

**FIRE SEASON 2016–17 — FERGUSON REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Motion*

Resumed from 29 June on the following motion moved by Ms M.M. Quirk —

That this house calls on the Liberal–National government to advise on the immediate actions it intends to take on bushfire management prior to the 2016–17 fire season, and the funding of those outstanding recommendations from the Ferguson report and those which are still unresolved from previous reports.

**MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services)** [4.42 pm]: I bring everyone back to when we last discussed this issue, following a motion moved by the member for Girrawheen about bushfire preparation for the oncoming fire season. I think I am seven minutes into my allotted time of 60 minutes.

**Mrs M.H. Roberts:** Do not feel compelled to use it all!

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I was not going to.

**Ms M.M. Quirk:** It is pretty hard to spin it out!

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I bet I could! I seek some guidance from the opposition on how many speakers it might have and how much time they might want, and I will limit my time.

**Mrs M.H. Roberts:** We have three speakers and we would like to go to a vote at six o'clock since our time for private members' business has been curtailed.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** Considering the wording of the motion that this house calls on the government to advise on immediate actions it intends to take on bushfire management prior to the oncoming fire season and the funding of those outstanding recommendations from the Ferguson report, I am not sure what will be the purpose of a yes or no vote. The government has been very busy for the last few months outlining a number of changes; in fact, I will take members back to where we were in June when Mr Ferguson released his report and the government was preparing its response. As I said, I was seven minutes into my response; in fact, I had hardly started. I made the point then and multiple times since that our aim is to do all of those things that can be done before the upcoming fire season that will make a practical difference to the ability of the state to combat fires, no matter where they are across Western Australia. I know that the leader of opposition business has foreshadowed other speakers and it is only fair I give them the opportunity to speak on such an important issue.

Firstly, I have kind of categorised the recommendations in the Ferguson report to two main areas: those that can be done easily and those that will take some amount of time. The most contentious recommendation in the report was the formation of a rural fire service. I am pretty sure that I heard the Leader of the Opposition on radio, either 6PR or 720, say that he supported what the government was doing on this. I also noted that the member for Girrawheen acknowledged that the special inquiry did not provide a lot of guidance on how a rural fire service would work. We have to take our time and have a sober look at this; in fact, I have just come into the chamber from a consultation meeting with the Association of Volunteer Bush Fire Brigades. There are a lot of stakeholders in this area. A lot of people are undecided about whether it will be called a rural fire service or a country fire service. They are unsure about geographical boundaries, funding sources, what the hazard management authority should be, or what happens when a fire crosses from a country fire area into a different fire district.

Prior to coming into this place, I was talking about what happened with Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria, and also what happened in Canberra in 2003 when a bushfire crossed the line and some 400 houses were destroyed. If the hazard management authority for bushfire is a rural fire service, what will happen if a fire starts burning down towns and parts of suburbia? Who will command and control in that situation? Another issue is that volunteer bushfire brigades, as they are now, operate predominantly but not entirely under the auspices of local government and are protective of their independence and want to stay part of their local government and local community, so who will man the rural fire service? Is it the same volunteers? Will they come under a rural fire service, even though they want to stay part of their own local government?

When we look at the way the emergency services levy is collected across the state of Western Australia, the overwhelming majority of ESL is paid by people who live in the metropolitan area. That is fine because we all like to go for a drive in the country or camp in the bush and we benefit from agricultural produce and economic gains that are produced by regional Western Australia. There are a whole lot of reasons for that, but the ESL spend into regional Western Australia is far greater than what is collected from regional Western Australia. Without going into the numbers, the metropolitan area greatly subsidises the cost of emergency service delivery in regional Western Australia. I am not complaining about that; it is the right thing to do.

Let us look at other issues such as royalties for regions funding to some of the mitigation services. The government recently announced another \$15 million fund for mitigation that can be applied to key areas of Western Australia. I am about to make public a report that I asked the State Emergency Management Committee to undertake. It relates to the ability of different government agencies that own land, whether commonwealth, state or local government, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Mines and Petroleum—with a tenure-blind approach, without picking anyone as favourites—and the kind of job they do mixing with that essential infrastructure, such as bridges, transmission networks, pumping stations, public transport whether train lines or whatever it might be, and how much money the state spends on mitigation, and do we spend it as effectively as we should and do we prioritise it in the areas in which we have the most to lose if we do not get it right. When I asked the State Emergency Management Committee to undertake the report, my view was to look at that from a tenure-blind approach. I am of the view it is not about spending more money as much as it is about spending the money better and doing a lot more with what we have got in a far more prioritised way, from the asset protection and asset value point of view, than we have done in the past. In fact sometime next week I will make that report public. It will be a great document for starting the conversation and highlighting those that do not spend enough money or those who spend money but not as wisely as they should. I do not want to quote the member for Girrawheen out of context but I understand she said that the report was lacking in detail on the formation of a rural fire service. I agree with the member for Girrawheen. It is easy enough to say that we want it and that we—on both sides of the chamber—will do it. How we get there, what its structure will be and what its core responsibility will be will take some time to resolve. Copying and pasting what occurs with rural bushfire services in Victoria, New South Wales or South Australia will not necessarily be the right thing for people in bushfire-prone areas of Western Australia. Victoria has a rural fire service but it has not stopped Victoria from losing a significant number of people from catastrophic bushfires in the last few years. It has not stopped the loss of a significant number of assets in both South Australia and New South Wales. In fact, our thoughts and prayers are with New South Wales, which has already dealt with some significant fires this season.

