

## **BUSHFIRE SEASON 2016–17 — PREPARATIONS**

### *Grievance*

**DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre)** [9.10 am]: I thank the Minister for Emergency Services for taking my grievance. It is in relation to the major incident review of the Esperance district fires in November last year. I know that we cannot do everything all at once. However, there are three areas I would like to draw the minister's attention to in preparation for the summer. The first is about early intervention. Although aerial support is not the silver bullet for everything, it is important that we have a clear policy for the mobilisation of aerial support, particularly in the early phases of a fire. I understand that there are challenges of distance. There were challenges around the number of fires in Western Australia on 16 and 17 November. There were four in the Plantagenet area; four in the Boddington area; one in Kondinin; nine fires burning around the Albany area, as well as Mt Solus; and 10 in Esperance, of which three became major fire fronts. It was a severe day: the McArthur Grassland Fire Danger Index was 222, and anything over 100 is considered catastrophic. In the fire 19 properties, 4 500 stock, 118 000 hectares of crops and large areas of bushland were destroyed. Also, unfortunately, four lives were lost.

The issues are in and around the unavailability of aerial support, the ability or inability for us to mobilise the local appliances—that is, two aircraft that were crop dusters—and that there was no clear fire policy or triggers for mobilising the aerial support. I understand that there were fires burning on three fronts: Cascades, Merivale and Cape Arid National Park. The contract for southern Western Australia for aerial support is via Dunn Aviation. It has the contract and is based around Narrogin, Manjimup and Albany. The Department of Parks and Wildlife has the contract with Dunn's aerial support. I wonder where we were at with out-of-contract crop dusters being used as early intervention for aerial support. The regulatory impediments, I believe, have been addressed through the Civil Aviation Safety Authority. There are air operator licences for the crop duster pilots and they are fully accredited to do water-bombing. We need a call-when-needed contract so early intervention can be done in inaccessible places such as reserves and national parks that on-the-ground appliances cannot access.

I understand that we also need an early contract because the contract with Dunn for Western Australia does not start until 12 December. Our fire season and our potential fire season is much earlier than that. I would ask that we plan to have the contracts issued early—from early to mid-October—so we can cover that very important time as we come into harvest with fire potential. We need to look at early contracts, out-of-contract crop dusters being used for early intervention until the squadron arrives and call-when-needed contracts. The question, of course, is who pays. When it is a local government jurisdiction fire, it costs around \$6 000 an hour to mobilise an aerial support water bomber.

Fire mitigation is the second part of my grievance that I would very quickly like to talk to. There are not sufficient resources to widen and maintain buffers between unallocated crown land and farmland. This is an important issue. I took out all the rest of the hair that I had left on the day after the fire was downgraded. We had bulldozers chaining a break between the interface of unallocated crown land and farmland. When the fire was downsized, the bulldozers stopped and who was going to fund the job became an issue. We understand that there is 2 350 kilometres of interface between unallocated crown land and farmland. I know that is a great challenge, but we need a clear policy on scrub chain or roll in order to create a buffer. Some interjurisdictional policies need to be clarified so as to clear up the confusion about how we can do this effectively.

The last thing I would like to talk to members about is something very important in the Nous Group report—the major incident review—namely, the breakdown in communications. I understand that there was a breakdown in communication between fire appliances and generally on the fire field. Twenty-one mobile phone towers went down. When the power goes out the mobile phone towers go down, but there are two other systems that are available. They are the bush fire brigade network and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services network. The DFES network is the command network to command the fire appliances on the ground. It was faulty; there was a faulty antenna. Channel 187 broke down and there was not a workaround for channel 186. It had not been developed and there were no backup repeaters or portable backup repeaters to make the system work effectively. The bush fire brigade network did work but there was a lack of clear protocols and discipline. A lot of chatter clogged up the system. A centralised communications plan is required in this area. As the major incident review states, there are no clear communication plans.

In summary, we need a communication plan, and we need to look at backup repeaters and the potential to keep them alive during a severe fire. We have to look at how we can get backup power for mobile phone towers. I know that is not the minister's jurisdiction but we need to look at that as well. There are three areas that we need to clear up for the fire season that is coming: communications, fire mitigation and early intervention. I hope the minister will be able to attend our fire forum on 4 October.

**MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services)** [9.16 am]: I thank the member for Eyre for raising these issues with me. Can I say from the outset, particularly around the use of non-prescribed aircraft

for early intervention and the issue of access to unallocated crown land, the member for Eyre has been exceptionally passionate in raising these issues, to the point of frustration.

