



The Bushfire Front Inc

Motto: Si vis pacem, para bellum

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The Chairman
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia
Level 1, 11 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

Dear Sir

Preparedness for the coming bushfire season

The Bushfire Front is a small volunteer organisation comprising professionals with long experience in bushfire science and management. We are people who started at the bottom, as firefighters, and worked our way up to leadership positions, responsible for bushfire system design and operations, and accountable for bushfire outcomes. We have been involved in, or have observed, the bushfire scene in Western Australia (and beyond) since the 1950s.

Our view is that the bushfire situation in south-western WA has never been more perilous. The State's capacity to deal with a serious, high intensity bushfires is fragile, and if we were to experience several simultaneous fires burning under adverse weather conditions, the result would be catastrophic.

There have been some positive changes in the last 12 months.

We have noted a significant change at FESA, the result of new, enlightened and professional leadership. One of the most damaging problems in the past (the antipathy between FESA and DEC) has declined, and FESA has woken up to its responsibilities in relation to oversight of Local Government. We are also aware of a new approach to planning new residential subdivisions so as to minimise bushfire risks. Progress is being made in recognising problems and thinking about their solution in the wake of the two Keelty report, and the restructure of the State Emergency Management Committee, and redefinition of its role, is welcome and promising.

However, all of these recent positive moves will take years to find their way onto the ground and make a significant difference to the bushfire vulnerability of the south-west. Going into the coming summer we observe:

1. The accumulation of bushfire fuels in south-west bushland is higher today than at any time since the great fires of 1961. The backlog in DEC's burning program now extends over a decade, and many areas carry fuels that are over 15 years old. The significance of this is that fuels over about 5-6 years old will generate an unstoppable wildfire under even moderate weather conditions.
2. There are residential areas and semi-rural subdivisions all over the south-west that are, to all intents and purposes, undefendable from wildfire. These have narrow, twisting and sometimes dead-end roads, houses on blocks carrying long unburnt bushland, the trees meeting over the rooftops, inadequate water supply and no back-up power. A 'regional bushfire' (one burning on a wide front and generating an ember storm, such as would emerge from a long unburnt national park) entering these areas would totally devastate them, and if there was more than one fire on the same day, lives would be inevitably lost.
3. Whole settlements in rural and semi-rural areas now contain people with no experience of bushfires and no training in bushfire preparedness or survival. These are the 'new settlers' the city people who have moved

For more information on bushfire management and current issues please visit the Bushfire Front website at www.bushfirefront.com.au

to the bush, or who have a holiday home on the coast, and who mostly do not have a clue. The majority are truly babes in the woods, sitting ducks for a bushfire attack.

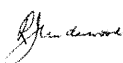
4. A fire suppression system that has increasingly become reliant on water bombing aircraft. As every bushfire expert knows, water bombers are good only for dealing with small localized fires burning under relatively mild conditions. They are useless in controlling an intense crown fire and cannot operate under high winds or at night (the very conditions under which the towns of Dwellingup and Holyoake were burnt in 1961, and the Black Saturday fires in Victoria in 2009).
5. Bushfire leadership in the field has been allowed to decline to a point at which many operations are now in the hands of inexperienced people. The old guard has mostly gone or is fatigued and stressed, and due to a lack of succession planning and recruitment, replacements have not been trained and mentored. This is not the fault of those who are now in key positions, but our concern is that inexperience leads to bad decisions under pressure, and this can result in accidents and to firefighters' lives being put at risk.
6. There is no tested bushfire warning system, and there have been no mock fires and no tested evacuation exercises for at-risk communities. When the balloon goes up, it will all be played by ear.

In short, Western Australia faces a situation this summer in which only one factor will decide the outcome: Lady Luck. If she smiles on us, we will survive without too much pain; if she turns against us, it will be disastrous. This is a discouraging prospect and not one that reflects on the quality of preparedness and damage mitigation programs over the last 15 year.

Unfortunately there is almost nothing that can be done to rectify this situation overnight. To set up and maintain an effective bushfire system requires leadership, discipline and a long-term view. A fuel reduction burn carried out this spring may not be called upon to do its job in slowing a bushfire for another five years. Burning programs must be planned and the ground prepared up to years ahead. The training and mentoring of competent fire officers must look 20 years ahead. Planning a residential subdivision in a bushfire-prone area needs to look 50 years ahead. These sorts of things no longer arise spontaneously in rural and semi-rural communities, nor are local communities by themselves able to achieve tasks like this. In bushfire management, just as in public health, crime prevention, and defence, the work of thinking, planning and system-maintenance falls to the bureaucracies. And if the bureaucracies do not do their job, the job does not get done.

As your Committee goes about its work, you will find most of this is denied by agencies and Local Government. They will point to the number of staff they have, the number of vehicles and aircraft, the jazzy communication and computer systems, the shiny new headquarters. But all of that is glitz without substance. Underneath, the basic situation is this: most rural and semi-rural communities in south-western WA are completely unprepared for a large, regional bushfire driving out of long-unburnt forest. If more than one such fire occurs on the same day under everyday January or February weather conditions, the result will be horrible.

Yours sincerely,



Roger Underwood
CHAIRMAN
16 October 2012