

BUSHFIRES AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Motion

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural) [10.04 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house —

- (1) acknowledges the significant loss of life and property across the nation during recent fires and natural disasters;
- (2) extends its gratitude to volunteer and career emergency service personnel for their enormous contribution at a national and state level; and
- (3) recognises the role of those Western Australian personnel who travelled interstate to support relief and response efforts.

I note, as, obviously, other members will, that there is a very similar motion from Hon Pierre Yang for debate later on today, and I think that speaks to the significance of the events that have occurred over the past months that all sides of this chamber want to take the time and the opportunity to acknowledge that, to thank those people who have served and to acknowledge the loss of many people. It is absolutely an understatement that the devastating fires and natural disasters that we have seen across the nation in recent months have been of a scale and ferocity not seen before in this nation. It is an awful and very sad reality that many people have lost their lives in the course of these events, and I am sure that all members will join me in extending our collective condolences to the loved ones and friends of all those people who have tragically lost their lives in the course of those events.

It is also another tragedy that many homes have been lost during the course of these events, and the memories, blood, sweat and tears that have gone into building and making those homes have been lost as well. To all those people affected, I extend my sympathies. Having witnessed firsthand the devastation of the terrible fires in 2015 down in Esperance and the tragedy that that was, I can say that it is without doubt the most terrifying thing one can imagine—that confluence of weather events and fire that come together to render us helpless to hold back such an incredible force. To put that into some sort of perspective, I would like to talk about some of the statistics of those recent fires.

Sadly, there was one fatality in the Australian Capital Territory, and 56 688 hectares were burnt. In New South Wales, there were 25 fatalities, 2 176 homes were lost and 5.2 million hectares were burnt. In the Northern Territory, five homes and 6.8 million hectares were lost. In Queensland, 48 homes were lost and 2.5 million hectares were burnt. In South Australia, there were three fatalities, 151 homes were lost and 490 000 hectares were burnt. In Tasmania, two homes were lost and 36 000 hectares were burnt. In Victoria, five lives, 396 homes and 1.5 million hectares were lost. In Western Australia, one home was lost and 2.2 million hectares were burnt. In the course of these fires, nearly 2 800 homes were lost and almost 19 million hectares were burnt across this nation. That is something in the order of 55 or 60 per cent of the land mass of Germany, for example, that was burnt in recent months. It is a massive scale and, sadly, at least 34 lives were lost in the course of those fires.

In a Western Australian context, of course, we all remember the Yanchep–Lancelin fire in early December that burnt approximately 13 000 hectares and damaged a couple of buildings. The response to that from our emergency services personnel was incredible. In December, approximately six fires around Norseman burnt around 800 000 hectares, and, of course, we remember that Eyre Highway was closed at the time, causing pandemonium and a great deal of chaos for interstate travellers and freight, putting pressure on supplies into Western Australia. In the Stirling Ranges between 26 December 2019 and 1 January 2020, we lost 40 000 hectares in the national park—roughly half of the national park was burnt. In December, the Forrestania fires, around Lake King and north west of Cascades, burnt 253 000 hectares. From 3 to 9 February, the Lake King fire burnt 103 000 hectares, and about 20 kilometres of state barrier fence was destroyed. Just last week in Katanning, 4 500 hectares were burnt. Thankfully, only one house was destroyed, but some sheep were lost. An incredible effort was made by the brigades down there to hold back that fire in what were awful weather conditions. Also, 21 000-odd hectares were burnt in the Mt Ridley–Mt Ney fire complex in December–January. A huge effort was made in dealing with a huge amount of fire burning in Western Australia, as well as right across the nation. The obvious thing out of that, apart from the terrible tragedy that is the loss of life and home, is the economic cost. It will be well over \$4 billion, maybe \$5 billion, across the nation, which is a massive scale. Also, there will be a loss of revenue to the tourism sector of around \$1 billion. A huge amount of damage has been created right across the nation with those recent fires.

Of course, in talking about the scale of devastation created and lives lost, we must also acknowledge the efforts of our emergency service personnel, be they career or volunteer firefighters, who came together at that time from right across the nation to try as hard as they could to deal with the unfolding disaster. Many of these events obviously occurred in remote and very challenging terrain, and that required substantial numbers of volunteer and

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career personnel to be mobilised, both from within and outside their own little localities, if you like. That mobilisation, of course, reduces the availability of those people within their own areas. Even though many of them may have been stood down from the event they were dealing with outside their patch, of course, when they return home, they are not off duty. They are still available and will be on call whenever a fire is burning to try to deal with that as well. There is no rest for those men and women as they work very hard on the front line. In addition to those frontline responders are those in the background providing the technical and logistical support in managing those emergencies. A huge effort was made also by all those people as well as our international friends who came from around the world to assist in these emergencies. Of course, we send many people overseas to do the same when our friends overseas need assistance.

As we all know, aside from those emergency service personnel, there are innumerable volunteers in our communities who, although not directly fighting fires or dealing with the emergency itself, are providing the support those people need by preparing food, for example, and whatever other little service they provide that is essential to ensure that our emergency service volunteers can do their job.

To all those various personnel to whom I referred, I ask all members of this house to join me in extending our sincerest gratitude and thanks for everything they have done in battling these catastrophes across our nation. We are forever indebted to you for the work you do every day to help protect us.

Of course, Western Australia provided assistance to our colleagues in the east, sending over 300 personnel to New South Wales and Queensland. It is something we would do time and again and I am sure that they would do the same for us whenever we needed it. I also recognise their efforts in addition to the other personnel I mentioned and thank them for their service and for assisting our colleagues in their time of need. It is truly, I believe, a fine example of the great Australian spirit of pitching in and helping out our mates when they need it. It is something I think Australians, in general, and Western Australians would do without thinking twice. We can all be very proud that at those times we will pitch in and help out whenever it is needed.