**Dr G.G. Jacobs:** I thought you were going to say to the point of psychosis!

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I was not going to say “pain in the proverbial”, but good on the member for doing so. Although I do not have absolutely perfect news, I have some good news for him. The bottom line is that some of the things that are happening now in this area would not have happened if the member had not been that proverbial dog with a bone, raising them and pushing them. All credit to the member for Eyre for what he has achieved, which I will outline shortly.

The Esperance fires were particularly complex. They were some of the most destructive fires the state has ever seen. Unfortunately, they took four lives: three foreign nationals and Mr Curnow. They also devastated over 300 000 hectares of farmland, as the member pointed out. There were catastrophic weather conditions that the state has probably never seen before, with fuel load and wind and temperatures on the day. There are a lot of lessons that have come out of it. A major incident review was conducted. It stated that it was “broadly well-managed given the scale of the incident and the extreme weather conditions.” However, it noted that there were some areas for improvement. Every incident, no matter the size, should always be an opportunity for emergency services personnel, whether they be career volunteers or support personnel, to reflect on how it was managed and to try to learn from how it was done and see if they can do things better the next time; in particular, using the aerial assets that the member suggested could have been used, such as civilian crop dusters. I took this up with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the Civil Aviation Safety Authority, which is a commonwealth regulatory authority. Civil Aviation Safety Regulations set the mandatory minimum requirements for aerial firefighting operators, which was also addressed on page 30 of the Nous major incident report.

In setting these mandatory requirements, the Civil Aviation Safety Regulations considered the significant risks associated with aerial fire suppression to ensure that the firefighting services provided are both fit for purpose and, importantly, safe. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the Department of Parks and Wildlife do not support modifying these regulations because relaxing or waiving the mandated minimum experience or qualifications required of aircraft and pilots would obviously incur significant risk to life and property, and no-one wants to see that. However—this is the good bit, member for Eyre—improvements can be made to the process and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services is currently incorporating Western Australia’s aviation contracts into the national aviation management support system database. What that means is that contractors will be able to pre-register the services they provide, such as water-bombing, which the member pointed out, and speed up the process of chartering and mobilising these resources when they are not already on seasonal terms contracts. In plain English, as a net result of the issues that the member raised, he can expect more pre-registered certified aircraft and pilots that meet that standard available in regional Western Australia. All credit to the member for Eyre. I cannot give him a number at the moment, but I will keep him updated on that. We want to make it easy. We do not want a situation in which someone who is a certified pilot with a certified aircraft cannot put water on a fire because they do not have a contract arrangement in place. That is in the process of being sorted. Hopefully, that will address some of the concerns.

The member for Eyre referred to fire mitigation and firebreaks. I think he referred to 2 500 kilometres —

**Dr G.G. Jacobs:** There are 2 350 kilometres —

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** — just in his area.

**Dr G.G. Jacobs:** That was in the report. It astounded me because there are about 7 000 kilometres in the whole state!

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** That is almost from here to Darwin or here to Kununurra. In the aftermath, once the fire had started to die down, the member rang me many times expressing his frustration because the equipment was on the ground and he wanted to seize the opportunity and ensure that those firebreaks were cleared. I will make a couple of quick points otherwise I will run out of time. Firstly, following that, an urban myth continued to be perpetuated that it is not legal for volunteer firefighters to enter unallocated crown land for the purpose of combating or inspecting a fire or fire mitigation. That is just not true and was exceptionally unhelpful. As I have advised in this house before, the Bush Fires Act 1954 makes provision for them to do that. I always reiterate that point because unfortunately people in not only the member’s electorate but also other electorates believe that myth.

Member for Eyre, my main view about aerial firefighting or situations similar to the one that the member saw with dozers trying to continue to work to reduce the fuel load around firebreaks on unallocated crown land down there is to get it done and send me the bill later. I have had conversations about aerial firefighting with Commissioner Gregson and said that we should not die wondering what would happen if we do not make the most of every opportunity to combat a fire in the first available instance—get it done, save the town, save the community and send me the bill later. That is our attitude towards that. It is not the cost that slows things down.

The member referred to the key issue of communications. We are looking at that and making some changes. We are including automatic vehicle location systems in fire trucks to help keep crews safe and to better coordinate resources going into this fire season.