

## FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES — GNARABUP COMMUNITY FIRE SHED

### *Grievance*

**MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party)** [9.39 am]: My grievance is to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Emergency Services and I thank the minister for taking my grievance. This grievance addresses the government enforced closure of the Gnarabup community fire shed, which ensures the safety of the Wallcliffe Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade during operational measures and provides a rapid response to bushfires.

As the minister is aware, Margaret River has experienced several severe bushfires. The 2011 bushfire in particular devastated the community, with 39 properties destroyed, 26 homes burnt or damaged and the historic Wallcliffe House, built between 1855 and 1865 by Alfred Bussell, one of WA's pioneers, destroyed. This is not a distant memory for the wider community but one that is in the forefront of their minds. The decision to close the Wallcliffe Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade's second unit has overlooked the needs as well as the concerns of a coastal community that has been affected by bushfire on multiple occasions. I have been contacted by business owners, community groups and residents who understand a minor fire could ignite at any point, and if not extinguished within minutes, could potentially move to be a major bushfire incident.

Last November, a member of the Wallcliffe Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade was in the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions fire-spotting truck patrolling Wooditjup National Park on Carters Road following a fuel-reduction burn. This is the content on the brigade's Facebook post —

Just imagine if any of this bushland ignited in the middle of summer with a 20-knot wind behind it ... Frightening stuff.

We cant stress enough that bushfire is inevitable if you live in the Margaret River region. You really need to be taking immediate steps to work on your preparedness for this summer. You can already see how volatile the bush is now and fire authorities are predicting an above average fire risk season.

In the same vein, it is the government's responsibility to ensure our brave firefighters can respond safely and quickly to avert a potentially serious bushfire. This region continues to enjoy visitors to our beautiful coastal destinations and surrounding bush. Wedding season is in full swing with our wineries, breweries and hospitality venues heavily booked, and all it would take is a cigarette butt to spark a fire.

The location of the fire shed, maintained for years by members of the Wallcliffe Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, is in a critical position to enable a rapid response when protecting the coastal hamlet of Prevelly from a possible bushfire. The light tanker that was removed has been used multiple times over the past 20 years on a range of fires. St John Ambulance support has been used over a dozen times, with the service arriving within minutes of an emergency call-out to the Gnarabup–Prevelly area. The volunteers live close to the fire shed and can be on location and despatched on the fire truck to respond to any call-out within minutes. The closure of the fire shed and relocation of the firefighting appliance to the main headquarters on Wallcliffe Road will result in an increase to response times of more than 20 minutes, which will jeopardise the ability to distinguish or contain a minor fire before it escalates. The location of the fire shed and fire truck is critical in the brigade's firefighting strategy in Prevelly and to ensuring a rapid response.

The Westin Margaret River resort and spa has been a contentious issue for the Margaret River community, with opposition from the Margaret River Coastal Residents Association. The association has recently been quoted in the *Augusta Margaret River Times* as being “alarmed” at the shed closure. The president, Adrian Wilson, said —

“Once a fire starts in coastal heath it is very difficult to control.

“For very little cost, this unit provided extra protection and might have made the difference between a small incident and a major fire.”

This decision is hard to believe when a submission from DFES recommended against the proposed Westin Margaret River resort and spa and associated village development at Gnarabup due to bushfire safety concerns as the area faced a major population increase. On the one hand, DFES is concerned about Gnarabup being an extreme bushfire area and its ability to effectively mitigate a potential bushfire risk, and, on the other hand, it relocated the fire truck critically positioned near Prevelly for rapid response in a high bushfire risk area.

*The West Australian* reported last month that firefighters had held peaceful protests outside every WA fire station to highlight what they claim are major resourcing shortages posing dangers to themselves and the community. It was reported that firefighters were at “breaking point” and were worried about gaps in coverage and their own health and safety. Our amazing firefighters and volunteers play a critical role in protecting our rural communities and they must be adequately supported. I am concerned this decision by the government to remove the fire shed potentially puts our volunteer firefighters at unnecessary risk. An incident could happen at any time. I respectfully request that the minister reconsider this decision and take into consideration the impact this closure could have on

our firefighters' ability to respond rapidly. An extra 20 minutes could be the difference between the ability to extinguish a small fire and putting firefighters and the community in a potentially life-threatening situation.

I again thank the parliamentary secretary for taking my grievance on behalf of the Minister for Emergency Services.

**MS H.M. BEAZLEY (Victoria Park — Parliamentary Secretary)** [9.45 am]: I thank the member for Vasse for raising this issue and giving me, on behalf of the Minister for Emergency Services, the opportunity to discuss how her community is being better served through this decision in terms of bushfire readiness. The state government recognises the risk that bushfires present to communities throughout Western Australia. Management of bushfire risk is a shared responsibility between state government agencies, local governments, various organisations and private landholders. They all have important roles to play on this in our community.

In July 2020, the Shire of Augusta–Margaret River formally wrote to the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner proposing the transition of the Rosa Brook and Wallcliffe Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades to Department of Fire and Emergency Services management. The advice provided to DFES was that the council had voted unanimously to support the transition, which was also requested and supported by both brigades. The Wallcliffe brigade transitioned to DFES management last month, on 2 February 2023, and has been gazetted as the Wallcliffe Fire Services Brigade. As part of the transition to DFES, a review of the brigade's current facilities, including the shed the member mentioned, and assets was conducted to ensure they were fit for purpose and essential for operational requirements. During the assessment, DFES identified that the single-bay bushfire appliance shed in the Gnarabup–Prevelly gazetted fire district did not offer suitable infrastructure to support the requirements of an operational fire station.

The Wallcliffe Fire Station is located less than five kilometres from the Gnarabup shed and provides storage and infrastructure capabilities to meet the brigade's and local communities' operational requirements. DFES advised the Shire of Augusta–Margaret River and Wallcliffe Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade that as part of the transition agreement, the Gnarabup shed would be surplus to operational requirements, as it lacked the necessary infrastructure. Advice was also provided that the light tanker housed in the Gnarabup shed would be relocated to the main Wallcliffe Fire Station. This upgraded station now houses six appliances—three light tankers and three heavy-duty appliances. In addition, having appliances in one location minimises complications when responding to bushfires. As I said, the main Wallcliffe Fire Station is situated less than five kilometres from the Gnarabup shed and is well located to support the Gnarabup–Prevelly area. Whereas, the shed has no road to the south. The Shire of Augusta–Margaret River also currently supports eight volunteer bush fire brigades that provide bushfire protection over the broader local government area.

The member mentioned the devastating fires of 2011—and they were. Following the 2011 Margaret River fire, the state government enhanced the structural firefighting capability across the capes. During the southern high threat period, an enhanced response arrangement called the capes zone response is in place and covers the Gnarabup–Prevelly area. This zone arrangement provides enhanced response coordination and bushfire suppression and includes a volunteer fire and rescue appliance, a bush fire brigade appliance, two fixed-wing aircraft, two rotary wing aircraft, one Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions officer and appliance, and one DFES officer.

The Shire of Augusta–Margaret River owns the Gnarabup shed and associated land, which can now be repurposed for the local community. In addition, the local government chief executive officer has on several occasions provided confirmation, in writing, of their support of the DFES position. In addition, as the member is aware, the allocation and placement of operational assets is the sole responsibility of the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner and he is confident that this is the best decision for the continued operation of the bush fire brigade in the area.