

BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT

Motion

HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West) [11.26 am] — without notice: I move —

That the Council —

- (a) recognise that a new arrangement for bushfire management is urgently required in Western Australia, including the need to promote a new culture in our bushfire authorities moving from emergency response and an “all-out suppression approach” to one of fire prevention and damage mitigation;
- (b) recognise that large bushfires result from failed land management; and
- (c) identify the urgent need for the Western Australian government to create a separate “country fire service” to manage emergencies directed by a board made up of Department of Parks and Wildlife, Association of Volunteer Fire Fighters, and the Western Australian Local Government Association.

Firstly, I have to say that it gives me no pleasure to speak today, once again, on the urgent need to change our thinking and policy on fuel reduction and prescribed burning, and now also our emergency response to fire prevention. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the people in the gallery. Most of them have travelled great distances to be here, and it is appreciated by everyone who is concerned about the current situation.

The current system or policy is broken. It is not working. The environment, nature, people’s lives and businesses, and infrastructure, are now under greater threat from fire than ever before. In 2016, we have already had two major fires and numerous smaller fires, the major ones being the Esperance fire and the Waroona–Yarloop fire. Both those fires resulted in loss of life. Our condolences go to the families of the people who lost their lives. We have not seen losses of such a scale since 1961. The question is: why? The answer is pretty simple. Prior to 2000, this state had a policy of good fire management. However, since early 2000, changes have been implemented to that policy. Those changes were implemented probably for the right reasons at the time. I think it is up to us as a government and opposition—because this is about bipartisan policies—to look at why the current system is broken and a proven failure, and work together and get it fixed.

The scale of the tragedy of the most recent fires is enormous. In the Waroona–Yarloop fires alone, some 214 properties, 70 000-odd hectares of land and 162 homes were impacted. We need to acknowledge the work that the fires and emergency crews did. They worked tirelessly to try to battle these blazes. However, at times, the bureaucracy was hampering them.

As I have stated previously, fire reduction by prescribed burning does not prevent bushfires. What it does is stop wild fires. It is much easier to control a fire down here than 60 feet up there. That is where the preventive fires come through. The issue in Western Australia will not be fixed by making minor changes at the edges. We need to make bold structural changes if we are going to prevent further losses of homes and property, and, importantly, lives. What can we do? We could put some simple structures in place very quickly to enable communities to re-empower themselves. The communities know their situation better than anyone and certainly do not need it to be controlled by bureaucracy located miles away. The local brigades can secure their towns by working with local government, not having to go through ridiculous permit systems now in place and get that burning done in an orderly and quick manner during the safe part of the year. Local volunteers do this work and that is a big cost that government does not bear. We have to allow volunteers or whoever sees a fire on crown land to have immediate access; they should not have to ring headquarters and be told that it is under control; it will not be a worry. One of the gentlemen there made several calls to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services only to be told that it did not matter; it was okay. Three hours later a two-kilometre bushfire front was heading towards his property. We know the consequences.

The permit system is clumsy; it takes too long. We do not need it. The permit system was stopping people who went out to the front from going back in. I will speak more on that a little later. I would like to share an open letter written by Roger Underwood in March 2015 to all state and federal members of Parliament. It states —

We are writing to all State and Federal Members of Parliament to alert you to the inevitability of a catastrophic bushfire in the south-west and the Hills area east of Perth and make it clear that we hold you (our political leaders) accountable for fixing this situation.

This is not the first time we have heard from the Bushfire Front, an organisation that has been campaigning on this matter for over 10 years.

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It is not a long time—some 15 years ago—since Western Australia was the envy of the world. Today, in 2016, we have a system that has completely collapsed. In the last five years we have seen more houses destroyed than in the previous 30 years. It must not be viewed as a political football. In the last 15 to 20 years successive governments have failed to address the dangerously high fuel levels in our south west. Areas, whether they be Pemberton or Waroona, have not been burnt for 40, 50, 60 years. As an upper house member for the South West Region and a farmer, I believe I have an obligation to speak about this matter and push the urgent need for bushfire management in Western Australia.

Given the enormity of the Yarloop and Waroona fires—let us not forget Esperance, another one that could have been avoided—the Department of Fire and Emergency Services has no other option than to review its bushfire management plan with a view to reducing the damage caused by and the cost of bushfires. The most highly skilled firefighters are now rendered powerless when they have to tackle the enormity of the heavy fuel loads. It is something they cannot do.