All that aside, what are we doing for this fire season? One of the first observations I will make—noting the member for Eyre is in the chamber, because I discussed this with him yesterday—is that we are getting better at trying to pre-deploy assets when and where we need them. Today is 9 November. Did the Esperance fire occur on 17 November, member for Eyre?

**Dr G.G. Jacobs** interjected.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** It catastrophically claimed four lives, including local farmer “Freddy” Curnow and three foreign nationals. This is the time of the year in Esperance when farmers are no doubt well into harvest—the member for Eyre will correct me if I am wrong. One of the criticisms that came out of the three Esperance fires was about response times. I keep in mind that it takes nine hours to get a truck from Perth to Esperance, so we have had a look at that. This week already, two water bombers have been pre-deployed in Esperance just in case, and they were not there this time last year. Hopefully, they will not have to get their wings and wheels off the tarmac, but if something breaks out, we know that—we are getting better at it—combating a fire early can stop a small fire from becoming a big fire. As I speak, in Esperance alone there are two water bombers just in case fire breaks out during the harvest in the member for Eyre’s electorate.

I think in June, when the Premier was in Yarloop, the Leader of the Opposition asked me how we were going with our automatic vehicle location system. The Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner gave evidence before, I think, the member for Girrawheen’s committee this morning on how that is going. I want to put on the record that, from my understanding of news reports, the media got his comments incorrect. I think he said that he expects some 600 or 700 trucks to be fitted out this year. One of the media outlets said that nine out of 180 had been done. I think someone is confusing spray bars with AVLs. Automatic vehicle locators will address a number of —

**Ms M.M. Quirk:** In that regard, minister, your press release was a bit misleading because it implied that they would all be done by —

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** Which press release?

**Ms M.M. Quirk:** The one a few weeks ago in which you announced the AVLs. It implied that they would all be done.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** They will all be done in high-risk areas.

**Ms M.M. Quirk:** In Yallingup, for example?

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I had a conversation with Commissioner Gregson about an hour ago and he assured me that the majority of the fleet will be done by the end of the year. Off the top of my head I cannot give the exact number of fire trucks in Western Australia, but if we count career fire trucks, the volunteer fire and rescue

trucks, the emergency services trucks and the volunteer bush fire brigade trucks, there are now 1 000-odd. The priority will be to roll out the AVLs into the high-risk areas first. In the last few weeks I have seen a lot of trucks going to and from O'Connor. Without sounding too ignorant, I had not heard of the locations of the little country towns across Western Australia that they had been going to and coming from, so when I got home I googled them to find out where they are. A lot of trucks are coming in to get the fit-out. It is a fairly simple system. It took time to get it right because we wanted to ensure that it was, firstly, futureproofed; secondly, fit for purpose; and, thirdly, inter-operated with other systems. It will not send data in real time over the radio networks; it will do it over the global system for mobile phones on the Telstra network. If that fails, as we know it is prone to do in remote areas when we are out of phone range or, as the member for Eyre knows, when Telstra towers go down, it will send the data in real time over, I think, the iridium satellite network, so there is a back-up system. On top of that, it will have an SOS button, so to speak—a panic button—so that if a truck crew gets into trouble, they can press the button and someone will immediately know where they are. If it is daylight and a chopper is in the air, they can protect the firefighters with water or whatever it might be. At least we can find out where they are, in real time, and realise something is wrong.

It will also allow incident controllers to better manage the resources on the ground. Imagine being in the incident control centre and there is a map of the fire ground, whether it is digital, analogue or paper, and reports are coming over a radio network that contains a lot of voice traffic about where people are and about the fire behaviour. It will alleviate the need to plot the fire on a map with either a pen or a mouse because the location of fire trucks will be obvious. Obviously, fire trucks deployed in a particular sector to the fire front will be moving in real time. It will identify the trucks and, in future, it will identify even the crew members of the truck. As part of the fit-out, it can identify already whether lights and sirens are on, so that we know the response conditions of vehicles if they are on their way to a fire. A few things have been built in.

On top of that, we will provide 200 portable units, and I will get to that in a second. It will allow us not only to know where the trucks are at any given time, but also to better coordinate resources to manage crew fatigue so we will know, without logging in, whether a particular brigade is self-deployed onto the fire ground. With every fire situation there seems to be issues for people not happy with catering, and suddenly the caterers and incident controllers did not even know the trucks were on the fire ground. It will avoid all of that. It will avoid crews spending significantly long periods on the fire ground and claiming they have not been relieved for 12 hours. It will manage fatigue and catering and, predominantly, it will manage firefighter safety and the ability for the incident controller to get a better picture of the battle space, and project that out as public warnings to alert the public of fire activity. When it comes to putting out public alerts, we need to keep in mind two things: firstly, when people are looking for timely information, they are normally sacrificing accuracy; and, secondly, when people are looking for accurate information, they are sacrificing timeliness. It will help formulate those two key ingredients of timeliness and accuracy much better so that we can publicise information better.

