

BUSHFIRE SEASON — HELICOPTER FLEET

196. Mr J.M. FRANCIS to the Minister for Emergency Services:

As a volunteer firefighter, I have been unlucky enough to have had water dumped on me by helicopters a number of times over the summer season; one has to listen for the alarm before they dump the water, and that is the cue to duck! Can the minister share with the house details of the state's helicopter fleet activity over the summer fire season?

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL replied:

I did not see the member for Girrawheen ask the question, although I notice she is dressed in half her SES outfit today!

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Knocked back? What does that mean?

Ms M.M. Quirk: Refused!

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: It has been a very, very busy fire season. The advice I have in relation to bushfires is that our firefighters attended 4 250 bushfires this fire season. At times our resources were stretched from Carnarvon right through to Walpole and further east towards Albany. I take this opportunity—on behalf of everyone in this house, I am sure, member for Girrawheen—to acknowledge and thank for their efforts all those firefighters, the people who support them and their families who stay at home while they are out in harm's way. There are, of course, professional firefighters, employed by the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Forest Products Commission, local government employees who line up to fight fires —

Mrs M.H. Roberts: They're all professional, you do realise that, don't you? They are career and volunteer firefighters.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: — and the tens of thousands of volunteers, professionally trained, who go out to fight fires when called upon. From a FESA point of view, not only were we out fighting fires, but also we have been implementing a range of reforms that were outlined to the government as a result of the Keelty inquiry. Those reforms are far-reaching and are being implemented as we speak. We are also dealing with the challenges that emerged out of the second Keelty inquiry around the development and instigation of the Office of Bushfire Risk Management and extra resourcing in the capes region to deal with fire risks there.

I am sorry that the member for Jandakot had water dumped on him; we might need one of those on standby to help the member for Mandurah when he leaves the George Michael concert! I do not want him going up in flames; it seems like he is going to get very excited!

The rotary fleet plays a very big role in fighting fires. This fire season the government has invested about \$13 million supporting our on-the-ground firefighters with the rotary fleet. Just to remind the house, the rotary fleet is composed of eight helicopters. There is the big Erickson Air-Crane helicopter nicknamed "Marty". The next time the member for Girrawheen asks, the name is "Marty", not "Elvis". I was unable to answer her question because she got the name wrong, but I will try again. There are also two type 1 helitacks, which hold around 4 500 litres, one in Perth and one based in Busselton, and there are four further helitacks supported and assisted by one aerial intelligence platform.

I will wrap this up shortly, but there are some interesting statistics on fighting those 4 250 fires. Our rotary fleet was activated 433 times; they flew more than 590 hours; they made 2 555 water drops, and in those water drops, dropped approximately four million litres of water and foam. Those helicopters played a massive role in fighting fires. The 9 500 litre Erickson Air-Crane also played a significant role; it was a major boost to the fleet. Over the next little while we will be examining the impact that the air crane had on our firefighting efforts, but the one thing I can assure the house —

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: I was down south there in Margaret River with the member for Girrawheen, and I have to report to the house that her performance that night was nothing short of disgraceful. There were people at that meeting —

Mr J.N. Hyde interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: I am just passing on my observations, and if the member for Perth had been there, he would have made the same observations. People at that meeting, who were calling —

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Girrawheen! Minister, you indicated that you are very close to the end of your answer. I sincerely hope that is the case. I do not want to be formally calling people to order at any point for the remainder of this question time. I address those remarks to you, minister.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: At that meeting there were members of the public calling for the heads of firefighters and people involved in firefighting. My view—I made this point at that meeting—is that if we run around after every fire and try to find someone to blame so that we can chop their head off, we will not be able to fight fires with headless firemen. It is important that we understand the fundamental point that we should do all we can to protect and stand behind the volunteer and non-volunteer professional firefighters who go out to protect our communities. That is a decision that we have made as a government, and that is what I will be doing as the Minister for Emergency Services whenever called upon to do so. I conclude by saying that those statistics and that \$13 million investment is a reflection of this government's commitment to working with communities the length and breadth of this state to help protect them from the threat of fire.