We must question the allocation of the agency's resources. Since 1999, there has been a 181 per cent increase in the fire and emergency services budget. In 1999, the FESA budget was \$29.4 million and it has gradually grown to somewhere around \$366 million in 2014–15. Given that increase in state funding, we could ask: how can we lose an entire town? We just have and it is totally unacceptable. It seems that more and more of the agency's resources are spent on fire suppression of catastrophic fires rather than preventive programs that reduce the threat of fire. I think we have to understand that we can redirect a lot of those funds. Instead of hiring helicopters from the United States, we could be undertaking fire mitigation. Ongoing allocations of royalties for regions and a shift in thinking from firefighting and recovery to one of fire management, hazard reduction and damage mitigation would save the government and our taxpayers many millions of dollars. Clearly, the current system is not working. Despite an enormous allocation of state government funds, in 2015 we have experienced the three worst fires in 50 years. We have also seen extensive wildfires in the Pilbara, the Kimberley and most other areas of the state. Bearing in mind that it is only the middle of February now, we still have a long time to go. Let us hope we are not standing here in another month's time asking: What can we do? What has been the response to the Keelty report?

I am not here to put blame on anyone. I now want to get something changed. We have some fantastic experience in this state. Ex-foresters Rick Sneeuwjagt and Roger Underwood spring to mind. That collective experience and men who were in charge when we had a good system should be utilised. The Department of Parks and Wildlife is very underfunded and most of its resources go into management of national parks. When DPaW is saying to local contractors, "We need a bulldozer but we can't pay you", there is something wrong. Should we wait for two days while DFES brings in a dozer and loader? It is pretty obvious what we should do; we should use local contractors. Our local firefighters reflect the local community culture. They know the communities and they have amazing local knowledge. From Albany to Mandurah there is one common thread. Constituents are now saying, "We have the knowledge; we have the experience; we have the expertise, but it is being ignored." How many times have we been told that the local fire brigade was told to go home because it was not needed? That happened very recently. There are countless layers of red tape strangling the firefighting service in Western Australia. It would not be hard to dismantle that.

Let me take members back to 5 January. A fire started from lightning in Lane Poole Reserve. We knew hot and windy conditions were coming. The fire jumped South Western Highway and at the same time another fire was burning in the hills east of Waroona. Local fire crews, contractors and farmers were working under these treacherous conditions. Witnesses told me that at this stage, DFES crews were attending but not participating. They were either driving around or parked up watching. DFES crews would not get out of their trucks or their four-wheel drives to suppress fires. They would not work on paddock fires or on the machines to assist. On the night of 6 January a local farmer in the vicinity of Buller Road, Somers Road and south of Coronation Road was on a loader, and local farmers were doing everything possible to stop the fire going further. DFES fire crews refused to get out and help. They said their orders were to only defend property, not to put out paddock fires. Where is the commonsense in that? A farmer's greatest asset is quite different from an asset in the city. A person's house in the city is his greatest asset. A farmer's is his land, stock, machinery, hay et cetera. They can replace their house. The town of Waroona has one of the highest ratios of earthmoving equipment to resident population in Australia. I am told that if it had not been for Harry Carna, the town of Hamel would have been lost, but it was his equipment and expertise that put it out. In many instances, farmers with dozers and utes equipped with fire water units were trying to suppress the fire to stop it from jumping Coronation Road. DFES crews were asked to help and work in conjunction with them. They refused and said that their orders were to only defend property and infrastructure, not to put out fires in paddocks and bush. This was a very common comment that came through the whole structure of people involved with the fire, whether it was from police, firefighters or local constituents. DFES had two big water tanks near the bridge on the S bend at

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Coronation Road. When asked how many times the crew had filled the truck during the day and night, they said once. Civilians would see a fire truck and thought help had arrived. Sadly, that was not the case. DFES was heard saying to locals, “Let it burn.” At one stage, 30 police cars were parked on the oval and I have to question why. The protocols that were in place were not appropriate for the local region. When farmers came to town to pick up fuel for their motors, they had to go through a clumsy permit system, with some taking more than two hours to get back. A fire does not wait for two hours! These are the systems that we can fix.

Infringement notices were handed out to people who were conducting burn-offs to protect their property. Surely the authorities have a little more to do than that and can see merit in it! As many locals tell us, fire crews from other districts that were called in to assist did not know the access points or water points or what topography was around the next bend. Our local fire control chief knows that well; he is an experienced fireman.

Communications are an issue in regional Western Australia, and that is not the fault of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services or anyone else. A simple siren in town, as we had many years ago—as soon as smoke went up, the town siren went off and the fire was extinguished within minutes—would be a way to counter the poor phone reception. A number of people were sent messages but they arrived two days late. The best way to find out knowledge about the fires turned out to be through Facebook and social media.