Obviously, a new website is available—[emergency.wa.gov.au](http://emergency.wa.gov.au)—which enables people to coordinate and promulgate information on areas of prescribed burns. It will show maps of watch-and-act and alert areas with much more defined detail. I notice the member for Dawesville is here. Every time there is a fire somewhere on his patch, it will show me a map with a little flame. The member for Dawesville will be able to look on the website and see, painted to the best ability in real time, the actual geographic outline of that fire and the different stages of alert, depending on predicted model fire behaviour. That will go a long way. It is something else we have kicked off for this fire season. In fact, it will allow people to check Department of Parks and Wildlife prescribed burns. Obviously, the window of opportunity for prescribed burns seems to be shrinking. I understand that the Minister for Environment is well on track to reach his targets this year. It will also allow the public to see whether a fire near them is actually a prescribed burn they need not worry about or whether it is a real-life emergency, in which case all kinds of alerts will be out for them. Communication is a key ingredient in our reforms for this fire season. I am not going to say that we will get it right; I am going to say that we will do our best and that we will continually learn. But these are significant leaps forward in advising the public about emergency situations.

An issue that arises in every single major incident and one that seems to take up a lot of my time—I share the frustration of people caught up in this—is the access of either volunteer firefighters, local residents, farmer firefighters or people needing to act for the interests of animal welfare, whatever it may be, back inside a fireground. From the outset, I say that firegrounds are inherently dangerous. Visibility is restricted, smoke is thick and trees are burning and falling across roads. I have been the responsible minister now for three and a half years, and every fire season I have seen a photo in which a tree has fallen and crushed a truck—predominantly a fire truck, but luckily without a crew in it. In firegrounds, there are live powerlines that are down and vehicles move very quickly under lights and sirens. A lot of activity is happening in a very dangerous environment. To let people back into a fireground is not without risk. I have pointed out before that my view is that following the tragic loss of three lives at Boorabbin, I think that the pendulum of risk aversion has probably been set a little bit

too high. We can do better. As I speak, I understand that the State Emergency Management Committee is formulating its guidelines that will come into play for the upcoming fire season, which is a good thing. Hopefully, they will allow a little bit more commonsense. If someone is well prepared on their property and they have all the water tanks, pumps and roof sprinklers ready—some people go to great lengths to get their properties bushfire-ready—should they be allowed back just inside the fireground to defend their house? Commonsense needs to prevail.

There is also an issue of emergency services vehicles that may not have automatic vehicle location units. Two hundred portable AVL units will be deployed throughout regional Western Australia so that if a doctor, the truck of a veterinarian or whatever it might be needs to re-enter the fireground, they can put one in their vehicle. It is in a little pelican case and has a magnetic base on the antenna. Those people can press the duress button if they get into trouble.

Also, the rest of the crew protection rollouts are taking place. I stress that crew protection is not a combat measure; it is a safety measure. AVL is something that essentially helps better coordinate resources, as well as tick the crew protection measure because it allows the signalling of duress. I do not want any firefighter, whether career or volunteer, to think that crew protection measures make them more like Superman. I do not want them to think that because they have radiant heat shields, they can get closer to the fire. The shields are there as a last resort in case something goes wrong. They do not make firefighters indestructible or any more able to put themselves at risk. I have never put crew protection upgrades, other than AVL units, into an area that increases the state's ability to respond; it is all about the safety of firefighters—as it should be.

A lot of other things are going on. The establishment of preformed incident management teams was one of the key recommendations from the Ferguson report —

**Ms M.M. Quirk:** And numerous others as well.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I can spend the next 30 minutes on my feet talking about them or I can wind up and let —

**Ms M.M. Quirk:** I was just saying to the minister that that is not something new; that is a recommendation of several inquiries.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** Numerous other reports—I see. Yes.

Those preformed IMTs have been assigned with volunteer representation and the ability to transfer them. There have been negotiations with all different stakeholders involved in that as well. If an incident escalates from level 2 to level 3 and requires a major incident management team, we can get one deployed to wherever it might be in the state as quickly as possible rather than having to take six or eight or 10 or 12 hours to re-call different people from different places. Those teams will be on standby. There is a roster for different levels of involvement in the IMTs. Level 3 incident controllers seem very hard to get. We are trying to train up more, but at least now we have the preformed IMTs done. That system was tested last Friday week out at the state operation centre in Cockburn. We had a major desktop state exercise with significant fire activity north of the river in the member for Wanneroo's electorate. The exercise was to test not only AVLS and logistics management, but also the ability to deploy and organise those preformed IMTs.

