

## PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAMS

### *Motion*

**HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West)** [11.37 am] — without notice: I move —

That the Council —

- (a) recognises that Western Australia's declining prescribed burning programs and forest management practices are seriously impacting on the security and safety of Western Australian residents and the environment; and
- (b) calls on the state government to urgently re-examine the process by which prescribed burning programs are implemented to —
  - (i) provide broad-scale fuel reduction to increase bushfire suppression potential and reduce bushfire size;
  - (ii) increase catchment water yield and daily run-off; and
  - (iii) provide a safe environment and help maintain biodiversity and enhance ecological processes on which native plants and animals depend.

This motion has been brought about by events that have occurred over the past few years. I want to focus on this motion for two reasons. As part of my background comes from having been raised in the country and being part of an era that cleared land for agriculture, I have experienced bushfires and seen the harm that they can do. If we go back to 1978, when cyclone Alby went through, much of the south west, particularly the country around Boyup Brook and Bridgetown that was being developed, was affected by bushfires. In my opinion, Western Australia has reached a tipping point in its bushfire history. We can make important changes as a result of bushfire damage and costs will decline, or we can continue with business as usual and watch the situation worsen.

Our firefighting capacity has never been better. We have a modern fleet of firefighting vehicles, we have invested an enormous amount of resources into new fire brigades around different shires and areas, we have never had a bigger budget in our history for fire and emergency and we have aircraft, yet we have seen some of the worst outcomes. We all realise that reforms are in the pipeline but the reality is that we are faced with certainties and they are all pointing in the wrong direction. We know that every summer there will be heatwaves, long periods of dry weather, heavy winds and thunderstorms. It is not a product of climate change; this has occurred over the short history of our country. It is a normal pattern of summer and it varies from year to year. The first thing that we notice is that fuels are generally drier and we have a higher density of fires in those areas. The second certainty is arson. There is an old saying that bushfires are caused by men, women and children, but we can now add a different dimension to that; arsonists have become a real factor in many of today's bushfires. There will always be fires started by lightning, accidents, faulty machinery et cetera, but a new major addition to that list is arsonists. The higher fuel load on the ground adds another dimension to the matter; one that we must start to acknowledge. The third absolute certainty is weather. I do not refer to the 42-degree days that we get every summer. We hear on the radio that if it is over 35 degrees, it is a heatwave. We have had that for years and years and always will; in my opinion, a heatwave is when it is 40 degrees plus. However, hot weather is not the main cause of bushfires; it is a combination of weather, wind and fuel. The heavy fuel loads on the ground create an increased fire intensity that will spread, and the production leads to an uncontrolled fire. One key point about heavy fuel is that a lot of forests now have in excess of 30 tonnes of matter on the ground, which is one thing we can control. Less than seven tonnes of dry matter can create an intense fire, so that increase in heavy fuel on the ground has led to extremely hot fires that cannot be controlled.

As I already pointed out, we have some of the best and finest-equipped firefighters in the world, and it was not many years ago that Australia was acknowledged as probably the world leader in firefighting practices, but inevitably we have let that go. The hotter the fire, the more powerless these men and women are in controlling it. I will not talk about how good the past was, but in 1961 there were bushfires in Dwellingup, Holyoake, Nanga Brook and Karridale, and there have since been major bushfires in the eastern states such as on Ash Wednesday. Those fires were devastating. We learnt from the fires of the 1960s and put in some extremely effective measures, but we have let that go and since the 1990s there has certainly been a change in policy. Warren National Park just south of Pemberton—it is in the Deputy Speaker's electorate and mine—has some 40 tonnes of matter on its bush floors, which is increasing annually by two tonnes per hectare. Boranup Forest near Margaret River is another area where two or three years ago we saw the devastation of the Margaret River bushfires. When we combine the fuel load with no mobile phone coverage et cetera, we are looking at some pretty severe impacts.

Other areas sitting on a knife edge and surrounded by forest are Dunsborough, Pemberton and Denmark. A lot of small five acre-type housing subdivisions are going into those areas, all with one thing in common—they are surrounded by state forest. The shires have many different planning policies; they allow bush to grow up to the side of the house and there can be a clearing envelope of a very small area. Vacant blocks of two hectares or more are sometimes covered in wild oats. The accountability of shires and landowners is questionable. A lot of single roads will be built into these subdivisions with only one access road leading out. In my opinion, it is time to have common planning laws that define the clear-back from houses in these subdivisions, the overhang of trees and whether we have underground or above-ground powerlines. Most of the newer housing subdivisions have underground lines. Local government certainly has a strong role to play in this matter. One question that must be answered is: why has this become so difficult when, in recent times, we used a commonsense approach that provided very effective control? It was a very simple thing that everybody went about and did without any issue, but now everyone has to deal with the red tape that departments have put in front of other departments before matters can be dealt with.