On 7 January, a local resident was stopped at a police roadblock at the corner of Bristol and Johnston Roads.

HON ADELE FARINA (South West) [11.41 am]: I rise to express my views on this matter also as a member for South West Region, which has been subjected to fires in recent times, some of which, sadly, have been started by arsonists. The opposition would also like to take this opportunity to put on the record its sympathy to the families and friends of the people who lost their lives in the recent bushfires. On behalf of the opposition, I also put on the record our sincere thanks to all those involved in fighting the fires, including the Department of Fire and Emergency Services; the Department of Parks and Wildlife; local government; our local volunteer bush fire brigades; the residents and farmers who, in many cases, did a lot of the bushfire fighting; and all the support crew that delivered the food and everything else that was needed to keep those brigades going during the fires. The local brigades in the south west and the brigades from other areas worked 12-hour shifts to try to fight the fires and get them under control. It was a massive effort by everyone involved. It is also important to acknowledge the work that has been done by a number of government agencies—for example, Western Power, the Water Corporation and Telstra—after the fires to get the basic services on the ground again as quickly as possible.

Hon Nigel Hallett is absolutely right; the reason there is an increasing number of bushfires in the south west region is partly climate change—we have a drying climate—but also massive amounts of fuel loads on the ground have not been properly addressed over many years. Our bushfire prevention strategy is severely lacking and needs to be addressed. I was at the Leschenault emergency evacuation centre every day during the fires, talking to people who had been evacuated from their homes. I heard their stories firsthand. In many cases, they were harrowing stories. These people have been severely affected, and it will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Despite hearing stories from the people gathered on the oval at Yarloop, who had to take shelter there when they evacuated Yarloop after it was hit by a massive wall of fire that devastated the town, I cannot really begin to understand the terror that they must have experienced when the mighty roar of that fire raced through Yarloop, with the gas cylinders at people’s homes exploding and fireballs launching into the air. It must have been a horrifying experience for them.

Although I acknowledge that everybody involved in fighting that fire did their absolute best, the reality is that there are systemic failures and problems in bushfire management in this state. The Keelty report articulated those very clearly, and the government has provided reports to this Parliament stating that it has completed all the recommendations in the Keelty report. I can tell members that the government has a different definition of “completion” than I and other members in the community have, because every other report written after every other major bushfire incident since the Keelty report has identified the same problems. So those recommendations have not been implemented; they have not been completed, or they have not been completed in a satisfactory way to address those issues. They are systemic problems.

I have spoken to a number of the firefighters who worked in the local brigades, the DPaW officers who were involved and the DFES officers who were involved in coordinating the response, and I can tell members right now that it is shocking to hear the stories. There are inconsistencies in what we are being told. I will not go through some of the stories, because an inquiry will go into the detail of those things, but what became very clear to me at the end is that there are systemic problems, there are communication problems and there are failings at every single level, despite the best intentions of all involved. As a state, we need to do a damn sight better.

One of the biggest concerns I have is the mismanagement of the emergency services levy by this government. The emergency services levy is a state government charge that is levied on rate notices issued by local

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governments. It is to raise money for firefighting. Under the Barnett government, that levy has gone up by 81 per cent. It was supposed to be used to deliver funding for frontline services in bushfire fighting. It is now being spent to run the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. The government's funding of DFES from consolidated revenue has declined and it has been dipping into the ESL for its administrative expenses. That is absolutely disgraceful. When we left government in 2008, the budget allocation for DFES was \$27.6 million. In 2015–16, the government allocation from consolidated revenue for DFES is \$15.2 million. That is an absolute disgrace. The government has been dipping into the ESL to fill the gap in the lack of funding it provides to our firefighting agencies. It is an absolute disgrace.

When I spoke to local brigades, I heard stories about volunteers who had completed their training. A huge amount of time is required by those volunteers to undergo that training. This is not a commitment to just a couple of hours a week; it is a massive commitment. They have invested that commitment, yet they are not able to fight the fires because their brigades do not have the funding to buy the protective equipment and clothing that they need to fight the fires. Why is that? It is because the government is sucking up that ESL money that is supposed to be going to the local brigades to pay for the administration of DFES. That is absolutely disgraceful!

When we first introduced the ESL, the then Leader of the Opposition, Paul Omodei, said —

We need to make sure that the Government does not use the system to save itself expenditure by using the emergency services levy to cover costs that it would normally cover itself.