Something that has become, I guess, evident in the course of these events is the extreme pressure placed on our regional communities and volunteer emergency service personnel. I want to take a bit of time to explore that a bit more. We saw many images throughout the course of these disasters of exhausted, tired, worn-out firefighters. They would put the gear down but continued to fight as hard as they could. However, there is no doubt there is extreme pressure on all of them in events such as this. I believe that provides an opportunity to reflect on what works, what did not work and how we may assist them in the future. Obviously, a great deal of debate has been raging across the nation during and following these disasters about all sorts of issues that are raised and what could be done better or differently. It is important that we have those discussions and listen and try as hard as we can to act on the requests of those people who have been on the front line. We could spend many hours in this place debating all those various issues but I want to narrow the focus a little and talk about our volunteers in particular.

There have been recent media reports in this state on the loss of volunteers from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' ranks. I refer to an article headed "WA needs you to save our volunteer fire crews" in *The West Australian* of 3 January 2020. In that article reference is made to the fact that the number of Department of Fire and Emergency Services volunteers has fallen by around 5 000 in the past nine years, from 31 450 in 2010–11 to 26 478 in the last financial year. The great southern region has lost more than 1 000 members during that period, as did the midwest–Gascoyne region. They are significant losses because we all know that the vast majority of our response to bushfires in particular is by volunteers. That declining number should be of the utmost concern to all of us and I think it will require a strongly concerted effort to address that decline. However, I do not believe it is simply a matter of asking more people to volunteer. It is a matter of listening to them and trying to understand what is preventing them from volunteering or making it more difficult for them to do the job they do as a volunteer while working in their existing career.

There is a good article in fact from SBS in January this year about exactly that. SBS went out and talked to volunteers right across the nation about some of their experiences on the ground and the issues they faced doing their job. I will refer to a couple of comments from that because it is important we hear them. Referring to volunteer Colin—not me—the article states —

Colin says he feels lucky that his boss has allowed him to take paid leave to fight fires ...

That is an example of how it is not so much just the volunteers themselves but their employers who need to be considered in all this. He said —

"My brigade gets by because most of the senior officers there are tradespeople—they run their own businesses. They're builders and carpenters, so obviously they just take time off and don't go to work and go firefighting."

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However, in doing that, these people are sacrificing tens of thousands of dollars to do that job while potentially losing customers from their businesses, but they do that because they want to help out and protect their communities. How we consider those issues as they are raised is important. Aidhan from Western Australia says that he does not believe volunteers should be paid as such, but they should not be expected to fight fires to the extent it is detrimental to their financial situation. Some form of compensation would be no doubt welcome, but he, personally, does not expect any. I am not sure that compensating our volunteers is quite the answer, but, certainly, in attracting more volunteers and allowing them and their employers to be supported at these times, is possibly an answer. Mark Tull, another rural volunteer, says that support for employers is the important thing to him so that volunteers can leave their paid work without fear of losing their job or losing their pay. How we do that is a great challenge for us as legislators and lawmakers in governments across this nation. There is no doubt that there will not be fewer of these disasters in years to come but there will probably be more and on a larger scale.

We will need to find a way to allow our volunteers to be on the fireground for longer than they have been in the past, and provide them with the right equipment and the right opportunities in their work life to allow them to volunteer without fear of losing their existing job. Over the years, I have spoken to a number of volunteers who have been reluctant to directly raise some of the issues outlined in that article because they are fearful that it may impact on their job or their local brigade. I am not sure that that is necessarily the case, but there is a fear out there of damaging relationships. We certainly need to look at that issue of them being free to communicate their problems so that we can assist them better. There is also a great deal of frustration on the ground after some very large fires in this state burnt in the middle of bushland. Some brigades were travelling for hundreds of kilometres in a fire truck every day just to follow a bulldozer through the bush. Is that the best use of those volunteer resources? Is that a contributing factor in volunteers not wanting to do that job? I do not think they would say no if they were asked, but it certainly puts additional pressure on them when they have to do such things. Clearly, we have a lot to hear from those volunteers. Here is an opportunity that we must take, while all of this is fresh in our minds, to listen to them.

There is a great opportunity right now for a good deal of reflection on what happened during those recent events. We have an opportunity to not only work to address the contributing factors, the cause and scale of the events and what we can do to mitigate risks associated with them and reduce the severity of those fires if we can, but also listen to our career and volunteer personnel. We can ask them what they need to continue doing their job and how we might attract more people into the volunteer service so that we are not relying on those same few people every time and can spread that load a little. It would be fantastic for them to turn up to training at their local brigade and have great numbers of people, so much so that not everyone can get a go at the same time. When they are called out for a fire, it would be great for them to turn up and have a crew for the truck and then some afterwards, instead of having to continually ask for people to put their hand up and scratch around to try to find those crews. That is what we should aim for, in addition to trying to reduce the severity and number of fires, of course, and we have a real opportunity now to make sure that we do that.

For me, this motion today is particularly about acknowledging the significant loss of life and property across this country and the scale of it. It is also about making sure we properly and rightly extend our gratitude and thanks to those who assisted across our nation and state in our time of need. I encourage other members to speak on this as well and offer their thoughts so that collectively we may find a way forward to make things a little better for our emergency service personnel and our nation.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral — Minister for Environment) [10.23 am]: I acknowledge at the outset the great motion we have before us. It is obviously a case of great minds thinking alike, with Hon Colin de Grussa and Hon Pierre Yang both on the same page in wanting to acknowledge the fine work undertaken by volunteers in this state, in particular over the past few months, with some of the tragic fires we have seen across the country. I would like to begin by offering my condolences to those people who have lost a family member or who have lost their livelihood, their house or their stock. Thirty-four people lost their lives over the last few months in the fires. Over 12 million hectares were burnt, and over 3 000 homes were lost. It truly is tragic. We also saw about 113 animal species that will need urgent help after their numbers and habitats were decimated. Australia has had a very challenging summer of bushfires. We have had unprecedented fires right across the nation. In a normal fire season, when one state has big fires like this, the other states rally around and can send volunteers or career firefighters to help it. However, this year we saw fires happening in multiple states at the same time. The pressure on the states was even greater and the ability for other states to help out with those fires was not as big as would normally exist. In saying that, though, Hon Colin de Grussa mentioned that he thought we had 300 volunteers from the west who went over east. As of 3 February, over 500 volunteers from WA had gone across to the other states to help them out, whether it was New South Wales or Victoria, in the main. We were able to fight the fires we had here, but also help out some of those other states in their time of tragedy.