Hon Brian Ellis probably remembers the farming days when we all burnt along the road verge as security for the farm against a fire if someone threw a match or a cigarette butt out of a vehicle window. I think Hon Darren West would have been in the same area. However, that cannot be done now. Farmers have to do a traffic management course that takes three days and they need to have extra people sitting at the end of the road, so it just becomes too hard and no-one does it. With that process, we controlled a lot of the feral animals. Logs lying on the side of the road, where foxes and rabbits could go, were burnt and the roads were much cleaner. The weeds, such as wild radish, that now grow very high along the sides of many roads, were not there when we burnt off the verges but they are there now, which adds to a bushfire environment.

The City of Armadale was the scene of the Roleystone bushfires. I happen to have a small block in Jandakot that comes under the jurisdiction of the City of Cockburn. A permit to burn leaves lasts for two weeks. We cannot create heaps more than a metre wide by a metre high, and every time we burn we have to ring the council. It is made so difficult for a landowner to look after his or her premises that it all becomes too hard. Why do councils make this process so difficult? If a person has an opportunity to burn and the weather is right, they want to go ahead and do it, but if it is the wrong day, a ranger must inspect the area before a person lights up. We have lost the plot and the shires and planning authorities must start using some commonsense. Kings Park is a Western Australian, and a world, icon, but it does not use fuel reduction strategies. We have seen some devastating burns, so one would question why there is no strategic burning at a very low volume heat on a regular basis to prevent the outcomes we have seen, particularly along the Swan River where a year or two ago it was blackened. With the knowledge and equipment that we have today, there are no excuses for that type of burn not to happen. A cool burn can be done and the forest will certainly not be devastated.

From the early 1970s to the early 1990s we used to burn 300 000 hectares a year. That has dropped dramatically in recent times to well under 100 000 hectares, but I will give Hon Donna Faragher her dues; as minister, it was one of her priorities to get that burning level back up and she certainly did her best to try to do that, but it has since dropped off. One would have to question why departments are pushing back on something that was so simple.

Another point is the common belief that bushfire smoke over the city or a town creates some health hazards. We have done a lot of investigation and we know that with smoke, there is no increase in the number of people attending major hospitals with respiratory or breathing problems. In 2005, there was a five-day haze over the city but no marked increase in admissions. We certainly must address that issue, and for the small inconvenience of smoke we are certainly a lot better off than having an intense fire. There are three types of fires. There is the “let it burn” approach, which is pretty common in the Kimberley. When I travelled there with Hon Ken Baston I had the opportunity to see firsthand the effect of those. The second approach is an all-out suppression approach. The third approach is a large, high-intensity bushfire, which is the result of failed land management. I would much prefer to be in control of a fire than the fire being out of control.

Foresters will tell us that leaving the Australian eucalyptus bush unmanaged does not work. Eucalyptus contains lots of oil, so the explosive measure is quite high. We must look at fuel reduction. In 2009, when we had the fires in the eastern states, we saw the entire firefighting community respond. We had assistance from New Zealand, Canada and the US, and we were still unable to physically control those fires. It is generally an act of nature, whether it is a light rain or something else, that will finally put out a fire.

In the longer term, two things are essential. The first is that we need legislative change to ensure that the Crown and especially local governments are bound by the Bush Fires Act. I am aware that new emergency services legislation is proposed and the Bush Fires Act may disappear, but we must ensure that parts of the Bush Fires Act, and especially section 33, do not disappear and that new provisions are introduced to force local government agencies and authorities to deal responsibly with the fire hazards on the land they manage. The

second requirement is a significant cultural change. Government bushfire policy must adapt the concept of the preventative-measures approach as the first principle. The government must pursue the implementation of this policy all the way through from senior public servants, agencies and local government to landowners. To achieve cultural change we must embrace this right at the top, and that means Parliament. I ask all members of Parliament to support this motion.

**HON RICK MAZZA (Agricultural)** [11.54 am]: I rise today to support Hon Nigel Hallett's motion. In the case of bushfires, complacency is certainly our enemy. Greens groups may claim that climate change is a contributor. After the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria, the Australian Greens leader at the time, Bob Brown, was quoted on Sky News Australia as saying —

It's a sobering reminder of the need for this nation and the whole world to act and put at a priority our need to tackle climate change.