There you go; those words were spoken by Paul Omodei back in 2002. That is exactly what the Barnett government is doing. It is an absolute disgrace! We have volunteers from local brigades who are prepared to go out and work 12-hour shifts and put their lives in danger, often while their own families and properties are at peril from the fire. They are out there saving somebody else's property, yet this government is denying those local brigades the funding that it is levying off property owners. It is time that we had a proper inquiry into what is going on in this state and not a Department of the Premier and Cabinet or government inquiry, because we are never going to find out the truth if we continue to rely on these government inquiries. The reality is that there is significant mismanagement in this area. Hon Nigel Hallett is absolutely right; we have retired foresters in this state who have spent their whole lives learning about and understanding land management and fire prevention. They have the expertise. They are prepared to offer that expertise to government and the government is choosing to ignore them. We have to ask why. How many lives have to be lost before this government wakes up and understands that bushfire management is absolutely critical? Every year we get pounded by the "Are You Bushfire Ready?" campaign by the government, but the government never asks itself whether it is ready. A significant problem is happening on government-owned land because the bushfire management and prevention strategies that the government is asking every other person who owns private property to employ are not being implemented. That is a disgrace. A situation that has arisen because of the policy of no logging in old-growth forest is that a lot of the CALM roads that had been put into national parks and forests to access the coupes to do the logging are no longer being used. As a result, they have become overgrown by bush and our firefighters cannot actually get to the points where a fire has started fast enough to extinguish it in a timely manner, and that is a major problem.

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West) [11.51 am]: I thank Hon Nigel Hallett for bringing this motion to the house today, which captures the sentiment felt in the south west at this time. I believe that the government does acknowledge this, because on 20 January 2016 the Premier announced an inquiry into the Waroona complex fires to be conducted by Euan Ferguson, former head of the Victorian Country Fire Authority. The inquiry will also delve into the extent to which recommendations from previous bushfire inquiries have been acted on by the relevant authorities. That is very important. The Keely report, which came to us when I was in cabinet, had some very good recommendations in it. This fire is also going to be looked at by former Governor Ken Michael, who is a much-respected man in Western Australia. He will listen to people. People need to go to Ken and speak to him. If even a quarter of the things that Hon Nigel Hallett said are correct, then this is where it needs to go. I believe that the Euan Ferguson inquiry is taking submissions until 4 March. It is really important that people go to the inquiry and have their views heard.

My absolute sympathy is with the families who lost their homes and possessions—I cannot even imagine what that would be like—and with the farmers who lost livestock, fences and feed. I come from a farming family, as does Hon Nigel Hallett, so we understand that when fences get burnt down and when feed disappears it is a frustrating and long process to let nature take its course. It is also a long process if farmers lose their livestock or if they have to source hay because the livestock has to be fed and there is nothing in the paddocks. It is absolutely devastating. Of course, a farmer's money disappears if their livestock has been burnt. Sue Warren, whom I know, lives near Alcoa. She had hundreds of acres burnt. As I said, it is just so frustrating. I have been through a few fires. I come from a very fire-prone area in Bridgetown. Every summer we just hold our breath

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because we know that if the easterly blows and it is a really hot day, the fire will just roll along. Tenterden has also had a few really bad fires.

The motion today gives members of this house a chance to discuss any issues, good or bad, that they may have with fire management. One point that I have is about the lack of controlled burning. Over the last few years the ball has been dropped on controlled burning, but the government recognises that. This fire had a 400-kilometre perimeter. Nothing would have stopped that fire, but if we go back a step and look at fire management and risk control, we may have had a chance of it at least not being so fierce. It was a huge, fierce fire. In total, 69 000 hectares were burnt. As Hon Nigel Hallett said, the fire started in Lane Poole Reserve and was reported at 7.25 am on 6 January 2016. The response and recovery efforts were led by a multiagency team of the Department of Parks and Wildlife, WA Police, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support, the Department of Health, Main Roads Western Australia and the Shires of Harvey and Waroona. I will just thank the presidents of those shires, who were absolutely amazing. They were on board from the start, as was my colleague Murray Cowper, who made sure that the volunteers were fed. While I am talking about volunteers, I have to say that they are amazing. I have much to do with our volunteer fire brigades and the fire chiefs right throughout the south west. They need to be listened to. They are the ones on the ground. I believe that through this inquiry with Ken Michael and Euan Ferguson, fire chiefs and other people who are on the ground with these fires will be listened to. They should be listened to. It is my belief and hope that my government will listen and that some changes will be made. I give my heartfelt thanks to the firefighters.

