder to fight.

...

By 4.00 ... pm ... the fire was travelling at a rate of approximately 36 km/hr, and it was gaining pace at an extraordinary rate. ... its speed may have reached close to 50km/hr, which is 'unheard of'. ... on the ground, and ... at the DFES office, were struggling to map the fire movement and predict where the fire would go due to its unprecedented speed and magnitude. ... the fire nearly tripled anything he had anticipated in terms of the distance it travelled and he was in disbelief and awe at its ferocity. The Cascades fire had jumped the Highway and the Merivale fire had crossed Cape Le Grand Road by this stage, and both fires were out of control. The Incident Control Centre was overloaded and the firefighters on the ground were trying to outrun the fire.