As I have said to the house before, and in numerous press conferences, we are doing, as quickly as we can, what we believe will make the biggest difference for both safety and the ability of firefighters, regardless of the colour of their truck and whether they get paid, to combat fires going into this fire season. Some things will take longer. Even the Leader of the Opposition has accepted that. He pointed out that he wanted to see a bipartisan approach to emergency services. I welcome that from the opposition. I am more than happy, as usual, to take every opportunity to do that. My closing comment is that whenever there is a major incident, one of the things that I try to resist is to have members from any side of the house, even those from the federal Parliament, including senators, visiting firegrounds. It actually irks me; it is almost as though it is emergency disaster zone tourism. I know I will offend some people here, but the last thing that emergency services personnel need to do is babysit politicians on a fireground. I do things individually with members. When there was a fire in the member for Collie-Preston's seat, I forwarded departmental briefing notes to the local member. To the best of my ability, I will keep members informed about what is happening in their electorate if there is something that they need to be concerned about, regardless of the political party to which they belong. I will ensure that members can have access to the area through the commissioner as soon as it is safe to do so. I extend invitations to the Leader of the Opposition to say that if I cannot get him onto the fireground, I will get him to the state operations centre and bring him up to speed as quickly as possible. I do not think it is right that an emergency service response, in particular when it is a real-life situation, is politicised. I am sure that opposition members share that view. I hope they appreciate the genuine effort that I make to ensure that it is done in a bipartisan way.

**DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale)** [5.09 pm]: I thank the Minister for Emergency Services for that invitation at all times. It is important with emergency services that each member is fully aware of the situation in their electorate. Obviously, parts of the electorate I represent are in a fire-prone area; I live in a fire-prone area. The 2011 Kelmscott–hills bushfire still remains the most devastating metropolitan bushfire in our history. That fire destroyed 72 homes. I am fully aware of the devastating effects of fire. Of course, Yarloop was my mother’s home town and was where my sister was born, so I am aware of the devastation that it can cause. It is not easy. We can never be 100 per cent guaranteed that we will not have a disaster because of the climate we live in. Of course, every summer we have to take whatever precautions we can.

The minister mentioned the Esperance bushfires of 17 November last year that were, of course, disastrous and severely affected the community of the member for Eyre. I think the minister stated in his contribution that the Department of Fire and Emergency Services was as prepared as it possibly could have been. That is why I would be interested in the minister’s response to the “Great Southern Region Operations Plan”. I am sure that he was told about that plan by the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner today.

**Mr J.M. Francis** interjected.

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** That really is not the issue. The issue is whether it went to the minister’s office or to cabinet and whether it has been acted upon. There are 10 actions in the plan. It was signed off by five people—the director of capability planning, the superintendent of the great southern region, the assistant chief superintendent of country south, the assistant commissioner of country, and the deputy commissioner of operations, Lloyd Bailey, who was at the hearing this morning. In the introduction of the plan, it states —

The Great Southern Region Operations Plan ... has been prepared in order to identify emerging risks and to identify gaps in service delivery. It forecasts changes required to mitigate the community exposure to such risks.

The Plan has identified that in order to continue to meet organisational standards and community expectations, a number of changes to service delivery models in the GSR are required. These changes include:

- An enhanced Volunteer Fire and Rescue presence;
- Enhanced Career and Volunteer capability through improved facilities and additional appliances;
- Increased DFES staff positions to support the service delivery model.

As I said, there are 10 actions in that plan. Many of them have a timetable in the next few years and are not required to be enacted as of today. The first action is to replace the great southern regional office in 2017–18, and I would be interested in the minister’s views on that. The second action is to build the replacement Albany Career Fire and Rescue Service Station with capacity for future increases in manning.

**Mr J.M. Francis:** Can you just go back—build which one in Albany?

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** It is to build the Albany CFRS station with capacity for future increases in manning.

**Mr J.M. Francis:** It’s well and truly underway. I’m sure it will be opened before March.

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** The third action is to establish a volunteer fire and rescue service brigade in Lower King by 2023, and the fourth action is to establish one at the south coast by 2020. The fifth action is to allocate an additional structural firefighting appliance to the Esperance Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service in 2017. I am sure that the member for Eyre would be very interested to know whether that has been actioned, particularly when we consider the disaster of a year ago. The sixth action is to establish a volunteer fire and rescue service brigade at Pink Lake. The seventh action is to co-locate the Cocanarup bush fire brigade, the Ravensthorpe Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service and the Ravensthorpe State Emergency Service when the new Ravensthorpe Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service facility is developed in 2022. The eighth action is to co-locate the Narrogin Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, the Narrogin State Emergency Service and the Narrogin central bush fire brigade in the new Narrogin emergency service facility by 2023. The ninth action is to establish a volunteer fire and rescue service in Boddington by 2019, which is just down the road from Armadale.

**Mr J.M. Francis:** They’ve got an SES and a bush fire brigade service there.

**Dr A.D. BUTI:** The tenth action, which I am particularly interested in, deals with staffing. The plan states —

A review of the staffing levels has highlighted that the staff to Brigade, Groups and Units (BGU’s) ratio is the greatest workload in the State. In other words, each staff member in the GSR is expected to be responsible for more BGU’s than is the case for staff in other DFES regions.

In response a restructure/staffing proposal has been developed. The proposal recognises that there is a need to increase the staffing in all three GSR Regional and District Offices. In total, eight staffing positions have been identified to enhance service delivery in key areas and bring the GSR's staffing levels up to those of the other Regions.

The staffing positions are included in the appendix. It continues —

This staffing proposal has been subsumed into a greater country staffing plan being developed by Country Operations.

