

PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM — FIRE ESCAPES

5451. Hon Sally Talbot to the Minister for Mental Health representing the Minister for Environment

I refer to the Western Australian (WA) former Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) and, post 1 July 2006, its replacement, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), prescribed and logging regeneration escaped fires/burns in south-west native forests and bushland for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2011, and I ask —

- (1) How many CALM/DEC prescribed/regeneration burns have escaped in each of the years 2000 to 2011 inclusive?
- (2) In relation to (1) above —
 - (a) what dates (day/month) did the escapes occur;
 - (b) what was the locality of the escapes;
 - (c) who was, or were the coordinators responsible for issue the orders for lighting the fires;
 - (d) what was the weather forecast prior to, and after the fire escape;
 - (e) how many hectares of logged/unlogged native forests/bushland was damaged;
 - (f) how many hectares of land, other than CALM/DEC land was damaged;
 - (g) what was the total monetary cost to the WA taxpayer associated with extinguishing the escaped fires;
 - (h) what was the total monetary cost to the WA taxpayer to compensate landowners for damage to their property as a result of these escaped fires;
 - (i) how many hectares of native forests/bushland have been back-burned by CALM/DEC in an attempt to control each of these escaped fires; and
 - (j) what ecological and biodiversity values were lost due to the escaped fires?
- (3) How many naturally occurring (lightning strike), arson and escaped fires have been allowed to burn without being extinguished in each of the years 2000 to 2011, inclusive?
- (4) In relation to (2) above —
 - (a) how many days/weeks were these fires allowed to continue to burn without being extinguished; and
 - (b) did any of these fires, that were left to continue to burn, later become out of control, if yes, which fires were they?
- (5) What was CALM/DECs annual budget for conducting prescribed burns for each of the years 2000 to 2011 inclusive?
- (6) What was CALM/DECs annual budget for conducting prescribed regeneration fires for each of the years 2000 to 2011 inclusive?
- (7) Is extinguishing of escaped fires, compensation to landholders and the rehabilitation and restoration of effected areas and species included in CALM/DEC annual prescribed burning budget?
- (8) If no to (7), why not?

Hon HELEN MORTON replied:

- (1)–(8) During the 11-year period 2000/01 to 2010/11 the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) conducted 1,816 prescribed burns in the south-west forest regions of WA. Of these 84 or 4.6% resulted in escapes. Over the same period, DEC responded to 6,370 bushfires across the whole of Western Australia. Of these 99 (1.6%) have been escapes from DEC's own prescribed burns, while 345 (5.4%) have been escapes from burns conducted by others.

The Minister is not prepared to require DEC to invest the amount of staff time that would be necessary to provide the detailed information requested across 84 individual fires dating back more than 11 years, nor is the Minister willing to name individual officers and thereby encourage a blame game and deter staff from carrying out a complex and difficult job. The Government supports staff who do this work.

DEC accepts responsibility for fires that are the result of escapes from its prescribed burns. Prescribed burning is the primary fire protection strategy in the south-west of WA. Research has shown that

prescribed burning across the south-west of WA over decades has not adversely affected the long-term persistence of flora, fauna and ecosystems.

DEC does not compensate landowners for property damage that might result from an escaped prescribed burn. However, where practicable, DEC works with affected landowners, using its staff and equipment, to make good disturbance and damage that have occurred. Where damage is beyond the scope of what DEC staff and equipment can rectify, landowners are encouraged to claim on their insurance.

DEC responds to all bushfires with suppression action, with safety of firefighters a primary consideration. Direct attack is employed where this strategy is safe and effective, with due consideration of environmental factors. Indirect attack, where firefighters revert to backburning and containment along existing roads and tracks, is often employed in wetlands and areas of inundation, dune areas and other types of difficult terrain and where disturbance through the use of machinery could threaten conservation values such as by spreading dieback.

In 2010/11 DEC spent approximately \$10 million on prescribed burning and \$27 million on bushfire suppression.