I will just go back to something Hon Nigel Hallett said about Department of Fire and Emergency Services people sitting in their trucks while the fire burned because there was this barrier, real or imagined, about not being able to go into private paddocks. Years ago if there was a fire, everybody got out there and put the fire out. There were no barriers; they just did it. Our country fire system is a good one because of our volunteers and our bushfire chiefs. They are the ones in my community who know what is going on and where the roads are. There has been many a time when I have spoken to a fire chief and they have said that someone had tried to stop them at some barrier but they managed to go around and put out the fire. We hear all those stories. Having said that, the government is only as good as the people it employs. Sometimes red tape stops people from doing what they should do.

There has been criticism of the management of fires. There have been questions from the public and the media about the response to those fires. The government is well aware of those concerns. I hope that those people who do not want to make a written submission to the inquiry will make a verbal submission. Believe me, they will count if they have information that is beneficial, not stories that they have heard, but actual facts. I always deal with facts because that is a better way to go. Questions have been asked and hopefully when the facts come out, there will be findings. Some people have blamed a lack of resourcing for the fire spreading so quickly and have said that firefighters do not have the equipment to fight fires the size of the Yarloop fire. I am not here to say to whether that is true; I am here to deal with the facts. Since 2011, \$80 million has been spent looking at the Keely report. New fire stations have been built and investment of \$54 million has been committed over the next two years for further fire station construction across Western Australia. But people who are practical, on-the-ground people like me know that it does not matter how many fire stations are built if the processes to fight those fires are not right. There is not much use having new, shiny buildings. We need to get the processes right and perhaps we need to go back to a country fire system. I take the point about the big helitanker sitting in New South Wales that could have been used to help fight the fire. Why was it sitting there? Why didn't we use it? All these questions need to be asked.

I go back to the 400-kilometre frontage of the Yarloop fire, which would have been absolutely horrific, particularly for the volunteer firefighters who had to step into it to save houses and lives. Sadly, two lives were lost. The two people who died were an integral part of the Yarloop community. A total of 181 properties were lost, including 162 houses and 18 other structures such as sheds, caravans and community and commercial properties. In fact, 95 per cent of Yarloop was destroyed. It was a beautiful town.

Visitors — Sacred Heart Primary School

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Liz Behjat): Order, members! Noting that this is a current and topical issue, I am trying to be as fair as possible in this debate by allowing those members whose electorates were affected by recent events to speak.

Before I give the call to Hon Rick Mazza, I welcome to the public gallery year 6 students from Sacred Heart Primary School. You are very welcome. We are having a debate on the recent bushfires down south that you may have heard of. I hope you enjoy it here; you are very welcome in our chamber.

Debate Resumed

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HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural) [12.03 pm]: I rise today to support the motion put forward by Hon Nigel Hallett. I compliment him for once again bringing this matter to the house. I think this is the third or fourth time that we have had this discussion in private members' business. I compliment him for his persistence in keeping this important matter on the agenda.

Members, we have had a horrific fire season this year with the loss of property and lives, and it is not over yet. There were fires in Harvey and Collie two weeks ago and as of yesterday a fire in Brunswick. Unfortunately, some of those fires have been attributed to being deliberately lit. It is very disturbing that someone would light a fire in that environment.

I, too, acknowledge those in the gallery today. It is not often that the public sits in our gallery to listen to debate. Such is the concern of the community that people have taken time away from their work, businesses and lives to listen to this debate today.

I drove through Yarloop a couple of days after the fire. I managed to get through the back way. I found it very disturbing. My family moved to Yarloop in the 1940s and my grandparents lived there for more than 60 years. I have a lot of childhood memories about Yarloop, so it was heartbreaking to drive through the town and see it razed. Yarloop will never return to what it was. Indeed, Alcoa has already said that it will not rebuild the 35 houses that it lost. It is doubtful that the town will ever recover.

I am not here to blame anybody. We have a system and that system is broken. It is not broken because of a lack of money. The emergency services levy for this financial year is estimated to raise \$320 million, which is an increase of more than 10 per cent from the previous year. The 10 per cent increase represents an extra \$31 million this year, which is a substantial amount of money.

An opposition member interjected.

Hon RICK MAZZA: That is right; the resources exist to improve our system.