I have to say that it has been great to see the nation rally, whether it was to raise funds or show support for those affected communities. I acknowledge Celeste Barber, the comedian, who posted on Facebook. It went viral, and

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thanks to her good work, over \$50 million was brought in towards the fundraising effort. We saw people, not only across Australia, but right around the world, show their support for Australia and for those communities that were affected by the fires. I want to add my support for and the thanks of the McGowan government to those people who did tremendous work over the summer both in Western Australia and across the country. I want to pay homage to the thousands of women and men in Western Australia who are involved in volunteering in the various fire services, whether it be the Bush Fire Service, the volunteer fire and emergency services, the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, the Marine Rescue Western Australia service, the State Emergency Service or, indeed, the emergency services cadet corps. They all do tremendous work, and I know that Hon Colin de Grussa in his contribution acknowledged and spoke about volunteering and the challenges associated with it. It always amazes me when I see the number of people who, having done a full day's work—in this day and age, people do not do an eight-hour day anymore; many do a 12-hour day—are happy to take a phone call, whether it is in the middle of the night or whenever, leave their house and their family and get out and do what needs to be done. That is particularly the case in regional Western Australia. I thank each and every one of those people for the tremendous work that they do.

Of course, I will also acknowledge the State Emergency Service volunteers who are engaged at the moment in west Pilbara, in Karratha, in particular, and have been helping to mop up after cyclone Damien, which caused some significant damage to that community. We heard from the Minister for Education and Training yesterday about the number of schools that have been affected as a result of that cyclone. I thank those volunteers who have been out there doing that work as well.

Western Australia's volunteers continue to show their sense of commitment to the community. Over the past few months, we saw that helping people does not stop at the borders. That is truly a remarkable thing. In fact, that is how it should happen. I also want to acknowledge the loved ones of firefighters, who often not only lose their husband, wife, son, daughter or whoever it is for a few days as they fight a fire, whether it is in the west or somewhere else, but also are left without information. We see on the news these massive fires, and at times the communication of some of the volunteers with their family is probably not great because they are fighting fires in remote areas. Those family members have to not only deal with the fact that their loved one has left them without knowing, but also make sacrifices when their loved one is away volunteering. I want to acknowledge that too, and thank them for what they have done.

As a state, we have answered virtually every request from other states to help our east coast counterparts while also battling our own serious blazes. As I said, in previous years we have been able to rely on support from other states, and also firefighters from other countries, so it is important that we offer our support when we are called upon. I also extend my thanks to the fire agencies from the eastern states that came across to Western Australia, most recently through the provision of the large air tanker, which came to assist with the bushfires outside Collie over the summer.

So far this bushfire season, emergency services in Western Australia have responded to over 1 800 fires—which is massive—that have burnt through about two million hectares. These figures were current as of 3 February—so last week. The challenging issue is that our bushfire season starts in November and essentially goes until May, but what we have seen over the past few years, including in Hon Colin de Grussa's electorate, is that the season can go until June now as well. There is no doubt about it; we are seeing a drying climate. Whether one believes in the science or not, the climate is drying and the window in which a bushfire can happen has lengthened and, conversely, the time that we can do prescribed burning has shortened, and it is now really about taking the opportunity when we can. We know that average rainfall is declining and temperatures rising, conditions are drier and traditional seasons are changing. Last year we experienced the hottest and second driest year on record—something is happening.

I have to say that preparation is a shared responsibility across government through to individual community members. We all need to do our bit when a bushfire strikes. The message has never been more important to keep people safe: being bushfire ready is a shared responsibility and one that every person and indeed family needs to take seriously. State government agencies, local governments and volunteers work very closely to help keep the community safe from bushfires. As Minister for Environment, I had the opportunity to go to Kalgoorlie in early January, when the Norseman fire was happening, to visit the incident control centre. I was blown away by the efforts put in by various staff. The control centre was staffed by career firefighters from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, staff from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, and volunteers. Truly, the effort and collaboration that went on was very, very impressive. I have been around the offices of Ministers for Environment for a while now and over the years the relationship between what are now DFES and DBCA has not always been great—different cultural issues or leaders at the top, whatever—but what I saw in Norseman and Kal was a sensational effort and collegiality between staff from those two agencies and volunteers who were there. Over the past few years, Minister Logan, as Minister for Emergency Services, has established some new preformed teams. There are four preformed teams that roll in when a big bushfire happens. The teams have about 80 people on them including staff from DFES and DBCA, and volunteers. It is like a mini city rolls in

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when they need to manage these incidents. They bring in transportables with computers, photocopiers, catering and the equipment provision. It is really fantastic to see. I think our preformed teams certainly help us to deal with these bushfires a lot quicker than we have been able to deal with them in the past, and I want to acknowledge the fine work that I saw at the incident control centre in Kalgoorlie and those officers and volunteers who were involved at the time.

Hon Peter Collier: That was on my sister's property.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: There you go. It was tremendous to see. Honestly, I cannot overstate the collegiality I saw. These people come from different walks of life, in some cases their day job might be something truly different, but they all come in and gel together. They all have their tasks and it works like clockwork. I think that is a big part of how we dealt with our fires and were able to get by without the loss of life in Western Australia this season, which is a truly remarkable thing when we think of the tragic deaths on the east coast. Although we could say it is all to do with these preformed teams, I think putting in the effort and the people involved truly did help to save lives in this state.