Even though eight staffing positions have been identified to enhance service delivery, the tenth action is to establish four new staff positions across the GSR's regional and district offices through the country staffing plan from 2015—which has already gone. Interestingly, the executive summary refers to establishing eight new positions but the figure “8” has been crossed out and a handwritten “4” has been put in its place. We do not have any confirmation of whether there has been one additional staff, let alone four or eight, and from the hearing this morning, it appeared that there has not been. When the fires occurred last year, it was, of course, after this plan had been released. Granted the plan was released not too many months before the fire, but, leaving that aside, it has now been over a year since the Esperance fires. We were told in the hearing this morning that this is a conceptual plan, but whatever we want to call it, it clearly identifies that the fire services in the great southern region are stretched to the limit; it is beyond what they can deal with. They are dealing with greater responsibility than fire services in other DFES regions. Considering the disaster in Esperance, it is of some concern that we could not get any confirmation that even one additional staffing position had been filled. I am interested to know the status of this plan, particularly with regard to staffing. When will additional staffing be allocated? The words in the plan are quite clear. It states that the great southern region has the greatest workload in the state; in other words, each staff member in the GSR is expected to be responsible for more BGUs than is the case for staff in other DFES regions. Eight staffing positions have been identified. Even if that is reduced to four, it is very disconcerting that no additional places have been filled—or none was confirmed this morning. If the minister has information to counter that, we would be glad to hear it.

I do not think we can state with any confidence in this chamber that the situation in Esperance, for instance, is any better this year, in respect to staffing issues. I understand that there are other issues. There might be better individual awareness, because it is a very important responsibility of individual landowners. However, in areas of particular concern, of which Esperance is one, we would think that with the climatic conditions this year, resulting in excess fuel because of higher rainfall, not acting on a report that shows that staffing levels are not up to what is needed is dangerous. I do not think residents of the great southern region can go into this summer with any great confidence that everything has been put in place to minimise the chance of another incident. This refers only to the great southern region, and it would be interesting to know whether operational plans for other regions have identified that staffing or other resources are not adequate. That is all, I have nothing further to add.

**MR M.J. COWPER (Murray–Wellington)** [5.21 pm]: I wish to make a contribution to this debate. The challenge for the current and future governments is how to deal with the ongoing problem of fire management. Before I comment on that, I want to make a comment about the fantastic people who respond to fires in the Murray–Wellington electorate in particular. Last Saturday night I went along to the annual dinner for the Waroona Volunteer Fire Brigade, and had a pleasant evening with an old friend and golfing buddy of mine who is now the superintendent in the south west, Peter Norman. The good crew at Waroona has celebrated 60 years in operation. Three of its stalwarts were awarded for 50 years' service. Fifty years in any organisation is fantastic. Those three men were led by the fire captain, John Twaddle, with 40 years' service, which in itself would be something of a record. Two very shy and unassuming gentlemen have been there with John Twaddle for all that time. It is cause for great celebration and recognition of the commitment they have given to the community of Waroona. There was also a sprinkling of awards for a mere 35 years' service, 15 years' service, and five years' service for one particular lady who took on the role of secretary. As members would appreciate, in any organisation the work is not done until the paperwork is done and, of course, usually the least sought-after job is that of secretary. The secretary in this case is a fine lady who had her name put forward, and assumed the job while she was raising two children. She was recognised as well. It was a great night last Saturday night, recognising a wonderful example of the groups of firefighters we have across the length and breadth of the great state of Western Australia. There would be none better than those in Waroona, but if anyone can beat that record, well done!

Yes, there are some challenges. The Ferguson report highlighted a number of issues pertaining to the circumstances attending the 6 January disaster that fell upon the town of Waroona and, on the following day, 7 January, fell upon the township of Yarloop and beyond. It is, in my mind, the most significant natural disaster ever to occur in the history of this state, inasmuch as it resulted in over \$195 million worth of damage. Notwithstanding the fantastic efforts of many people, the fire was out of control, and not a lot could be done under those circumstances. Much has been said about things along the way, and I do not think there is any future in trying to relive or revisit some of the problems that they faced, and there were many of them. Many problems

occurred between various agencies, and that was the reason for a very frank, open and honest good hard look at ourselves, as far as the Ferguson report was concerned.

It has been left somewhat open-ended, and I have heard the comments made by certain members in this place about how we would go forward into the future, and that is the challenge. I have for many years been proffering better training and better communications. In my experience in emergency management, which includes the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service, the State Emergency Service, bush fire brigades, volunteer rescue in the Pilbara, and also in my role as local emergency management coordinator and district emergency management coordinator, two things always occur as a result of either a training exercise or an actual event. Two things that always come out in the debriefs are communications and training. I see that the state government has taken steps to address the area of communications, and with the advance of technology that is also welcome. That is not to say that we should rest on our laurels. There is always a rolling emergence of different technologies that we need to be abreast of and seize upon as they present themselves. Training is an area that we all need to consider.

