

GASCOYNE FLOODS AND BUSHFIRES

Statement

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral) [5.29 pm]: I want to touch on the Gascoyne bushfires that occurred in late December and January. After a long drought in the Gascoyne and Murchison, those areas received record rains and then floods. In fact, 19 December 2011 was the anniversary of the Carnarvon floods. With those record rains came an abundance of vegetable matter, and because there was very little stock on the scene as a result of the drought, it ended up creating a fire hazard. This last happened some 50 years ago and does not occur regularly; therefore, the preparations were, I guess, probably not as good as they could have been.

On 27 December 2011, the first fire started as a result of a lightning strike at Mooka Station, which is about 120 kilometres north of Carnarvon on the Gascoyne Junction road. This property is owned by the Department of Environment and Conservation, and the fire was known as the Mooka fire from then on. From 28 December to 30 December the fire was monitored and between 31 December 2011 and 5 January 2012 bulldozers and fire crew were sent in to build containment lines. However, the fire continued to burn in some fairly tough country in the back of places like Mardathuna. The fire burnt down through Jimba, Binthalya, Mardathuna, Hill Springs, Cooralya, Booloogooro and Manberry stations. Cooralya was the worst hit of those properties north of the Gascoyne River, with more than 80 per cent of the property burnt. Multiple lightning strikes on 19 and 20 January 2012 started some seven fires south of the Gascoyne River at Meedo, Yalbalgo, Doorawarrah, Callagiddy, Ella Valla, Edagee, Marron, Wahroonga, Winderie and all properties south east of Carnarvon. Of all those properties, Yalbalgo lost the most with some 90 per cent of the property burnt. It is the burning of not only the feed, but also the fences, troughs and tanks. One pastoralist told me that a fibreglass tank that had been burnt but that appeared to be okay shattered when he put his hand against it.

On 24 January, I visited Carnarvon and received a personal briefing from a DEC fire control officer, who was from Manjimup. I attended one of the regular briefings being held at five o'clock each afternoon and attended by the police, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, State Emergency Service and Department of Water personnel, as well as any other agencies involved, and the pastoralists. On 25 January I was able to fly over some of the southern Gascoyne fires in a helicopter. During this time, the North West Coastal Highway was closed due to the Edagee fire. During these few days, I wanted to charter a plane to fly out to a pastoral property, but thunderstorms made it too wet. Despite the rain, the dry areas were still burning, creating havoc for the firefighting effort as vehicles became bogged and trucks lost control and rolled on slippery dirt roads.

During the fires, I received a number of complaints as a result, it seems, of the lack of consultation with local pastoralists. I have followed up on that and on 12 and 13 March I visited the area, driving out as far south as Gascoyne Junction. I met with individual pastoralists to listen to their views of the event and to hear how we could do better. I also met with the Upper Gascoyne and Carnarvon Shires. I travelled with the local bushfire control officer, a gentleman called Dennis Bumback from the Gascoyne, and it was, I have to say, of immense value to hear him explain the unfolding events during these fires. I will express to the appropriate ministers the pastoralists' views on what we can do better next time because there is certainly room for improvement.

Interestingly, the southern firefighting efforts of FESA were highly praised; especially the efforts in fighting the Meedo and Wahroonga fires. Locals could not speak highly enough of FESA efforts. However, there were numerous complaints about the DEC fire office.

This incident is not covered by WANDRRA—that is, Western Australian natural disaster recovery and relief arrangements—funding because \$240 000 of public infrastructure must be affected to qualify for that assistance. Even though a massive area of some 900 000 hectares was burnt, that funding does not apply. I have seen some pictures of one of the properties that had sustained a lot of fire damage and had to reduce its stock numbers. I was shown pictures of animals being loaded onto trucks. They were destroying about 10 per cent of the animals because their feet had been burnt and as they were loading them onto the vehicles their hooves were dropping off and the animals were dropping down and walking on their knees. Of course those animals had to be destroyed.

The firefighting effort utilised a massive amount of infrastructure. I do not doubt the minister's press release because the amount of machinery that I saw during the fires was quite amazing. I had never seen anything like it. I think these fires were as big as the fires in Dwellingup in the south west some 50-odd years ago. According to the minister's press release, there were 30 machines, including eight bulldozers, 14 graders and eight loaders; 316 people were involved including 175 DEC staff from the more than 25 DEC centres from Esperance to Kununurra employed in Carnarvon; FESA provided crews from Bunbury, Albany, Geraldton, Manjimup, the aerial operations branch, Northam, Narrogin and Perth; the State Emergency Service provided crews from Geraldton, Belmont, Kalbarri, Perth and Shark Bay; the Forest Products Commission sent up staff from Collie, Gnowangerup and the south west region; and bushfire brigades came from Gascoyne River, Gascoyne Junction, Irwin, Geraldton, Mingenew, Waggrakine and Carnarvon.

The cost of this effort ran close, I believe, to the \$2-million mark. I am still putting together my report, but what has become clear so far is that we do not need two agencies fighting fires in the same area because of the command post clashes that became obvious during these fires.

Rain is the most important thing the area can receive now. I know that it has had some rain, but the areas that have missed out are still a charred mass. Where there has been rain the grass is up as high as six or seven inches. Rain is the answer and I am sure that over time it will be proven that the damage done, although very hard now for those pastoralists to accept, will be beneficial to the grazing land.