The importance of volunteers in providing a service across this vast state will never diminish. I certainly have nothing but admiration for those people who were involved. They are an integral part of emergency services not only in Western Australia, but also across the country. Over the last 18 months, the McGowan government has introduced a number of reforms that provide greater support and improve the way we communicate with volunteers. This is a constantly evolving space and we can always learn, adapt and make things better. We have employed volunteer management support officers throughout the state to provide administrative and logistical support to volunteers, so they can focus on what they do best, which is protecting the community. We have employed volunteer liaison officers within DFES to ensure that issues important to volunteers can be raised quickly and be properly investigated and addressed. DFES has invested heavily in developing the volunteer hub to improve the way volunteers connect with DFES. Earlier this year we launched a campaign called Get Behind the Frontline to encourage more people to join emergency services. Hon Colin de Grussa in his contribution spoke about the challenges associated with getting people to volunteer. In a world that is constantly changing, when there is more focus on doing 12-hour days rather than eight-hour days, it is challenging, particularly in some regional communities, to get people to put up their hand to do more. But I have to say that as a result of some media in January, there has been an uptake in volunteering again. As a result of those fires here and indeed across the country, more people have indicated that they would like to volunteer again. For those listening who are interested in volunteering, a good website is dfes.vol.org.au. People can go to that website and put in their suburb, South Hedland, for example, and they will see that there are two local volunteer groups that they can engage with. I encourage people who are thinking about volunteering to go to that website; we would be grateful for their support and indeed they are helping not only their own community but also the country.

Over the summer we saw fantastic examples of service volunteers who have been truly remarkable; they really did put the needs of the community and others before their own. We saw examples of that at the Yanchep bushfire in December, the long operation to fight a series of bushfires in the goldfields–Esperance region in December and January, and of course those bushfires outside Collie. Those volunteers have an intimate knowledge of their local area, and that knowledge is invaluable to our state's emergency preparedness and response. Twenty minutes goes very quickly when one is talking about the great work that these people do, but I want to quickly acknowledge those who were awarded Australian Fire Services medals in the Australia Day Honours recently: DFES's Superintendent Mark Bowen, Mr Richard Lawrey from the Mundaring Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, and Dr Neil Burrows who was formerly from my agency, DBCA. An Emergency Services Medal was awarded to Swan State Emergency Services volunteer Mr Roland McPherson. Thank you to each and every one of those people for what they do to help our community.

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [10.38 am]: It is a difficult debate today because I understand that many would prefer that the question of climate change was not discussed in relation to these fires, but I am really pleased that the minister was able to speak with quiet ensuing in the chamber. I think we need to listen and we need to know what is happening. I get that we talk about this fire season as being unprecedented and unexpected, but we have been told about this for 20 years or more. Ross Garnaut wrote in his 2008 report that by 2020 we would have mass fires across the country, and we did. I am not happy when somebody predicts the future like that and it comes true, but we cannot say that we did not know it was coming. We cannot say that those deaths were unexpected. We knew that these fires were coming and we know that we were unprepared. I cry for those people who lost their lives or their loved ones. I cry for those people who are going to die in future years because we did not take action to do something to ensure that this does not just become our way of life—that we have these fires and we depend on people to go from one state to the other, helping each other out, and that we invest more and more into fighting them rather than looking at what is the cause of them. Anybody who suggests that this is a one-off event is living in a fool's paradise. Go ahead and believe that, but please do not stay in government if it is your intention to just

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keep going as we have been. We talk about all the lives that were lost, all the houses and property that was lost, the loss to our economy through all those lost productive hours of work, the clean-up that is going to happen to try to fix this, the lost tourism and lost businesses—so much. We talk as if this is something surprising. Get used to it! This is just another disruption to our society, like we saw happening with Synergy, within the taxi industry with Uber coming in and within our media. Whoever thought that social media would be so far ahead of the print media at this time? Get used to it! Times are changing and we have to do something about it.

I appreciate this motion being moved. I definitely acknowledge the significant loss of life and property across the nation, and I definitely think we have a responsibility to acknowledge it and do something better to ensure that that is not our future.

The second point is extending our gratitude to volunteers and career emergency service personnel. Of course—how could we not? Imagine getting out of your bed in the middle of the night to go and fight a fire some distance away from your own home, because that is the right thing to do, because that is what we need and because that is the only way it is going to work. I have talked to brigades in the south west and the number of volunteers is dropping, as Hon Colin de Grussa said, and they are very willing to talk and be heard about what they need, because they want to do it. This is their life. They expected to be part of the brigade. They started at a very young age, as Hon Martin Aldridge did. They get involved and support our communities because they are very connected to those communities. But we are coming into an age when we have many volunteer brigades, because that is what people do; we have the career fire departments; we also have private companies that will hire out their people. I understand there was a problem in New South Wales when the private companies were saying, “Okay, pay up now. We showed up at the fires. We need to pay for our staff and equipment.” There is a tension that is becoming greater and greater. I think we have to acknowledge that tension in the brigades.

As Hon Colin de Grussa said, I do not think the brigade volunteers are saying, “Please pay us”, but they are going to be asking for something. They are asking for appropriate equipment, enough equipment and the right equipment. From what I understand, when a truck reaches a certain age or has been driven a number of kilometres, which sometimes is not much, it is sold off, but it is not sold to another brigade or someone in the region who can use it to help fight fires off their own bat. It is sold off to the highest bidder, which is often a mining company and it is stripped of the shell around the outside that protects it and it is also stripped of the radios and the emergency lighting on it. Why can we not keep those trucks in the regions with the brigades that are willing to use them? Also, there are some very difficult landscapes out there, and some of the trucks are not fit for purpose, but I understand there is a Tatra 6x6 truck that is amazing. It can go through anything; it can go up the hills and through the sands. I hope we are looking to see whether maybe we can invest in a few of those Tattras so that those brigades are safe and can get to where they need to be. We need to keep our brigades safe. We need to build up the numbers because this is coming and it is going to get worse. There is going to be more uncertainty for firefighters leaving their homes wondering whether they are going to be able to come back that night. We have not seen this happen before. Now that it has, we need to be concerned.

I refer to the third point in the motion. I would like to recognise the Western Australian personnel who travelled interstate, as well as the international people who came to our aid. I am still hearing from people around the world checking to see how Australia is going. It is great—we made the world news. It was not for something pretty. It is a real shame we have not done something more about this.

I am hearing from the brigades that communications are mostly via internet now, and when the internet connection goes down in their home, truck or whatever, they are kind of lost. That is something we need to address. We need to recognise that communications are not like they used to be, and we need to make sure that we put in place warning systems. From what I understand, a lot of people across the country were looking to the ABC. We have a very good system here. The ABC was the way that people were finding out where the fires were, how bad they were, where they were going and what they should do.

