

ESPERANCE BUSHFIRES — RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Grievance

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre) [9.28 am]: I thank the Minister for Emergency Services for taking this grievance around resource allocation and early intervention during the Esperance fires. At the outset, I acknowledge the wonderful work of firefighters during the tragic fires of 17 November last year, including professional firefighters, and firefighters from local brigades and from the Department of Parks and Wildlife. Resources and early intervention is so important. Early intervention is important in preventing a serious wildfire from developing, which we have experienced in Western Australia. I recognise that once a wildfire develops, it is almost unstoppable.

I also recognise the very severe conditions around that time in Esperance, with a grass fire index of 221. To put that in perspective, anything over 100 is deemed extreme. I recognise also the increased fuel loads and the temperature on that day. However, it would be sad if we did not learn something from the “Major Incident Review of the Esperance district fires” that was released on 8 March this year by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, and the good work of Euan Ferguson. I want to address the limited external resourcing. I quote from the report —

While the Esperance district did request additional resources, the pattern of fires and predicted adverse fire conditions across the state meant that limited external resourcing was made available

“Limited” resourcing was made available, recognising all the matters within Western Australia and the severity of other fires throughout Western Australia.

On 16 November, the day before the major wildfire in which we unfortunately lost four people around Grigg Road in Scaddan, a DFES area officer based in Albany was deployed to the Esperance district office to assist the local incident management team. On the morning of 17 November the regional operations centre requested additional resources from Perth. Initially the state operations centre did not action the request due to a determination that there were adequate IMT resources already in Esperance and Narrogin. It is the matter of aerial support that I want to address in particular. I understand that aerial support is not the be-all and end-all in fighting fires—it is very important that we have ground troops, if you like, to follow up—but aerial support in early intervention is critical. Two local fixed-wing agricultural aircraft operated by private contractors in the Esperance area were offered for aerial support suppression tasking; however, regulatory constraints and the time available and contract management capacity prohibited their deployment. We recognise that there were demands from the aerial infrastructure in the metropolitan area and Albany region, and for Mt Solus and in that area around Albany.

On the evening of the seventeenth, after the wildfire had developed and gone through Grigg Road in Scaddan, a further request was made. Eventually, aerial support was available but it did not appear until the Wednesday morning. It is really important to look at the whole issue of the implementation of aerial support, both the intelligence in fighting the fire and the suppression of it. The response in Esperance, therefore, was reliant on aerial resources from outside the region. Had aerial suppression resources been available prior to the escalation of the fire on 17 November, they would most likely have been deployed at the Merivale fire, which was the fire that was threatening the town. There were three fire fronts, as the Minister for Emergency Services well knows, at Cape Arid National Park, at North Cascade and at Merivale. If those aerial supports were not available because of all those constraints and demands in the state of Western Australia, we need to take away those regulatory constraints that do not allow the deployment of two fixed-wing aerial agricultural aircraft that could have been deployed. This is not the first time this issue has arisen. It is really important. It is not as though those two aerial supports would be used during the whole firefighting period, but it would provide early intervention until the troops arrive; until the other squadron, if you like, arrives. That is really important because, as with disease, early intervention is critical and obviates much pain into the future.

In the last minute I have left to speak I will touch on resources being low initially in the incident management team. It is important that we have a scalable model so that when the risk exists during the high season—we have a very large agricultural region—more than one person is in the office. One person in the DFES office is insufficient and staff numbers must be increased when there is a potential fire risk. The minister must recognise the importance of early intervention with aerial support and the IMT in the early phase of the fire. There was some description around the lack of record keeping, planning and information passing up the line in the early phase of the fire that threatened early intervention.

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services) [9.35 am]: I thank the member for Eyre for his grievance on resource allocation and early intervention during the Esperance fires. I acknowledge also his passion and absolute commitment to the people of Esperance, in not just raising this issue but also in dealing with the recovery from those fires. It takes the kind of human touch that only a doctor could provide to his

electorate to help people through what has obviously been a significant and challenging time in and around Esperance. To put it into context, the Esperance complex fires were some of the most destructive fires the state has ever seen, notwithstanding the Yarloop fires, which obviously was a different issue to confront. The Esperance fires devastated over 300 000 hectares and tragically cost four lives. Since then, there has been commentary around the deployment of resources and the speed of the response. I also have a limited amount of time and there are a couple of points I need to address, including the member's comments about early intervention using aircraft capable of dropping water.