As has been discussed at length, Western Australia had not had mega-fires for nearly 40 years since the 1961 Dwellingup fires, after which, in 1962, there was a royal commission. One of the major recommendations from the royal commission was that we carry out a prescribed burn of 250 000 hectares of forest each year. At a community meeting at the Pemberton Mill Hall, people from the Department of Parks and Wildlife said that during the 1960s and 1970s that quota went up to 350 000 hectares. There was a very big effort to reduce fuel loads in our forests. During estimates hearings over the last couple of years, I have been alarmed to get back answers from the Department of Parks and Wildlife that it has been carrying out prescribed burning of less than 50 000 hectares a year since the early 2000s. A rough calculation suggests that over the last 15 years, we are between two million and three million hectares behind in our prescribed burning—a substantial fuel load. A lot has been said about climate change and a drying climate. I remember the 1960s and 70s when we had long, hot, dry summers but we never had mega-fires because, obviously, fuel loads were being reduced. The idea of a drying climate and drier winters counteracts the argument because if we had wetter winters in the 60s and 70s, more vegetation would have grown, which would then dry out in summer. If we have drier winters, we should have less vegetation. I will be very disappointed if the Greens or others start pointing to climate change as the reason for the mega-fires; it is simply fire management and suppression. In the last five or six years there have been fires at Boddington, Northcliffe, Walpole—which we discussed earlier today—Roleystone, Toodyay, Parkerville, Esperance and more recently the Harvey, Waroona and Yarloop fires. The current management system is obviously flawed, which has produced unsatisfactory outcomes.

I support Hon Nigel Hallett's suggestion that we set up a separate country fire service. I do not think that that would take away from the 1 100 paid emergency services personnel who do a fine job when it comes to emergencies or building fires in the city. However, the country situation is quite different; it is mainly made up of volunteers, supposedly managed through local government, and those volunteers have a strong sense of community. They know their terrain and they have a lot of pride. Recent changes to the structure have resulted in a change in the colour of volunteer trucks or uniform logos without consultation. That takes away from the culture of the volunteers and their sense of community and of what they do.

It was a little bit disappointing to see in the media the exchange between Murray Cowper, MLA—I must say that Murray Cowper did a good job for his district in monitoring those fires—and Minister Joe Francis over food that was supposed to be delivered. Murray Cowper phoned 000 and the retort from Minister Joe Francis was, "Well, he should have rung for pizza." If that is the fatigue management program, I will help out the minister. I have some Domino's Pizza vouchers here—three pizzas for \$31 delivered! The process has to be better than ordering toasted sandwiches or pizza. The bottom line is that volunteers on the fire front need to be backed up with food and drinks. Some of them had not had a drink for hours. Consideration should be given to what those people had been through at the fire front.

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There has been a strong push for a country fire service and, as I said, I agree with Hon Nigel Hallett that a board comprising volunteers, members of the Department of Parks and Wildlife and local government is a very good model. Another bureaucratic review is being undertaken, by Euan Ferguson, and I welcome that. It will mainly focus on the Yarloop and Waroona fires. There have already been a couple of bureaucratic reviews, but I think that it is time for a parliamentary review, consistent with what was called for in the petition that I presented on Tuesday. The petition contains 2 000-odd signatures and more signatures are rolling in. I do not know how I will deal with those just yet, but there is obviously a lot of community concern. We need a people's review so that people can express their experiences with and concerns about the fires. Let us get it fixed.

HON MARTIN ALDRIDGE (Agricultural) [12.10 pm]: I too rise to speak on the motion before us today. In doing so, I want to add my condolences to those that have already been made, particularly to those who have tragically lost family members and community members or have lost property and livelihoods as a result of some of the devastating fires we have seen this season. As some members have already pointed out, the season is still some way from being over, and our wishes are also with those who continue to serve until we get some good rains. I would also like to mention and reflect on the many people who have worked for considerable amounts of time, particularly our volunteers and our career staff throughout Western Australia. I know there have been strike forces from the Pilbara and remote parts of the state coming down to the south west to help out their colleagues. I will also mention some of the services that we often do not recognise enough, like the State Emergency Service, the Salvation Army, not-for-profit organisations, Red Cross, the Country Women's Association and a whole bunch of other services in our community. Once the response function is completed, they play such an important role in the recovery of these communities.

Just about every member who has spoken so far has talked about the inquiry. I fully support the inquiry that is being led by Euan Ferguson. When I was a volunteer firefighter in the early 2000s, I actually spent a bit of time with Euan; at the time he was the chief officer of the South Australian Country Fire Service. He comes from a background of running a voluntary organisation in South Australia and is held in very high regard, particularly in South Australia and in Victoria, where he later went to work with the Country Fire Authority. I know from feedback that I have seen so far that the work he has done in Western Australia has been quite positive. I think the inquiry is important and that is why I have so far contained my comments about what has or has not happened this fire season while I wait for some of the facts to come to light as a result of that inquiry. I know some members have made some speculative comments and voiced some speculative concerns today, and some of those things are very concerning; but I also do not think it is very helpful to continue to recycle those things, day in, day out, until we actually get to the bottom of what has happened and how we can improve some of the things that did happen rather than the things that may have happened.