For Bob Brown, as a leader of the Greens, to attempt to get political mileage before the coals had cooled on that fire was absolutely appalling. Greens groups have opposed burning a lot of these forests, and in my mind they were a contributor to the intensity of those fires in Victoria. *The Australian* published an article in December 2011 titled, "The long, slow burn over learning to live with nature". I quote —

**DAVID Packham's intriguing observation comes from a lifetime of confronting the ferocity and unpredictability of fire.**

...

His groundbreaking work with West Australian forester George Peet led to the development of prescribed burning by aerial incendiary, a fire control method now used throughout Australia and North America ...

I would like to read a particular part to members. This is to do with the Margaret River fires —

But while the anger remains palpable in and around Margaret River, the state's prime tourism and wine mecca, Packham believes it is grossly unfair to blame any one authority or person for the fires that still burn across WA.

Firmly pointing the finger at "the green lobby" for its role in the retreat from aggressive fire management policy across the nation, Packham believes there should be more controlled burning, not less.

He's scathing of timid governments that do not have the courage to undertake what he describes as a proven and effective measure against deadly, uncontrollable bushfires.

And he goes so far as to suggest that up to 100 lives might have been saved in the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires had the Victorian government had the gumption to carry out regular prescribed burns at the WA level of 5 per cent of the state's forests and national parks.

If it was climate change, why did we have the Black Thursday fires in 1851? Five million hectares were burnt, 12 lives lost, and 1 000 head of cattle and one million sheep died. Then we had the 1898 Red Tuesday fires in which 2 000 buildings were lost. Was it climate change that caused the Black Sunday fires of 1926 in which 16 lives were lost? The list goes on. Australia has a long history of fire being a part of the landscape. Aboriginal people, long before white settlement, are recorded as having burnt the forest floor to manage the land. It is something that we have neglected over time.

A lot of reference is made to the 1961 Dwellingup fires. It burnt down the town of Dwellingup and it was the main area affected, but the fires spread from Mundaring all the way to Manjimup. Prior to 1961 prescribed burning was done in wintertime and burnt only the top 10 or 15 per cent of the fuel on the ground. It was described as giving the forest a bit of a haircut. A lot of fuel loads were left. The royal commission into the 1961 fires identified that as a problem that led to the intensity of those fires. I have read a third of this book titled *Tempered by Fire*. There are some interesting stories in it. When we read the trials and tribulations of a lot of those people, we recognise that what they had to go through is quite heart wrenching. One quote comes to mind —

Coming to the top of a rise on Northeast Road we saw the most terrifying sight. The smoke was copper-coloured and great gouts of flame were leaping skywards about four times the height of the trees.

One can only imagine a crowning fire four times the height of the trees; it would be absolutely terrifying. I have had only a few experiences with fire, from burning a bit of bush on my farm from time to time. When we burn small coppice of, say, paperbark trees and a wind gust gets under it and it roars, the sound of the fire is so terrifying that one almost needs a change of underpants! What those people had to go through in the 1961 fires is

absolutely terrifying. There are stories of people getting a wet bag and throwing it over themselves and hiding in a ditch to survive. It is amazing that no lives were lost. The town of Holyoake, as alluded to by Hon Nigel Hallett, was lost and has never been rebuilt. Much of Dwellingup had to be rebuilt. We need to understand that we have to live with fire.

I have been very concerned at some of the estimates hearings and hearings on annual reports when the Department of Parks and Wildlife has said that it is way, way behind in its annual prescribed burning program. It has done only 20 per cent of the program. We are a long way behind. We should be having a very aggressive approach towards getting up to 300 000 hectares, which I think is the stipulated amount, and make sure that we get to that quota every single year, because sooner or later another fire event will occur. The royal commission into the 1961 fire reported the weather conditions as —

... hot, humid, rainless conditions culminated on 19th January when severe electrical storms produced a series of lightning fires extending from Mundaring in the north to Manjimup in the south, to be followed by further severe, dry thunderstorms and lightning fires the following evening.

The fires thus started, burnt under continuing heatwave conditions for the next five days and a disastrous “blow up” occurred on the evening of 24th January, when cyclonic wind squalls associated with the southern movement of a tropical cyclone struck miles of partially controlled and uncontrolled fires.