Another thing that came across that we should be aware of is that in some of these communities, when the fires were coming close, the people there directing the population refused to use the word “evacuation”, because if they did, they were expected to provide shelter for those people. They just said, “It’s time for you to leave your homes.” There was no word about official evacuation. Again, that is shifting the responsibility, putting it back on the people, and that is not right. That is why we have governments. That is why we should be doing something and our federal government should be doing something.

We need to make our landscape more resilient. There are things that we can do to prepare for this, and it does not mean firebombing, prescribed burns and drying out the landscape so that nothing grows. It does not mean killing all the trees so that they will not burn again. We have seen plenty of fires go across crop land and grassland. Killing all the trees is not going to work. That is exactly what people are trying to do over east now. People in the burnt out areas are saying, “Oh, well, we might as well take all the charred timbers out, because they are not

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doing any good there.” It is not going to help; it is going to further dry out the landscape. I do not mind if there are people in this place who still have trouble with the idea that climate change is human caused. I get that. There is some philosophical idea that says, no, humans cannot do that; it is too big. People can go ahead and believe whatever they want to believe, but they should acknowledge that they have the responsibility to do something to prepare for this and make sure that it does not continue to get worse, and that we do not just continue drying out our landscape.

There is a financial side to it, too. It has been suggested that the fires have cost \$5 billion already. The lost lives and businesses, the lost industries, the lost tourism—think what the cost is going to be from that. It is ongoing. Repairs will have to be made and new equipment will be needed. This is just in the realm of fire. Climate change will affect an awful lot more than that. We are already investing in seawalls in different places around the coastline. We are already investing in so many things. Even in health, we can look at the coronavirus, which is going around the world now. Hopefully it is not going around so much; I hear it is on the decline. These things are going to get worse with climate change. Get used to it! The cost for our health system and for everything is going to go up. Even if members are too old to be around in 10 years when it is going to be so far along, their children and grandchildren will be. If members do not have children or grandchildren, other people will. The human race will still be here, and people will be paying for our mistakes—for all the things we did when we were just spewing emissions into the air, without thought or consideration for what comes after us. I am absolutely disgusted that that is where this conversation has had to take me, because I do not feel that anybody is listening to that. I care so much about these people, I care so much about their landscape, and I think we should do better.

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [10.48 am]: It is a bit of an unusual turn on a Thursday morning to have such raging bipartisan support in the way that we have seen during non-government business and private members’ business this morning. I think it is a great opportunity that has been brought to us by Hon Colin de Grussa, and shortly by Hon Pierre Yang, to offer our condolences and respects for the significant loss of life and property during this fire season thus far. I know that many other Parliaments in their opening sessions in 2020 have already conducted similar condolence debates or events.

The fire season of 2020 has been a particularly difficult one thus far, and some people have already outlined some of the really concerning statistics. Nearly 2 700 homes have been lost and 33 deaths have occurred. Four of those deaths were firefighters and an additional three were aviation firefighters; members will be very aware of the large air tanker that crashed during the parliamentary recess. Some 1.25 billion wild animals were killed and 18.6 million hectares burnt. They are some of the statistics I have seen published in recent weeks, largely from the significant events that impacted the eastern coast of Australia. It is certainly the worst fire season we have seen since the Black Saturday fires in Victoria in February 2009. As I said, the fire season is still potentially some months from being over, particularly on the west coast.

We have all shared today a pride in the way Western Australian personnel, whether they be career employees or volunteers, have responded to the emergency events such as fires, floods, cyclones or anything else that have unfolded over the past few months and impacted our good state and, indeed, our nation. They have gone above and beyond. A significant number of our personnel—I think the minister just said 500 volunteers—were deployed interstate on operations. It is important that we foster those interstate deployments. Some people have a view that we should keep our resources closer to home and on hand, ready to respond to what might unfold here. However, the deployment of those personnel is important for two reasons: the first reason is that the volunteers I know who have come back from interstate have really valued the experience. In the realm of emergency response, experience is just as important as training; in fact, in some aspects it is more important than formal training. I have not met a volunteer who has returned who has had other than a positive learning experience from serving interstate. They have certainly brought some ideas back to Western Australia and to our brigades, groups and units for how we might do things better or perhaps differently.

The second reason is that it builds and strengthens our relationship with interstate agencies. Although this fire season in Western Australia may not require interstate or international assistance, I am sure we will face one in the future when we will rely on our cousins interstate, or indeed internationally, to help us out in a time of need. It is also important to note that the number of intrastate deployments is increasing, certainly from my experience. We are seeing an increasing number of strike teams and increasing demand, particularly on volunteers to respond within Western Australia. This week, a number of volunteer crews, as well as career crews, are in Katanning assisting with the recovery of that community. So that members are aware, often those deployments are on the 1–5–1 model, so it is usually a day for travel at either end and five days of operations on the ground. That is a significant commitment by both volunteers, who are taken away from their everyday life, and career staff, many of whom are recalled from off duty, perhaps from leave, to help bolster capacity during increased periods of activity.

I will talk a little about the impact of this fire season and some of the things that we need to continue to keep our focus on. We have had many debates, parliamentary questions and estimates hearings, and all of the other

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occasions the Parliament has used. Particularly in recent years, in my view, there has been an increasing focus on fire mitigation, and specifically hazard reduction burning. That is important. Criticism has been made in years gone by that we have been far too response focused. Now we need to become far more mitigation focused: how can we reduce those risks? Some of the key elements of emergency management are prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, logistics, recovery and review. They used to be simply prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Obviously, mitigation is one of those elements and response is one of those elements; however, there are many other elements to good and effective emergency management. We need to make sure that we do not place too much emphasis on any one of those things. As I said, historically, we have been criticised for being too response focused. We are certainly lifting our game now on mitigation—good mitigation, targeted mitigation. In years gone by we have been too focused on meeting arbitrary targets for mitigation as opposed to perhaps being a bit more strategic around risk mitigation. That might mean burning fewer hectares, but doing it more effectively.