I usually welcome discussions on these issues and I want to use this opportunity today to talk to some of the aspects of the motion. I think Hon Nigel Hallett ran out of time and did not quite get to the last point of his motion, but I hope to this morning. The first part of the motion talks about cultural change. I struggle with the notion that if we have a cultural issue amongst our fire agencies, creating another fire agency is going to fix the cultural issue. Having worked in both the volunteer and the career service, I know there are at times individuals who do have cultural issues with other organisations and other agencies, and we have quite a few different agencies responsible for fire response in Western Australia, not to mention our many, many local governments outside Perth.

I think it is important to recognise that fire prevention and mitigation is ultimately the responsibility of the landowner in Western Australia. That was reinforced in the Keelty report; I think Mick Keelty's words were that if you own the land, you own the risk. I guess one of the issues I have with the current approach is that obviously this state government is quite a big landowner and we do a good job and are doing a better job at helping people manage risk on their lands, but we need to do a better job of managing risks in our estate. I know that some recommendations are going to government as a result of the project amalgamating emergency service acts in Western Australia, and I know there are some specific recommendations around the responsibility of the state and the lands that it manages through its portfolios, including the Department of Lands, the Water Corporation and a whole range of other agencies that have large landholdings in Western Australia.

Talking about prevention versus response, we find these sorts of things competing in not only emergency services but also a whole range of portfolio areas, be it corrective services, law and order or health. Often there are some really good, innovative ways that we can do more in the prevention space that, if successful, will lead to better response outcomes and therefore less cost to government, less loss of life, less loss of infrastructure, and less damage to the environment. But sometimes those competing interests are competing for the same pot of money. I think some really good things have come out post-Keelty—I have spoken about this previously—particularly with regard to the bushfire risk mitigation project that was initially piloted in the south west and is being rolled out to other parts of the state. It is a really important program, helping communities and regions to

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understand their risks and to manage them. I have spoken before about the Department of Parks and Wildlife's arbitrary burning targets; I think they are somewhat irrelevant unless we actually understand the risk and target and prioritise that risk.

I do not support the creation of a country fire service. As I said before, I think it is rather interesting that people mount arguments about bureaucracy constraining their ability to do their job, yet they want to create a new bureaucracy to allow them to do their job. When I speak to some of the volunteers in my electorate, they actually want fewer fire agencies, not more. There are local government fire services that want to transition to state government control under the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. Only yesterday, I understand, the Shire of Augusta–Margaret River started a process to transition from their local government fire service to a state fire service under DFES. This is a part of the state that has seen devastating fires in recent years and was subject to the inquiry by Keelty not that long ago. Yesterday we saw progress towards volunteers within that local government authority voting to progress a process with the state government to transfer its fire service into the state system.

I think it has become a bit of a sport to bash DFES. I liken it to the sport that state governments sometimes play with local governments, or that federal governments play with state governments. Whenever something happens in the emergency services space, it is the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner who is to blame. Interestingly, a bit has been said today about who did or did not get fed during a recent fire in the south west, which resulted in a 000 call. I think that is a very serious matter; certainly, as a former firefighter I would never tie up an emergency phone line to make that concern known, particularly at that time of year, given the types of things that were happening around the state. But if I read correctly in some of the reporting that has occurred since and some of the information that is now public, that fire was actually managed by local government. More seriously, although that fire was managed by local government, local government did not know that those fire crews were on the fireground. Yes, it is concerning that volunteers are not being fed and watered on firegrounds; that is important, but more seriously, we had people in control of that fire who did not even know the firefighters were there. Unfortunately, that was not widely reported, and perhaps that might be something that is considered as part of the inquiry—cutting through some of the stories and some of the noise we are hearing after those fires.

More can be done; there are new things constantly happening. I was briefed only yesterday about reforms to the Emergency Management Act in Western Australia, which I think will deliver important powers to the State Emergency Management Committee in respect of reporting to government and the minister on the implementation of recommendations following an inquiry. I think that is important, and I support DFES and the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner. I think we need to wait until some more facts are known before progressing the debate.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural) [12.21 pm]: I will be brief, because I know that there are other speakers and there is only a short time left. I just want to make a couple of points. As a resident of a regional area, who has turned up to many fires and helped to put them out, I am aware of how the hierarchy can work, and how things can go wrong in regional areas. I acknowledge members of the public in the public gallery today, and I acknowledge all firefighters, both volunteer and professional, and the great work they do.