Those weather events were peculiar at that time, but for us to think that they will not return at some time would be very, very naive. The fires were in 1961, so there are probably not many members in this place who would remember them; it is the year I was born so I cannot remember them. But I am fortunate enough to have a father who remembers them—he was around the Dwellingup fires at that time—and it was horrific and we do forget and become complacent. I think it is very important that we give our firefighters credit. They do a wonderful job and they are well equipped, but they are hampered by a lot of the restrictions that have been put in place with these controlled burns, and a lot of the environmentalists who are restricting those burns. We need to give firefighters more scope to initiate those burns. We also have to make sure that we do not lose the expertise. As these older firefighters from the 1961 fires pass away, we lose their expertise in fighting those huge fires. As many of them have said to me, it is not about being able to fight the fires, it is preventing the fires. That is the main way we are going to save Western Australia from a disaster like Black Saturday or another Dwellingup fire like we had in 1961. It is prevention rather than trying to fight it. In fact, reading some of the stories from 1961, it was impossible to fight those fires.

That is my contribution for today, and I urge the government to move—I hope it does—in increasing its prescribed burn quota each year.

**HON COL HOLT (South West — Parliamentary Secretary)** [12.02 pm]: I want to make a contribution to the motion moved by Hon Nigel Hallett. Prescribed burning is just one part of the solution around protecting our communities from the ravages of fire. There is no doubt that it plays a pretty important role. I am not sure that setting a target of 300 000 hectares should be our focus; I think it should be more about the areas where we carry out prescribed burning to ensure that we protect, firstly, lives, and, secondly, properties. I would have thought what we should be advocating is a much more strategic approach to prescribed burning. I do not want to see 200 000 hectares burnt out in the middle of nowhere; I would rather see some strategic burning in areas that are close to towns, farms, people and buildings. I have had some representation from Nannup in particular, where there is a patch of bush right on the edge of town that has not been burnt for 30 years. The people of the town think that is a disaster waiting to happen, and I probably agree with them. I think we should be absolutely targeting those areas to reduce the fuel loads that have been there for 30 years. Once it gets going in there, it is going to put lives, property and community infrastructure at risk. Along with Hon Rick Mazza, I do not want to see those sorts of fires come through our towns ever again. I think prescribed burning is part of the solution—not a complete solution—and I do not think a target of, say, 300 000 hectares is necessarily the right thing; it is about where we actually put the resources to protect lives.

Talk around this debate should be much more around the personal responsibility of managing fire risk. I know where Hon Nigel Hallett’s motion has come from; it is about the government playing a role in managing the risk for our communities. But there is a much greater responsibility in this that sits with all landholders in Western Australia. Not long after the Mundaring fires, I had to go to Kalamunda hospital. I pulled up in the car park and looked across the road at a house. It must have been a week or two after the Mundaring fires and I would have thought fire prevention and being prepared would have been at the forefront of everyone’s minds. I looked across to this house, and I reckon there would have been maybe one foot of bark and leaves sitting on the top of this garage. I reckon if a fire had come over the hill, there would have been no way in the world they would have stopped it.

**Hon Kate Doust:** Whoosh!

**Hon COL HOLT:** Yes, exactly. It would have just gone.

I was stunned by it; I should have taken a photo of it and broadcast it. We had had this enormous event that should have raised awareness about fire prevention in our communities, but not everyone was getting the message. I think that is just part of reality. What do we do about those sorts of situations and those sorts of people? We could introduce by-laws that say they have to clean it up, but even that will not necessarily be a complete answer. I know some shires have introduced by-laws around people not being allowed to have trees within 20 metres of their house. From a fire prevention point of view, I absolutely see the merit in that, but it takes away from people taking responsibility for their own safety in times of emergency. There are people in the Shire of Manjimup, for example, who really enjoy living in the bush—that is why they live there—and they really like trees around their homes. Some of them have taken precautions by installing sprinkler systems on their roofs to ensure that if a fire comes over the hill they can at least have a go at preventing their house from being burnt. But I also know those same people have a strategy for leaving; that is, as soon as it gets too hot, they are out of town. I would be putting a sign up on my gate saying “Please let it burn”. That is what it comes to. People are not taking responsibility for their own safety, yet expecting, in times of emergency, our emergency personnel to come galloping over the hill on a white steed to save them. We should not be putting our emergency services personnel at risk to save people or property who have taken no personal responsibility. We have to target our prescribed burning more, but I think we really have to ramp up that whole message of taking responsibility for the environment we live in. We know there will be bushfires in Australia; we live in Western Australia, which is probably the hottest place on the earth given the amount of bush we have. We know we are not going to get away without having bushfires in our communities every year. People who live in those high-risk environments should expect bushfires to happen and take some personal responsibility. They should not expect the cavalry to arrive to save them and their property. They should have a plan in place that says, “I’m going to keep myself and my family safe first”, and make sure that when the authorities drive down their street combating a fire they know those people are not in their homes. That way, the emergency personnel do not have to risk their lives inspecting an empty home or trying to save people who have not done the right thing in the first place.