I want to make some observations about the Yanchep fire, which was close to my part of the world. It burnt into my local government area in the Shire of Gingin. It was interesting listening to an interview with the incident controller, Superintendent Andy Winton. I am sure those watching that fire at the time were interested. He made the observation, and it is quite often a strategy that is employed, that we have very good intelligence on fuel history. When hazard reduction burns have been carried out, all of that is plotted and mapped. Often fire managers will try to stop a fire or direct a fire into an area of low fuel. It appears that that was certainly the case in Yanchep. Interestingly, the fire behaviour did not change significantly as it burnt through an area of low fuel load. I think they were fuels of three or four years, post hazard reduction burning. That is not to say that hazard reduction burning is not an effective mitigation tool; it is just that we are seeing fire behaviour that is increasingly more difficult to control. The point I want to make from this is that mitigation is not the silver bullet, nor is any other principle of emergency management. We must still make sure that we have an effective response capability. The greatest risk to ensuring we have effective legislative frameworks to drive effective emergency management—I am sure this applies across Australia and even internationally—is complacency: complacency by communities, complacency by landholders, complacency by governments at all three levels, as well as legislators.

I will quote briefly from the foreword of the “National Strategy for Disaster Resilience”, which is penned by National Emergency Management Committee co-chairs Roger Wilkins, AO, and Dr Margot McCarthy —

Application of a resilience-based approach is not solely the domain of emergency management agencies; rather, it is a shared responsibility between governments, communities, businesses and individuals.

That is something that was echoed by Mr Keelty in his report on the 2011 inquiry into the Perth hills bushfire, which was entitled “A Shared Responsibility”. As this fire season moves on, and perhaps we might go through a couple a little quieter than this one, we as legislators and executive government and the community must ensure that the biggest risk, which in my view is complacency, does not set in and that we make sure our communities remain safe and resilient.

HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural) [10.58 am]: I thank Hon Colin de Grussa for bringing this very important motion on bushfire to the house. We all saw the tragedy that unfolded in four states on the east coast where massive fires burned. Some statistics have already been quoted. Some 33 deaths occurred during that period. Seven of those were firefighter personnel who tragically lost their lives. The images from the funerals of the firefighters who had young children were heart-wrenching. Just under 3 000 homes were lost. To see the look of despair on people’s faces when everything they own in the world is gone and nothing but ash remains brings home how important our emergency services are to not only this state, but all of Australia. We should all be proud that Western Australia sent 500 personnel to assist with those fires and that we have the capacity to provide 500 personnel and still have enough people in this state to look after fires that occur here.

As was mentioned by the minister, there were some fires in Western Australia around that time. The Yanchep fire burnt for some time. Close to home for me were the fires around Collie and Mornington. It is a bit concerning when you live in a fire-prone area to get up in the morning and have a blanket of ash over your house or to look into the distance at night and see a bit of a glow still going. It also gives you some concern. The comfort I had, though, was knowing that the area between where I live and where the fires were had been prescribed burnt within only the last few years, which would provide a level of safety for me.

We have some 26 000 volunteer bush fire fighters in this state. That number fluctuates from time to time, but I think it is indicative that in a state with such a small population—under three million people—we have 26 000 people who are prepared to give up their time and be absent from work to assist in fighting bushfires. Of course, they do that with our career firefighters as well. From around the world, 70 nations offered assistance to fight these fires. Some 300 firefighting personnel came from the United States of America, New Zealand and Canada. Tragically,

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some aircrew who were from the United States lost their lives. We should also thank those 300 people who came to Australia to assist with the fires that we had at that time.

Western Australia has not been immune to huge fires. We had the Dwellingup fires in 1961, which are often referred to. More recently, in 2016, we had the Waroona and Dwellingup fires. I think that mitigation plays a big part in making sure that we at least make fires manageable. What has upset me a fair bit is that we have had these tragic fires take place and it has degraded into a political stoush about climate change. I think that is somewhat disrespectful to the emergency personnel who are out there fighting these fires. The idea that these huge bushfire events are something new and are all about climate change is deceptive. On 6 February 1861 we had Black Thursday in what is now Victoria. Those fires affected some five million hectares. In 1898, there was Red Tuesday, when fires burnt 26 000 hectares throughout Gippsland. In the early 1900s, there were destructive fires in the Grampians over some 100 000 hectares. In February to early March 1926, forest fires burnt across large areas of Gippsland. The history goes on that every so often we have these massive fires. This is not a particularly new thing that is happening in Australia. It is not totally linked to just climate change. I accept that the climate is changing. We need to adapt to climate change. We are not going to change the climate overnight back to the way it was a hundred years ago. The fact of the matter is that we need to adapt to that. A large part of that is hazard reduction burning. That is one of the things that we need to do. What really annoys me about the Greens is that their policy to not do prescribed burning has been part of the problem.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon RICK MAZZA: Some of the calculations are that for every —

Hon Alison Xamon interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: You can give it, but you can't take it!

The PRESIDENT: Order, members! That is right. This is and has been up to date a very respectful debate acknowledging the contribution of heroes in our community. You may not like what you hear, but please listen. You will each have an opportunity to add your contribution to this debate during the morning.

Hon RICK MAZZA: I think the calculation is that for every 50 millimetres of fuel on the forest floor, per hectare there is about 50 tonnes of fuel. Some of those areas on the east coast had not been burnt for some 40 to 50 years. That is where a lot of that intensity came from. It is a bit rich for the Greens to say that this is climate change when their policy contributed to it. The Greens should hang their heads in shame for some of the comments they made during those disasters.

Along with the mitigation programs, one of the things I came across in some shires in the Agricultural Region is that they have real difficulty in trying to get hazard reduction for their road verges. We can do all sorts of things to try to reduce the intensity of fires. Fires are going to occur, whether it is because of natural lightning strikes or arsonists who light fires deliberately. We are going to have fires. We can mitigate that through hazard reduction burning, road verge management and, as Hon Martin Aldridge pointed out, a whole range of things that could be available to communities to try to reduce the intensity of these fires. Fires are something that are with us. They are part of the Australian landscape—whether it be fires, floods, or other natural disasters.