The Keelty report was titled “A Shared Responsibility” and that is an absolute truth. It is a responsibility shared by everyone who lives in areas subject to fires, which is pretty much everyone in the state, and in particular those people who live in proximity to the Darling scarp. One of the lessons of this year’s fires at Yarloop and Waroona is that katabatic winds generate hot air from the wheatbelt. On summer evenings, when the temperature drops on the lower coastal plain, the hot air rushes down the hills from the east. Many of us who have lived along that section of the Darling scarp would know that the winds become quite significant. I have family who live in Maida Vale and I know that the area of Maida Vale and up to your neck of the woods, Madam Acting Speaker (Ms L.L. Baker), is very windy on a summer’s night, and often the wind can be howling. It is the same in the electorate of the member for Armadale. I lived in Brunswick for a short time, and I always thought that Brunswick was the windiest place I had ever lived, until I moved to North Dandalup. North Dandalup is typical of the kind of town that I believe is right in the firing line, along with Brunswick and every other little community between Bindoon and Dardanup, which is a section of about 200 kilometres that will be tested again this year. One thing we saw about the way the fire behaved in that situation was that fire gathered in the timber tops and moved into the floor materials, and it virtually exploded as it approached Yarloop. That can be repeated at any time, and that is the lesson we need to take from all of this.

How do we deal with the contemporary bushfire environment? I may have mentioned this before, but we have some very good technology, and experienced people who operate within the forest environment. I am referring to the Department of Parks and Wildlife firefighters. I have seen firsthand where they have driven into fires in the forest with the flames shooting over the top, with their CO<sub>2</sub> canisters on top of their machines, and they have done an extraordinary job. I have no doubt that they are the experts in dealing with fires in that forest environment. Equally, in chasing down fires that have got across open paddocks, semi-timbered paddocks or parkland and the like, the bush fire brigades have done an extraordinary job. I have seen them making a pincer movement, where they run fire trucks along the actual fire, driving right across the top of it, and on the side there were a lot of farmers with their little brigades stopping the spot-overs and the jump-overs in the horrific winds that I referred to a moment ago. There are also the career firefighters who attend the dreadful job of going to road crashes and also dealing with structural fires in a contemporary urban environment.

The questions of the Ferguson report are: How do we deal with that situation? Who are the experts in each particular field? At what particular point does it transfer from being a forest fire into a rural fire and then into an urban environment? That occurred at Yarloop within a space of about 150 metres. It went from a forest environment into a farm environment and then straight into the town. Who will take control of it? In essence, that is the difficulty we need to contend with.

I will go back to the point that I believe training is at the very heart of what we need to do in the future. Training is something we cannot have enough of. I believe that although we train firefighters to a certain extent, we can go to a totally new level of training. For that to occur, I think we need a proper training facility. Members in this place may know that I put forward a suggestion to gather all the various relevant experience and corporate knowledge that exists within the forestry and rural environments to establish a country or rural fire service. I would like to call it a country fire service as opposed to a rural one because Western Australia is not all rural—some of it is rangelands. Knowledge could be gathered to experiment with materials and equipment that could be used in a Western Australian setting. Much of the equipment we use is gathered from other parts of the world. Air Tractors, which are a wonderful tool, operate as our air fleet. Air Tractors are largely the water bombers that we use, which are operated by the Department of Parks and Wildlife. They are 1 500-horsepower planes with the capacity to carry about 3 000 litres of water. I think they are a wonderful innovation. Although they were largely designed to be crop dusters, they are very effective but there are ways in which we could improve on those models. Regarding the types of equipment such as the heavy bulldozers that are used during our fires, the contract is with DPaW this year, which operated in the dreadful fire at Yarloop. I know for a fact that they were bombed on a number of occasions while they were in their D9Rs—caterpillar bulldozers—and, on occasions, they became trapped in their own machines, but they kept pushing. If it was not for the great coordination with

the water bombers, those guys may have been worse off than they were. I took a photo and sent it to our former Premier, Richard Court, who works for the WesTrac Caterpillar dealer.

**Dr A.D. Buti:** The next ambassador to Japan.

**Mr M.J. COWPER:** I believe so. Basically, the glass in the dozers had melted and the stickers on the side of the dozers all melted. They were obviously very black and sooted. Their heroics, experiences and courage to do what they did is something of legend that will come up in the future. With the establishment of a training facility, there is an opportunity for us to do that somewhere that is central to the south west. I proffer an old plant in the Murray–Wellington electorate. It is out near Pinjarra, near the back of the Alcoa refinery. It is an old gallium plant that was built about 20 years ago and it never fully functioned. It is on 1 100 acres of land. It has offices for 300 people. It has workshops. It has gantries. It has accommodation. It has a whole range of things. It is otherwise sitting there, unused. It is situated strategically between Dwellingup and Waroona, in triangulation with Pinjarra. If we were going to pick arguably the two most fire-prone towns in Western Australia, we would pick Dwellingup and now Yarloop–Waroona, given that Waroona has been hit twice in 18 months. I think the location is great. There is access to and from the wheatbelt from the south, the east and the north. This portion of land has the capacity to have its own runway or airstrip. There are storage facilities for the equipment needed during any type of natural disaster. Equipment could be mobilised and proper training could be given.

This is something that needs to be seriously considered. I have written to the Premier and by way of doing that, also to the minister. I am aware that the commissioner, Wayne Gregson, sent one of his officers down to have a look at the facility and I hope it will be seriously considered. It is a great opportunity to establish ourselves as a country fire service and I believe it will give us at least a five-year head start. If we were to build a facility from scratch, we would have to find a suitable, sizable parcel of land. We would then have to look at building the necessary infrastructure and all those things that cost a whole bunch of money. Given that this facility is sitting there, it could be really well used on short notice. I think we need to have a serious look at it. It would at least advance us somewhat from where we are today. As members know, we are on the steps of another fire season. In fact, when I spoke to John Twaddle on Friday night, he reported that there had already been three grass fires in the preceding few days and I suspect there has probably been more since. We can expect that our volunteer firefighters will not be sitting idle anytime soon.