As a state we have some responsibility around prescribed burning to protect the broader community, but I think we really need to get the message out about personal responsibility, personal measures and the implementation of strategies to ensure that the first thing people save is their own lives, because no-one else has a responsibility to save anyone else’s life; people are responsible for their own lives.

I thank Hon Nigel Hallett for bringing the motion to the house and allowing us to make a contribution. It is an important debate. We are always going to have constraints around prescribed burning, but I would like us to make sure that the high-risk areas are identified and burnt first to protect communities.

**HON KATE DOUST (South Metropolitan — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [12.10 pm]: I want to thank Hon Nigel Hallett for moving this motion; it certainly has the chamber engaged in some interesting discussion around a significant issue. We do not have to hark back to the early 1960s for examples of dreadful fire events; we have only to cast our memories back over the last couple of years to know that those dreadful events have happened recently and will continue to happen unless significant action is taken. Even more recently, we had fires in Stoneville and Parkerville in which more than 50 homes were lost, so it is an ongoing issue for all of us in this state.

I found myself agreeing with a lot of what Hon Col Holt had to say about how people need to change the way in which they deal with these issues on a personal level. That is a matter that has been canvassed in a range of places, particularly in the wake of the bushfires in Victoria and New South Wales. I was actually in Victoria on that dreadful weekend when those fires occurred; I have family who lived in those areas, and they talk about the losses in and to their communities and what has happened since. One of my cousins was in the recent Blue Mountains bushfires; whilst his house was okay, his neighbour’s house went. Another of my relatives has recently moved from Kalgoorlie to Mahogany Creek, and they have actually taken precautions in the design of their new house, in terms of placing blue metal around the house, installing sprinklers and the placement of trees. I think people are coming to terms with those issues if they want to live in those environments.

Hon Nigel Hallett has put forward a range of interesting options that need to be considered in the future in terms of the role that local government plays, how we put in place appropriate legislation and how we coordinate all the various organisations that are involved. When we dealt with those bushfires a few years ago, there were some concerns about the interactions of the various players and who had responsibility for various events. I think we can all agree that those things probably need to be clarified so that when events happen there is no confusion on the day and people know what is going on.

The first part of Hon Nigel Hallett’s motion talks about declining burn rates. I think Hon Rick Mazza talked about those declining figures. During the estimates hearings in May, Simone McGurk in the other place raised the issue of the number of hectares the department had undertaken in the last five years. The figures she provided

Hon Nigel Hallett; Hon Rick Mazza; Hon Col Holt; Hon Kate Doust; Hon Alyssa Hayden; Hon Darren West

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related to staff and the number of hectares that had been burnt in Swan, south west and Warren. In 2008–09, there were prescribed burns over more than 151 000 hectares; it then went to 212 000 hectares; then, in 2010–11, it was 136 000 hectares, a significant drop; in 2011–12, 103 000 hectares; 2012–13, 23 000 hectares; and in 2013–14, it increased to 72 000 hectares. Whilst there has been a decline in the areas being funded for prescribed burns, there has also been an increase in the number of staff who have been allocated to monitor it. I find it quite interesting that there has been an increase in the number of staff who have been given the job of doing it, but there is a much smaller area in those confined spaces. That is a real challenge for government, and I probably would have liked to have spent a bit more time talking about how the ball is now really back in the government’s court to pick up on this, determine the areas, and fund them appropriately. I agree with Hon Col Holt that to go out and burn huge swathes in one go is not the most sensible or advisable way; we probably would get a better outcome with more targeted burns, and looking at other options for managing domestic areas.

**Hon Col Holt** interjected.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** I am not an expert in this space and have never claimed to be. I have lived in the bush and have experienced bushfires coming close to my home, and a range of other matters in connection with the work done in that space. I think that practical approach is quite useful.

It was mentioned that there are reforms in the pipeline; most of the issues have been canvassed. We have had a series of reports and inquiries after each of these significant events, but I have not heard the words “Keelty report” mentioned once in the context of the matters that Hon Nigel Hallett is canvassing; not just the amount of burn or the manner of the burn, but other issues about how the burn will be conducted and the water issues. All of those matters were picked up in the Keelty report, but the government has yet to deliver on any of those recommendations or to articulate clearly whether or how it will flow them out. There were some very sensible recommendations in that document and it is a shame that we have had fires occurring after that. This is a sensible debate to have, but at the end of the day it is up to this government to do whatever it can to reduce these opportunities. The member is right: if it is a choice between someone’s life or their home, they will walk. That is the most sensible approach, although I know it is a hard decision for people to make because we are all attached to our properties and our things. It is a hard call, but at the end of the day, that is the right decision. There probably should be much better education for communities about these issues, and that again is something that the government could and should provide, but we still have a long way to go. The opposition would support these things happening, because we do not want to see people losing their homes or their lives. People can never be compensated for the loss of their memories and their hold in the community, or for the loss of life of a family member; we do not want to see that happen, but I think the government has to be much smarter and to show a much stronger commitment to going about doing that. There probably is not a silver bullet for fixing this problem; there probably needs to be a variety of mechanisms put in place to manage these processes in a better way.