I take my hat off to those people who volunteer and the career people who have put in their time in training. It is not just attending fires. A fair bit of training goes into maintaining their field-ready accreditation to be able to go and fight those fires. I really honour those people and thank them for the efforts that they have put in.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.06 am]: I would also like to make a brief contribution on this motion put forward by Hon Colin de Grussa and acknowledge the bipartisan nature in which it has, predominantly, been debated. I think it is a very good way to start the parliamentary year for both sides to acknowledge the fantastic work of all our fireys, as we affectionately know them, across regional Australia, and particularly regional Western Australia, including the many brigades in the Agricultural Region.

I recently attended the Australia Day breakfast in Toodyay. I began my speech by acknowledging the traditional owners and then acknowledged the row of fireys who were helping out on the day. The audience spontaneously burst into applause. Our fantastic firefighting personnel and other volunteers, who give up their time to benefit us all, are greatly loved and appreciated right across our communities.

This has been the most challenging summer in Australia. As has been pointed out, and to put it into some context, the area that has been burnt is larger than the area of England. When it is put into context like that, the enormity can be realised. I went over east a couple of times during the season. The smoke and the fear among the community was very evident. Lives were lost, and countless homes and outbuildings, fences, livestock and wildlife were all

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destroyed. It was the hottest year on record—the hottest year in 125 years. It was the second driest year on record. No-one is ever going to tell me that it was other factors, such as fuel mitigation or arsonists. That is all bollocks! It was caused by the hottest and second driest year on record. We can look at this in a couple of ways. We can look at this as we have had the hottest year in 125 years, which has led to the worst fires in history, or we can look at this as the coolest year in the next 125 years, so what are we going to do about it? The climate is definitely warming, and it is warming because of the increased amount of carbon dioxide in the air. It is of our making and it is now up to us to adapt and work out how we are going to fight these fires in the future. It is extraordinary that people still think fires can be named by the day in the 1830s and 1850s. They were named after a day because they predominantly burnt over one day. These fires have been burning since September and it is only the recent heavy rainfall events, which have caused widespread flooding, that have put an end to the crisis.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: Member, we also have a vastly different technology to fight them, yet we are still finding it harder to contain them.

Hon DARREN WEST: Indeed, in 1926 we were fighting fires with a knapsack and a horse. Now we are fighting fires with state-of-the-art facilities such as water bombers, and volunteers and professional firefighters are much better prepared. There is no comparison between the fires we have seen this summer and the fires of the past. There is no comparison whatsoever. Anyone who has been over east and met with people who have fought these fires—the brigade chiefs, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services commissioners—will all tell them that.

I think we need to look forward at this, rather than look back at past fires, and work out exactly what we are going to do. Areas that have been burnt out for two years just exploded into flame during these fires. Controlled burning is not the only mechanism available to us. Areas have been control-burned underneath. When I drive down from the Agricultural Region along Great Eastern Highway, I notice that a lot of the bush east of Mundaring has been burnt, but after one year, there is a carpet of leaves and litter on the floor again. The tops of the trees will burn in a wildfire. We have to start thinking very carefully about what we are going to do about fighting fires in the future.

On our fabulous volunteers, which is what the very good motion is about, I thank all 26 000 of them. They are terrific people who give up their time. I encourage everyone to be a volunteer firefighter. I must confess that I have not officially registered as a volunteer firefighter, but I intend to do that. I have attended dozens of fires as a volunteer with my own farm ute and firefighter. Along with all the other farmers, we get to the fire and get it out and we usually have a couple of beers afterwards.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: I have seen you fighting fires on your farm.

Hon DARREN WEST: The minister has. It was a little embarrassing. When a fire starts at hay baling, we have to put it out, and we have done that. As a community, we all get around and put the fire out, tell some good stories about what happened during the fire and have a few drinks afterwards and use the occasion as a social get-together once the job is done. We have countless fires, including fires started by headers, machinery—as the minister saw firsthand—and lightning strikes. We get around and we get them out. That is the way we operate in WA and everyone plays their role.

It is fortunate that in all the fires we have had in Western Australia, including the Yanchep fire, the Norseman fire, which closed Eyre Highway for 12 days, the Lake King fire, the Stirling Range fire and the Esperance, Bullsbrook, Baldavis, Kalamunda, Kwinana and Atwell fires, we have not lost a life and we lost only one house in the Yanchep fire. We saved 6 500 houses and lost one, but it was more a commercial building than a house. Our firefighting capacity and our firefighters are outstanding. They are the best in the business and I thank all of them for the great work they have done.

We have done a few things. Hon Colin de Grussa touched on why it is getting hard to recruit volunteers to fight fires. There was a time when the relationship between professional firefighters and volunteer firefighters was toxic. We have worked hard to fix that relationship and get everybody pulling in the same direction. We have introduced the Rural Fire Division. We have a large air tanker based in WA. We are doing other mitigation work, not just controlled burning. One of the key findings from the tragic Esperance fires was that it was difficult for firefighters to get into the reserve where the fire began because the tracks had not been maintained. Part of the mitigation work is about clearing tracks to allow ground vehicles to access fires, rather than having firefighters wait for the fire to come out, which it tragically did in that case and took three lives.

I want to touch on some individuals who have done an amazing job and have been recognised. I note that the Minister for Environment touched on some recipients of the Australia Day honours. Some local heroes were honoured in the Australia Day honours list and I would like to touch on them. They are from all forms of volunteering and are not confined to volunteer firefighting. Mr Jim Clarke was acknowledged in the Australia Day honours list for his work at the Jurien Bay Volunteer Marine Rescue Group. Mrs Pamela Hamence was acknowledged for her

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work with the Bridgetown Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade. Mr Richard Kidd from the Julimar Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade near Toodyay, Mr Graeme Robertson from the Kulin South Bushfire Brigade and Mrs Christine Thompson from the West Murray Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade were awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to their communities. I thank those people sincerely for the many hours of their time that they have given up. I also thank their families, because for every volunteer who goes off to a fire, whether it be a local fire, one further afield in WA or a fire on the other side of the country, as 500 people have done recently, a family has to manage and make sacrifices without that person. They worry about their safety, but they all do it as a team. I thank all the families and the other people left behind so that the volunteers can give their time freely.