We have put out some pretty big fires in the wheatbelt, and that happens as a consequence of everyone working together, knowing their role, working safely and getting the right outcome. That does not seem to be happening all the time here in Western Australia at the moment. I acknowledge that the Ferguson review is underway, and that we should wait and see the outcomes of that, but there have been lots of reviews and things are getting worse. We are either not learning from our reviews or not acting on them. That is a point for the government to think about. I thank Hon Nigel Hallett for bringing this great motion to the house on a very important issue that we need to deal with.

I disagree with Hon Rick Mazza. Climate change is real, and it is happening. We are experiencing a warmer and drier climate in late winter, spring and early summer, and we will have more and more fires as a consequence. The hotter the weather, the harder the fire, for a whole lot of reasons that I will not go into at the moment, but we have to factor that into our future planning.

It is fair to say that in my experience in my area, the relationships between the Department of Parks and Wildlife, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and volunteer firefighters have never been worse. Volunteer firefighters are exasperated at the amount of bureaucracy and the chain of command that establishes itself in a fire situation. There are times in every fire's life when we can put our foot on it and put it out. The point is that the earlier we can get in and start tackling a fire and trying to beat it when it is small, the better. We do not seem to do that well enough at the moment.

Hon Martin Aldridge interjected.

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Hon DARREN WEST: The member has had his time, and he has made his point.

Several members interjected.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Liz Behjat): Order! Everyone wants to have a chance on this, and the members who are interjecting have had an opportunity. Please allow Hon Darren West to continue.

Hon DARREN WEST: I will wind up my remarks. Hon Martin Aldridge has made some controversial comments, and I am sure that something will be made of those later, but I want to say that we should give more respect to our volunteer firefighters' knowledge of local conditions. That is missing here, and a lot of local volunteer firefighting groups raise it with me. They do not feel valued enough at a fire; they do not feel that they are talked to and that their views matter. We can make a very important start in all this. Let us see what the review comes out with. The review will make a recommendation about the country fire service. I think it is an idea worth exploring. I will wind up my remarks there.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Minister for Housing) [12.24 pm]: Thank you, Hon Darren West, for giving me the opportunity. I am not going to concentrate on some of the operational questions that have been raised, and there have been many over the recent fires, because that is a role for the review. I will restrict my comments to some observations I have made based on some feedback from the community, volunteer firefighters and people directly involved in the incident control centres.

To me, it comes back to the relationships between the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, the Department of Parks and Wildlife and volunteer firefighter units. I agree with Hon Darren West; I have never seen the relationship worse. There has been a breakdown in the relationship, and a breakdown in trust. The level of trust runs from the very top, through the command chain to the fireground. The feedback that I get is that at the fireground, the incident controllers and the guys working with units are exceptional, and continue to do good work. In the bureaucracy, further up the chain of command, the level of trust breaks down. To use an analogy, when police officers are doing their duty, day in, day out, we grant them a level of trust. We train them and give them a role, responsibility and level of trust to make decisions every day in their jobs at the very front line of community policing concerns. They do not call their offices and ask what to do next; they take responsibility, and we train them to do that. It seems to me that that does not extend to fire and emergency services. Where is the level of trust to give people the right decision-making powers at the right level? I am not a firefighter, so I do not know. I am basing my observations on the feedback that I get.

To come back to the motion before the house, it seems to me that there has been a shift in the management of fire risk. That management has shifted from doing things in a land management sense before a fire even happens, and that is what Hon Nigel Hallett is bringing to the attention of the house today. We used to do a lot more management before a fire even started—fire suppression, controlled burns—so that we did not have to deal with a wildfire. It seems to me that that risk management has shifted from before the fire to when a wildfire actually occurs. Of course there will be some challenges when that occurs, because wildfires are just that—they are dangerous and unpredictable and we have conditions in Western Australia that make them almost impossible to stop at times. We should shift our risk management back to the land management options. I understand that DFES is an emergency management organisation; it is not a land management organisation like those we have had in the past, when DPaW, the Forest Products Commission, local fire brigades and local governments themselves had taken control of some of the land management issues. We need to get back to that. We need to review how we manage our fire risks way before the fire even starts. It seems to me that it is the wrong way around.

I agree with some aspects of what Hon Martin Aldridge said about establishing another bureaucracy. I know why it is there in the third part of this motion, but let us get the relationships right. Let us get the level of trust right. We have professional firefighters at all levels. We need to start working together rather than mistrusting relationships.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.