I note that the last part of Hon Nigel Hallett’s motion states —

- (iii) provide a safe environment and help maintain biodiversity and enhance ecological processes on which native plants and animals depend.

We know that fire is important in terms of rejuvenation of our forests; fire can rebirth forests in some ways. That is why we have to be smart in the way in which we manage that. Perhaps we need to take a leaf out of the book of our Indigenous community, who have managed fires in the bush for an aeon. Perhaps we need to look at how they have done that and to pick up on some of those practices; it might assist us to manage these processes in a better way.

At the end of the day—I keep saying that; I should stop saying that—it does not matter where we live, be it in the bush or in the city, we are finding that fires are encroaching more and more on the metropolitan areas, particularly the ones we have had in more recent times. This is not just a bush issue; it is a city issue as well and we have to find solutions or mechanisms that can assist everyone. I encourage Hon Nigel Hallett, as an active backbencher, to rattle the cages of his ministers and government and to thump the table loudly with his colleagues. If it is a question of funding, then he and the government have the capacity to deliver on that. We in the opposition have the capacity to keep pushing the issue, but at the end of the day we all want the same outcome: we want a safer environment in our community, a proper fire prevention strategy put in place, and everyone working together, regardless of level of government or where they work in the spectrum of fire safety. It is a shame that we keep having these discussions and these dreadful fires keep happening, but we are still unable to put a coordinated, cohesive plan in place with appropriate funding. I encourage Hon Nigel Hallett to keep raising these issues, but there is no point having all these reviews unless the government actually delivers on them and makes a commitment to the community.

**HON ALYSSA HAYDEN (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary)** [12.20 pm]: I rise to not only to thank Hon Nigel Hallett for bringing this important motion to the house for debate today, but also back up the

comments of Hon Col Holt and Hon Kate Doust. One of the many points that Hon Kate Doust raised is that this is not only a bush issue, but also a metropolitan issue. As all members know, in January we had the Parkerville–Mt Helena fires and a couple of years before that the Roleystone–Kelmescott fires. Sadly, these were all in the East Metropolitan Region. Members have only to look out the windows to see the hills that surround the CBD and how close bushfires are to the metropolitan region. My parents were affected by the Parkerville–Mt Helena bushfires. The fire ended at their block, going through one side and coming back on the other side. Although that was in January and to us it was nearly six months ago, to them it was like yesterday. They are still grieving. My parents live with me at the moment, so I am grieving with them.

**Hon Kate Doust:** It is on the record now.

**Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN:** It is, but I have said this to their face, so it is okay. People choose to live in these areas. My parents have lived in that area for 37 years. They bought a 20-acre block of virgin bush in Mt Helena. They cleared enough land for the driveway, water tank, house and a bigger area for the men’s shed. They knew from day one that by choosing to live in a fire-prone area they were responsible to take the precautions necessary. We learnt from a very young age that if a fire came, we would simply hop in the car and leave. They have always had their box ready and prepared with legal documents, photos and private and personal things that they treasure. We are lucky these days, with the internet and computer storage, that photos and memorabilia can be stored elsewhere and we do not need to worry about getting them out of the house. For 37 years my parents have been fire-ready and prepared to pick up that box, hop in the car and go. The reason that I am telling this story is that it does not matter how ready people may be or how many years they have prepared for this, on the day it happens logic goes out the window. When my mother saw my dad pulling the flat-screen TV off the wall and trying to put it in the back seat of the car, she knew he had lost sight of what was important. When people are in a crisis and faced with something terrifying, such as a bushfire, they do not always think straight, which is why being prepared is so vitally important. People need to be able to go into auto-mode to be able to save themselves and their loved ones. Once mum convinced dad that the TV was not vital, they got in the car and left. I have to say that my dad took my mum to a safe place and then wanted to return. Luckily for us the firemen had shut down the roads and would not let him back in and said, “Go away you silly old fool, you shouldn’t be doing this.” However, our neighbours stayed. They are volunteer firefighters and they stayed to protect their home. If members have ever seen a fire roaring through the bush—my parents have 20 acres, the people next to them have 20 acres, as do the people next to them—being fuelled by trees, it is the scariest thing they will ever see in their life. These were well experienced people defending their home, and they came close to losing their own lives.