The major incident review released just last week found that the response was broadly well managed; however, it also noted that there were clear areas for improvement. That MIR was conducted by the Nous Group on behalf of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, so it is effectively an internal review. It notes clearly that there were a number of high-level fires and a lot of fire activity across southern Western Australia during this time, with 29 separate fires burning. On 15 November lightning strikes ignited multiple bushfires throughout the Esperance area. The Department of Parks and Wildlife and local government brigades responded, and DFES monitored the situation from the state operations centre, as it does with every single fire. When a level 1 fire starts, it is initially under the control of the local brigade and local government. When it has escalated to a level 2 fire, effectively it is still under the control of the local government but it will bring in other resources from other local government areas if required, and perhaps aerial support. A level 3 fire is effectively when the local government authority asks DFES to take command and control of the fire, for a number of different reasons, but probably for logistics and also because of the command and control structure that is required for a large fire and the coordination of all the responses.

We must keep this in the context of the catastrophic weather conditions on 17 November. The fire escalated at 12.30 pm on 17 November. Under section 13 of the Bush Fires Act, the local government requested, as I mentioned, that DFES take control of the incident; so the fire had effectively been burning for some time before then. Under the control of the IMT, which was staffed by DFES, Parks and Wildlife and the local government, additional resources were immediately mobilised. One criticism is that when a fire becomes a level 3 incident DFES does not listen to local knowledge. I should note that there are always local volunteers, local fire control officers and local experienced people who are part of that IMT. It is essential that whoever is qualified as an incident manager down to a sector commander takes into account local knowledge, and I am confident that continues to happen.

The "Major Incident Review of the Esperance district fires" notes that preparations were undertaken across all regions in the state, in light of anticipated severe fire conditions, as early as 12 November—three days before the fire started. The Cascades fire had an unusually high intensity and rate of spread for a grassland fire; it is thought to have been the hottest grassland fire in Western Australia's recorded history. The science of it is that direct attack by water after a fire like that takes off—I know the member was talking about before it took off—is like putting a glass of water on a bonfire. Grassland fire is hard to compact with water after it gets across a measurement of 5 000 kilowatts a metre, and this fire was assessed to be 45 000 kilowatts a metre of intensity of energy; it was significant.

Resources were mobilised from all over southern Western Australia, and crews from Perth—predominantly volunteers—were on three-day deployment. I acknowledge the volunteers, career firefighters and businesses that employ volunteers and let them go and fight fires; there is a financial sacrifice when they do that. I also acknowledge the wonderful corporate support. I remember giving the example of Virgin Australia Airlines having put on, at its expense, an aircraft to fly volunteer firefighter crews in and out of Esperance in the style of fly in, fly out workers. That made it a lot easier for more volunteers to go to and from Esperance; it otherwise may not have happened. The trucks were left there and Virgin flew the crews back and forth. That was a great act of corporate citizenship by Virgin, and a lot of other businesses made similar contributions. The crews did a two-day turnaround, and once the appliances were on the ground it was a lot easier.

I will quickly touch on two things. Firstly is the issue of aircraft—the crop dusters that could not be used for aerial firefighting. The major incident report states that federal aviation regulations prohibit a pilot who is not licensed to undertake firefighting operations from doing so. Member for Eyre, I think we can explore this further because it is a good point. I am happy to take this up with the relevant federal minister to see what kind of emergency relaxations might be able to be put in place.

Mr A.P. Jacob: Accredited pilots do cropdusting, and they can fly a plane.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: But flying over a crop is different from flying over a fire, and there may be a very good reason they are not allowed to do that.

I want to place on record that the Bush Fires Act 1954—this is another urban myth that now creates a dangerous situation—clearly allows fire control officers and firefighters from bush fire brigades to enter crown land for the

purpose of extinguishing a fire. An urban myth has been spread by a number of different people that if bush fire brigades do that, they will be prosecuted; it is just not true. It has become counterproductive, because there is a myth out there that if bush fire brigades go on that land, they will be prosecuted. I wanted to put on the record that that is not the case. There is a clear and specific section in the Bush Fires Act that allows that, and I think it is dangerous to continue to perpetuate an untruth that would prohibit bush fire brigades from putting out a fire.