With that, I would like to offer the support of the great experience of the people from Murray–Wellington, including foresters, volunteer firefighters, farmers, volunteer fire brigades and, of course, career firefighters who would also like to see a harmonisation of the Ferguson report into something that is meaningful and will result in a mitigation of the tragedies that we have seen. As I mentioned before, we are all on notice given the katabatic winds and the nature of the environment that we have to deal with. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that a fire could get away in the hills behind Kalamunda and potentially race right through the City of Perth. Do not think that that could not happen because, if members know what happened in Waroona, the fire came down the back of Waroona on the southern side this time; last year it was the northern side. It got into Drakesbrook and proceeded in a westerly direction. It was on the western side of the Forrest Highway in a little over an hour. This thing travelled a distance of some 20 or 30 kilometres at a rate of around 15 or 16 kilometres an hour. We also need to consider the notion that it could not happen in the metropolitan area. Certainly, it could happen in any of the communities such as Bindoon; North Dandalup; Keysbrook; Serpentine; Mundijong; Coolup; Harvey, which dodged a bullet; Wokalup; my old town of Brunswick Junction, which is right in the firing line; and down to Burekup, Waterloo and across to Dardanup. There is nothing to say that those communities could not be in the firing line. I can then go to another area outside my electorate where I have previous experience—Denmark—which is where I was stationed as a police officer for nearly five years. With the fuel loadings in Denmark, Walpole, Bridgetown and Manjimup, the potential for a disaster is enormous. I know the member for Swan Hills has great empathy for the people down that way and I think he also knows that should there be a fire down there, there would be no stopping it.

I thank members and the opposition for raising this as a key issue. As I said, it is a shared responsibility; we all have to do what we need to do. That goes for the government and an effective opposition, to our firefighters, support crews, the families of those support crews, and to the individuals who elected to live in those areas that are perhaps fire-prone. There may be those who probably did not think they were fire-prone, but let me tell members, they are fire-prone. I think we also have a responsibility to do certain things within the confines of our own properties. Have you reduced your fuel mitigation? I have been out on my lawnmower and rotary hoe trying to put firebreaks in my property. Have I got sufficient water? If there were a fire, could fire crews get in and get access to water readily? It was surprising that one of the things I saw in the 2007 fire at Dwellingup was that people had wood stored under the eaves of their homes, obviously for their heating during winter. They had wood stored right up to the eaves. People put woodchips in the gardens, obviously to reduce the need for water and gardening, but woodchips are almost like a wick that the fire can follow right up to the house. We need to consider how we do things.

[Member's time extended.]

**Mr M.J. COWPER:** One of the other things I would like to see happen is training availability for individuals. When a fire is approaching, often police and emergency services go to warn the person they need to leave and some people choose not to, and they need to do that in an informed and prepared way. I believe there is an opportunity to train people in a certificate II or certificate III in fire mitigation whereby they could demonstrate their understanding of the nature of fire and their capacity to be able to fight a fire should they be impacted by one. That means they should have enough water for at least 20 minutes, have a retreat plan if the fire gets out of control and have done a certain amount of fire mitigation with fuel loadings as well as a range of things that could be brought in to a course of learning. It could be similar to a first-aid course arrangement whereby on completion of that course they could put a sign or a marker on their front gate indicating that they are certified, have weighed up the circumstances and threats, and made an informed decision. That gives the opportunity for the bush fire brigades, the police or whoever is seeking to evacuate to recognise that those people understand their circumstances and have decided to stay and so be it. That saves the emergency services time and enables them to warn other people who are perhaps less prepared. I think there is plenty of opportunity for fire management training in that area in Western Australia. I did not mean to take this long, but I am thankful for the opportunity to say a piece. Of course, let us give thanks to our firefighters and their families for allowing them to participate, and I wish them all the best for the upcoming season. May they be safe.

**DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre)** [5.43 pm]: Thank you, Mr Acting Speaker, for the opportunity to talk to this bushfire management motion in private members' business. I was asked to write an opinion piece or an editorial for the local newspaper in remembrance, if you like, of the first anniversary of the fires in Esperance, and particularly the Scaddan fire where those four people were lost tragically on that 17 November 2015. With the understanding of the chamber, I might read this piece. According to my notes it states —

The horror day hit Scaddan just a year ago now. The tragedy of loss of loved ones for four families is hard to reconcile—these events in our well-equipped society, with all the technologies available. It goes to the matter of the power of nature, and we see that at sea, we see it in the air and we see it on the land. It also highlights our humanness and that not all we do is perfect in all situations we find ourselves in. Nevertheless, what can we learn from these cataclysmic events and catastrophic events, and how do we limit the loss and, indeed, survive? I suppose this is what the three inquiries recently commissioned would set out to do.