To me, what we need to worry about with bushfires and fires of any kind is preparing people on how to survive them. It applies from prescribed burning right down to what to do on the day. At the end of the day, bricks and mortar can be replaced but lives cannot. Living in Mt Helena, my parents rely on the local fire brigade to do their prescribed burning. They have been on the list for some time—unfortunately, too long. Their block should have been burnt quite a few years earlier and it was not. I am glad that Hon Nigel Hallett has raised this issue, because we need to look at ways of supporting prescribed burning and making sure that people who want it done can get it done in the right time frame. We also need to look at ways to support our volunteer firefighters so they can help with the prescribed burning requirements and needs, especially in metropolitan areas where the concentration of houses is so high. A lot more damage was done in the Parkerville and Roleystone fires because of housing density—the number of houses and their close proximity to each other—than occurs in a rural setting. I am not saying that a fire is worse in the metropolitan area or that there are any less crucial elements to a rural fire, but we need to make sure we protect our metropolitan bush areas. My dad put in double firebreaks—outer and inner firebreaks—and he cleared everything around the shed, instead of the house, because that is where his vintage car that he could not get out is housed. The whole block was totally burnt in that fire and the house was burnt, not to the ground, unfortunately—because it would have been easier to rebuild a completely burnt-out house—but enough to make it uninhabitable. However, the area around the shed where dad had taken precautions was not touched. They had 20 acres burnt to ash, black and grey, but the shed with the vintage car was saved! Precautions are vital.

The government plays its role, and I commend the government on what it has done in learning from each fire and the systems that have been put in place. My parents have been treated amazingly well through all of this by all the departments. They have not had to go to departments to ask for help; the departments have been ringing them giving them the help they require. I put on record my gratitude to all the departments involved, to local firefighters and paid firefighters for everything they have done for us in the tragic event of a bushfire. The government steps up when it matters, and I am very proud of that.

**Hon Jim Chown:** What about the insurers?

**Hon ALYSSA HAYDEN:** My parents are still working with the insurance companies, so we will not go there.

As Hon Kate Doust said, there is so much more we can do and we need to keep putting the pressure on to make sure we fund the necessary avenues to get prescribed burning up to date and to get people prepared and bushfire ready.

**HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural)** [12.27 pm]: I too thank Hon Nigel Hallett for bringing this motion before us today. It is a very important issue in Western Australia. Several members have pointed out that Western Australia has a history of catastrophic fire events over a number of years. I cannot disagree with what Hon Nigel Hallett has put forward. It makes commonsense to me that we have an increased level of fire management and control in Western Australia.

It is a difficult area. There are a lot of conflicting views about prescribed burning, management of land and reserves versus the public safety element of controlling fires with prescribed burning. Clearly, anyone who is involved and on the ground in this area will have a voice and will make their views, on either side, clearly known. I grew up and spent some of my adolescent years in the state of Victoria. I can remember clearly in 1983 the Ash Wednesday bushfires that affected multiple areas around where we lived. I can remember that the smoke hung around for several days. We knew plenty of people who had homes and property burnt or destroyed, and after that we spent quite a lot of time working with communities—fortunately we were not affected—re-fencing properties, providing fodder and agistment for sheep, and all of those associated activities that are required after a fire. I agree that we should think more about how we act before the fire comes through. As was pointed out by Hon Rick Mazza, for thousands of years Aboriginal people have been using fire as a management tool to manage the land. I had a discussion about this last night with Josie Farrer, the member for Kimberley, about some of the traditional practices they employed in her country. A lot of it was about flushing out animals, clearly to provide food for Aboriginal people, but also to provide the regrowth that came after a fire had been through an area, which would then attract large fauna for the purpose of hunting. She told me that if these small pockets were not burnt, the large wildfires would come and kill off a lot of the food and take away a lot of the shelter for the traditional people who live and hunt there.

Prescribed burning can impact on security and safety on both sides of the spectrum. If not enough prescribed burning and management of high fuel loads is done, we have all seen catastrophic fire events, with communities front and centre in the path of large wildfires devastated. Hon Alyssa Hayden contributed evidence of her first-hand involvement with that and what it means for families and communities. On the other side, we have seen evidence of prescribed burns going terribly wrong, such as the case in Margaret River where there was a significant loss of property and immense inconvenience—at least—and tragedy for the community.

