

BUNBURY AIRPORT — FIREFIGHTING AIRCRAFT — SECTION 95 PRISONERS

62. Mr G.M. CASTRILLI to the Minister for Corrective Services:

I understand that Bunbury Airport has requested the use of section 95 prisoners from Bunbury Regional Prison to help reload firefighting aircraft. Can he please advise the house on the progress of this request?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS replied:

I thank the member for Bunbury for his question and his interest in the rehabilitative work that section 95 prisoners are doing in the community. Anyone who watched Channel Seven on Friday night would have seen a great story about 17 prisoners from Karnet Prison Farm who have become pretty much fully-fledged volunteer firefighters and who now go out to not only man fire trucks, but also help reload the aerial firefighting fleet. To give credit where it is due, the idea first popped into my head when a member of the public wrote me a letter last year highlighting the significant contribution that prisoners in California were making to fighting wildfires over there. I thought we have a need for a few more firefighters to help out to reload aircraft and helicopters and here we have section 95 prisoners who, hopefully, can volunteer some of their time, get a skill, repay some of their debt and get some sense of purpose back into their lives—so it is happening. In fact, some of the firefighters from Karnet Prison Farm on the day Yarloop was unfortunately razed did a significant amount of work. On that day, four of them reloaded four water bombers for over 10 hours—over 310 000 litres of water and foam into aircraft—in fact, 98 times. What we know from records so far is that they have set the new benchmark for reloading aircraft, which is so important when fighting these big fires.

Four weeks ago when the Premier, Hon Col Holt and I were in Bunbury launching, with the member for Bunbury, the second rescue helicopter, one of the operators yelled out over the fence and asked to have a chat with me. He asked, “Can you get me some section 95 prisoners from Bunbury to also help?” So word is spreading.

I have to tell the house that these are volunteer prisoners, by the way. If they work volunteering as firefighters on a Sunday, they do not get their \$10-a-day pay; they go back to work on a Monday. They are doing it for free so that they can get something out of it as well.

I am pleased to tell the member for Bunbury and to inform the house that as of last week, seven section 95 prisoners from Bunbury Regional Prison have begun their training to become volunteers and to help reload aircraft. Hopefully, also, there will be competition amongst prisoners from different prisons to try to outdo each other in the amount of effort. I want to place on record my thanks of and appreciation for not only the staff but also the prisoners who, as I said, are volunteering so that they can interoperate with the rest of the community as volunteer firefighters.