When I refer to the three inquiries, obviously there is the Ferguson report, which is not necessarily directly relevant, but has some lessons to be learnt on fires wherever they be in WA. Then there was that Department of Fire and Emergency Services—commissioned Nous inquiry, and the recent, yet to be fully released, inquiry done by Pacer Legal and commissioned by Scaddan farmers and supporters. Admittedly, the Ferguson inquiry is about the Waroona–Yarloop fires, but some synergies exist for us in Esperance. It was the need to seek answers that led a group of farmers and supporters to engage their own inquiry. From this inquiry, and dealt with in a variety of ways in other analyses, the matter that proved critical was early intervention with water bombs—the inability to use local aircraft with ability and pilots with accreditation due to the sole contracting arrangements under the Department of Parks and Wildlife, with only one social contract based in the south west. Early intervention, like a lot of things, can save a lot of pain.

The important matter of firebreaks and fuel reduction by controlled burning is grossly underdone and underfunded. The recent funding for fire mitigation from the government, a \$15 million allocation, is a start, and this can hopefully be done by local people who know where the hotspots are and who know where the danger points are, and we can make a start in effective mitigation. The prevention is better than the cure, and this applies to fires, as well as a lot of things.

The third matter centres around the role of communication, and this is paramount in firefighting, as it is in a lot of things. When this breaks down, the battle becomes even harder. The message that government must take on, and I take on, from the involvement I have had not only during the fire, but post-fire, is some recommendations around the creation of a rural fire service, and many others in the Ferguson report. But we need to be realistic. These will not happen tomorrow. What can happen is addressing the three matters outlined and dealt with now. So let us fly early with local planes at least until the squadron from the south west arrives. Let us make a start to cutting and maintaining our breaks at the town and UCL farming land interfaces. This needs to be done by local brigades, rangers as well as departments, and local governments. Finally, we need to improve our communications by improving our battery and generator backup for our mobile phone towers, as well as upgrades to some of our inadequate ones and, indeed, our blackspots, with attention to our remaining blackspots.

We need to be prepared and equipped as far as possible to fight what is a war against fire—a war of nature; it may return. Let us thank the people who fight this war, fought the last war, and will no doubt, when called upon, fight the next one. Our thoughts and prayers go to those families who paid the ultimate sacrifice. Let not their loss be in vain.

The recommendations from all the inquiries we have had cannot be acted upon tomorrow, but the things that can be done now are realistic things around early intervention, fire mitigation and communication, to make a start. I will just describe the need around the Esperance region and how prepared it is. I recognise we now have a station officer from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services based in Esperance, but sadly it took too long. There was a significant hiatus between the resignation of the one we had before and the new one we had appointed. It was pointed out that it was not fire season, but it is very important that we prepare for fire season in the months before November. I recognise the porting of two water bombers on our tarmac at Esperance airport. That was brought forward a month because our risk time starts now.

I am getting some indication from the member for Girrawheen; yes, thank you. I will finish at five to six.

I will talk about the risks we are faced with in the Esperance region and the challenges we have. There is a growing urban risk and it is pushing Esperance towards warranting service delivery. The population is not expected to reach 15 000 in the near future; however, the statistics for volunteer fire and rescue service callouts show an average of 88 annual calls over the past five years. The figure in the great southern region operations plan, released on 21 September 2015, shows an upward trend in the annual callout rate. Therefore, further support needs to be given to the VFRS to cope with the growing risks in the area, through the provision of urban-qualified staff to address the growing urban risk. The plan includes a table. There is a recommendation for a second urban firefighting pump allocation to Esperance to cater for the growing risk. There is also a recommendation to allocate additional structural firefighting appliances to the Esperance VFRS. Esperance VFRS membership is currently strong, and we thank them for that. We thank them on behalf of the community and how they have —

**Mrs M.H. Roberts:** Our private members' time was cut to one and a half hours from three hours, and our member hasn't even been able to respond to the motion. Time cuts out any minute now.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I will just finish with this sentence. The membership is currently strong and is expected to remain so, and therefore is expected to be able to fully utilise an additional appliance. We need, in bush management, to be prepared. There is extra work to do, and I believe we need to address some of these issues in fighting the potential war that we may be faced with in the future, heaven forbid.

**MS M.M. QUIRK (Girrawheen)** [5.54 pm] — in reply: In the minute or so I have to respond, this motion is about government management of fire and emergency services before this fire season. Whilst many of the issues relating to climate change and the inevitability of a drying climate cannot be addressed, the opposition says the government has failed to address a number of issues. It has failed to prosecute a number of recommendations of successive inquiries and has failed to adequately fund things that can and should be funded now. The State Emergency Management Committee's "2016 Emergency Preparedness Report", tabled yesterday, notes that emergency management is an element of unfunded core business, and that resourcing limitations in some areas have been identified as adversely impacting the ability to provide proactive mitigation and asset betterment. Even with regard to crew protection, which is supposed to be fully funded and finished, in response to questions the government says that it might need some more money in next year's budget. Finally, what is even more appalling is the response to questions by the Minister for Lands, who said with regard to crown land that the government does not have a central database of land held by the government and that it needs to do a new bushfire risk management planning process. It has not even completed that, and it cannot even start mitigation on its own land. There is much that needs to be done. The recommendations are there and they are observed in the breach, and I support this motion.

Question put and passed.