

BUSHFIRE SEASON — PREPARATIONS

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

On behalf of the member for Scarborough, I acknowledge the year 5 students from St John's School and their teacher, Mr Greg Goldy.

In light of the severe fire season that was inflicted on this state last summer, could the minister please update the house on what the government is doing to prepare the state for the upcoming fire season?

Mr R.F. JOHNSON replied:

I thank the member for Jandakot for the question. I know he has a very serious interest in the government doing whatever it can to fight any possible bushfires in the coming season.

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: The member for Girrawheen is interrupting again. She is so rude. All she ever does is mumble, mumble, mumble whenever anybody on this side of the house gives an answer to a question.

Mr T.G. Stephens interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Pilbara, I am formally going to call you to order for the first time today.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Last Friday, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia, along with all the other agencies that play a part in fighting bushfires, organised a seasonal outlook, which is the annual briefing that outlines the latest predictions for the season. Certainly, what came out of that meeting was quite clear: the average rainfall has increased the annual grass fuel loads, resulting in a majority, or up to 80 per cent, of the state having an above-average potential for bushfire risk. The Liberal–National government is doing all it can to prepare for this very challenging and busy bushfire season.

Today I am pleased to announce that my very good friend and colleague the Minister for Environment and I announced that this government will invest more than \$6.25 million in additional specialised firefighting equipment to protect local communities during the bushfire season. This includes the lease of an S-64 Erickson Air-Crane helicopter, which is to be based in Perth but which can be moved anywhere in Western Australia, for additional support during the bushfire season. This helicopter is very often known as Elvis. I cannot guarantee that this particular helicopter will be named Elvis. Apparently, there are a few in the eastern states. We could get Sally or one with another name.

Mr C.J. Barnett: Or Rob!

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: It could be called Rob!

Several members interjected.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I would truly be very honoured for an Elvis look-alike to be named Rob!

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: I think the member would know more about that than I would.

The government is very proud to have made that commitment to try to ensure that during this bushfire season, we save not only lives, but also as many homes as we possibly can. The benefits of this new Elvis-style air crane helicopter is that it will drop 9 500 litres of water per load. That is more than the four helitacks, which carry 1 000 litres each, can drop. The type 1 helicopters have roughly 3 800 litres to drop. This will be a huge benefit in that the helicopter will quickly off-load water. The high water volume delivery will rapidly increase the knockdown of running fires, resulting in reduced risk to life, property and the environment of Western Australia. Our current fleet includes the type 1 helicopters, which carry about 3 800 litres each, and the smaller helitacks, which carry about 1 000 litres each. This particular helicopter will be based in the metropolitan area and will primarily be used to respond to bushfires in high-risk rural–urban interface escarpment areas where local wind conditions severely affect smaller rotary and fixed-wing aircraft.

The aircraft can also be used in regional areas of the state, especially in the south west land division. We will also double FESA's additional or reserve tanker fleet during the bushfire season, with four new additional appliances ready to respond to major incidents. The plan is for these appliances to be utilised throughout the state during the alternate fire seasons. It will be based in the south west during the summer period and will then be relocated to the north west during that fire season. During days of severe or greater fire danger ratings, these tankers will be based in the hills areas such as Mundaring and Roleystone, or other areas of identified high risk. These additional tankers will provide an immediate early response to fires and provide assistance to the predominantly volunteer fire and rescue crews and, indeed, the bush fire brigade crews. In addition to the four

new tankers, a heavy pumper will be brought online to support the core fleet in times of major bushfire. To ensure that this strategy is in place this bushfire season, FESA will immediately refurbish four tankers and put plans in place for the new appliances to be ready for the 2012–13 season.

Today Western Australia’s fire agencies tested their preparations for the upcoming season in an exercise scenario involving several simultaneous major bushfires across the south west. The exercise took place across six regions and involved agencies including FESA, the Department of Environment and Conservation, local government, Western Australia Police and the Department for Child Protection. Today’s exercise provided a valuable opportunity for agencies to test their response to and coordination in a situation involving several serious and challenging bushfires occurring simultaneously.