The bushfire season is starting earlier and finishing later. It is more challenging to do controlled burns now because the window is getting smaller due to the changing climate. It is getting drier earlier and, as we have seen in the eastern states, fires are beginning in September. As the minister has seen, we can have fires in October now, which has not happened in the past, and the season can go right through to May and June. This year at our farm, we had the opening rains in early June. It is not until we get those opening rains that we can start to breathe easy that the fire season is over; the new green comes through so the fires do not really get a hold and burn as fiercely and as quickly as they did. Our season is not over yet. It is mid-February and we still have two or three months of very dry and warm conditions and very low humidity to come. I encourage everybody to make their bushfire plans and to be bushfire safe. There is plenty of information on the Department of Fire and Emergency Services website about what people can do to protect their family and property in the event of a fire. Fires are a fact of life. They are going to get worse. The climate is getting drier and warmer. We are going to have to be more mindful about how we deal with this. I encourage all community members to take the advice and do whatever they can to become more fire safe and fire ready in an unprecedented situation.

To our volunteers, which is what this motion is about, and I thank the member for moving it, thank you all very much for what you do for Western Australians. Thank you all for your time and service.

HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan) [11.16 am]: I also rise to say some words on this very thoughtful motion moved by Hon Colin de Grussa. I also acknowledge the bipartisan approach that has been taken on the next motion to be moved by Hon Pierre Yang; that is right. When we talk about acknowledging the amazing work of our firefighters, both our professional and volunteer fireys, I think it is appropriate that all of us show our enormous debt of gratitude to them for the work they have done. It has been particularly devastating this summer to watch the sheer scale of the bushfires that have occurred around our country, but particularly on the east coast. I give my most heartfelt condolences to the families who have lost loved ones fighting those fires. I also acknowledge the three American firefighters who came over to Australia and lost their lives. I am sure that everybody here shares in the sadness at the loss of those lives. I think particularly about the children who have been left without parents. I also want to acknowledge those members of the community who have died in the fires.

I am going to make only a quick comment about this matter, but I think it is really important that we do not silence our firefighters and the chiefs of our firefighting brigades by trying to pretend that climate change has not played a role in this, because they are the ones who have made it very clear that they want to be heard. They are unequivocal that the scope of the fires that we have seen have been caused by a changing climate. I for one am not prepared to disrespect them to the degree of denying them that voice and pretending that they are not saying that unequivocally and emphatically and demanding to be heard. It is very real.

I want to reflect on the sheer level of devastation that the Australian community has felt from these fires. It was truly devastating in the lead-up to Christmas and over the new year period to watch our country burn from these out-of-control fires. Every day we got the news that these massive fires were about to connect and that we were losing entire landscapes. There has been genuine grief from the community over the extent to which our beautiful country has burnt and I want to acknowledge that. I certainly felt it. I felt it particularly in the first week of this year. I felt really quite devastated and an overwhelming sense of grief for our country. I felt that at the same time as I felt, and continue to feel, an enormous amount of pride for all community volunteers as well as our amazing firefighters, who, in true spirit, have come out and done their all to try to help people who have lost everything.

I will reflect on part of the devastation that I think the Australian community has felt. A lot of the people I have spoken to, certainly in a lot of the online communities, have been particularly impacted by the devastating impact on our Australian wildlife. The koalas, in this instance, have become almost a symbol of what we as Australians feel we have lost and feel devastated about. Leading wildlife experts have now estimated that we lost over one billion animals and hundreds of billions of invertebrates because of these fires, and that many other animals that rely on these ecosystems have perished as a result of bushfires. We also know that thousands of head of livestock have been killed or badly burnt. It has been pointed out that for some species we are now looking at imminent extinction. I think that although only those who have been personally threatened or affected by these fires and have lost loved ones—property or animals—can have a full understanding of just how devastating and

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upsetting those bushfires have been, many of us have shared that trauma, watching or listening in horror. We have felt heartbroken and quite aghast at how these fires have burnt and destroyed many people's lives and livelihoods, their homes and gardens, and those forests and the bush that are home to our precious native animals.

I note that there are still things that we can do, such as donating to the many bushfire appeals, and I note that Hon Stephen Dawson referred to some of the really innovative and good work that has been undertaken to raise awareness. But I will also say that I am a bit sad that, as usual, some crooks come out to try to take advantage of the fact that they might be able to make a bit of a buck out of this, so I think it is also important that we make sure our money is going to reputable charities. But I want to acknowledge how much is happening in that space. I also think that we can directly support those organisations and individuals at the front line who are supporting and caring for injured and stray animals. Seeing people bring injured animals into their homes and make sure that they recover from their burns and receive appropriate food has been incredibly heartening to watch. It is a wonderful response from so many Australians.

We also know that the bushfires threatened more than just those animals that were affected by the initial fires. We know that once the fires pass, any survivors will have to cope with a lack of shelter and food, and the subsequent invasion of feral animals into those burnt areas. We need to make sure that we are securing those unburnt landscapes to ensure that those surviving animals are not going to be preyed upon, and we need to make sure that we address the issue of feral animals. A lot of good work can also be done and is going to be done to ensure that threatened and endangered animals, in particular, have nesting boxes rolled out and strategically established captive breeding programs are put in place. That insurance will be needed to try to protect these species to the degree to which we hope we can, and preferably before any future fire events occur.

I give a huge shout-out to those wildlife carers who are doing the work now. Although the majority of the fires are now out, their work continues. We must, of course, acknowledge those people who have been on the front line, and who put their lives at risk to try to save homes, lives and entire ecosystems. It has been a terrible start to the year and the decade. With all my heart, I hope that this is not a sign of things to come. That is obviously going to be unpicked in the year ahead, in particular, but for today, I want to again give my heartfelt thanks to all those amazing Australians and overseas volunteers who have been part of the efforts of recovery.

The PRESIDENT: Hon Colin de Grussa, you have about 20 seconds, so be very quick.

HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural) [11.24 am] — in reply: Thanks, Madam President, and thank you to everyone who has contributed to this debate. I am sure we will hear plenty more when Hon Pierre Yang moves his motion very shortly. By and large, it was a very respectful debate, and that certainly was the intention, so thank you to all those who contributed.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.