I think we can make the following assertion about fire and fuel load management in forest areas: a lot of things are changing rather rapidly and clearly climate change is an issue. Although I know that some members do not believe it is an issue, I cannot remember days of 46 degrees, 47 degrees or 48 degrees as a small boy in the wheatbelt. Often those extremely hot days are also days of high wind. Temperatures over 45 degrees and high winds is a deadly concoction; if fires get hold during those extreme events, no group can possibly hope to control those fires with conventional means, as we do as farmers, turning up with our tank of water behind us and a Honda firefighter pump, fronting up to the side of a fire and working at it until we get it under control. It is just too dangerous to do that during those extreme weather events. I think the drying nature of the south west of Australia, which is one of the driest climates in the world, is impacting with extremely dry, low humidity days. In the springtime, we bale hay and have to keep a close watch on air humidity. We have an optimum baling time, and in the house I have a little meter that tells when that is. In the summertime, we get down to nine per cent humidity, which is extraordinarily dry. Days like that, with high temperatures and high winds, is new ground in terms of climatic conditions.

There is more settlement in fire-prone areas. In the hills, as Hon Alyssa Hayden pointed out, blocks were once 20 acres and they are now one acre. There are so many more settlements and communities in what could be described as fire-prone areas. The same applies with communities in the south west, as Hon Nigel Hallett alluded to. There has been a tree-change notion around for quite a while—people taking the opportunity to move into bushland areas, which has created another set of circumstances.

People now have less practical exposure to fire. Once upon a time, everyone had a barbeque, open fire or wood heater in the house, but it is very rare these days as everything is gas or electricity. People once learned about what would happen if ash fell out onto the ground in front of the barbeque and how quickly fire can get hold. People were more exposed to fire and understood that when things go wrong, they can go wrong very quickly, and they had to be very vigilant with fire. I think that is missing these days. I note that the Roleystone fire was started by an angle grinder. The lack of vigilance and people not putting two and two together can allow fire to get a hold on the wrong day. A lot of people have not been to or seen a big fire and do not understand how terrifying it is, how fires create their own wind, move at devastating speed and create a roar that is something to behold.

As Hon Nigel Hallett alluded, we have more of the idiot element in our community who, for some reason that I will never understand, see fit to go out on a day of high winds, high temperature and low humidity and deliberately light a bushfire. I will never understand what could put anyone in that place in their mind that thinks that that is a good idea and then skulk off to wherever they came from and not own up and say, “It was me.” I think we have a real issue in our society that a group of people stoop to that level and cause extreme loss of property and life—for what purpose? I really grapple with that one. Then there is the enormous fleet of people prepared to come and help to put the fire out, who instead could have all perhaps just had a chat to that person in the meantime. It is increasingly difficult to attract volunteers to volunteer fire brigades in regional areas. We have great difficulty attracting volunteers, full stop. There is that hardcore group that always turns up to every fire, meeting and training day, but it is very difficult to get new people along, especially younger people.

So what do we do? I think the 200 000-hectare-a-year target is a bit of a silly idea; 200 000 hectares can be burnt in one sweep. Burning 200 000 hectares in one square out in the Great Western Woodlands, on the south coast or in the Kimberley does not actually address the problem. The difficulty is in strategically managing fuel loads. Fuel loads need to be managed in small areas around settlements and communities, which is difficult, costly and labour intensive and inconveniences people with respiratory ailments in those communities. Often a lot of smoke hangs over Perth and it is news for three days. When there is a prescribed burn in the south west the smoke pools over Perth and hangs around—this is created when conditions are ideal for burning, when there is not a lot of wind—and produces community conjecture about whether prescribed burning is such a good idea. Smaller targeted, managed areas are the way forward, but it is a difficult position. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. For example in Wandoo woodlands a seven-year rotation will not work because there is very little understorey and leaf litter. Most of the fires in Wandoo woodlands get up into the crowns of the trees. How could we prevent that? Different bushlands require different management strategies—some animal and plant species are pyrophilic and some are pyrophobic and require different management. The Keelty report makes a lot of recommendations and I urge the government to follow the recommendations of that report.

**HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West)** [12.38 pm] —in reply: I thank everyone for their contributions today. I totally agree that giving responsibility back to landowners when some shires only issue three permits a year is the type of thing we need to start targeting. In the last five years, we have lost more houses than in the previous fifty years. It gets back to management. I agree with Hon Colin Holt that maybe 200 000 hectares is not enough strategic burning. Water catchment is another issue to raise.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.