

FIREFIGHTING RESOURCES — LOCAL GOVERNMENT GRANTS SCHEME

655. Ms M.M. QUIRK to the Minister for Emergency Services:

Mr Speaker —

Mr P.B. Watson interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Albany, stop putting the member for Girrawheen off!

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I refer to concerns raised by volunteers that volunteer bush fire brigade firefighters are not supplied with breathing apparatus or with training under the local government grants scheme through the emergency services levy unless a need is demonstrated to the satisfaction of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services.

- (1) Does the minister support our bush fire brigade firefighters being supplied with breathing apparatus?
- (2) If no to (1), is this because the funds under the local government grants scheme have not increased, despite an over 80 per cent rise in the ESL and increased demand?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for Girrawheen. Happy 434th anniversary! It is 434 days since Labor Party members have asked a question about emergency services in this place. Clearly, they take it so seriously!

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! Member for Mandurah!

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I welcome the Auditor General's report tabled today and his findings in support of the preparedness of fire and emergency services volunteers. I was going to make some other comments and I did not expect this question. However, I am certainly willing to talk about it, and in particular whether or not volunteer bush fire brigade firefighters should be given breathing apparatus. This is a very interesting debate. Firstly, I must point out that the majority of volunteer bush fire brigade firefighters, on my understanding, actually do not want BA. There is also an issue with the fact that because of the exposure they get, as long as they are only fighting bushfires, not other fires with carcinogens other than smoke from the bush, they probably do not need breathing apparatus. There is also the issue of whether, in the conditions in which they fight fires—prolonged conditions when they are exposed to lots of heat, predominantly over summer—it would be physically too onerous for volunteer bush fire fighters to even be wearing BA. If the member wants to talk about personal protective equipment—in other words, just masks—or protective equipment overall, that is another issue. I know the member for Girrawheen specifically asked about BA and whether I support it: at this stage, no, I do not. I have not seen any scientifically based evidence to suggest that volunteer bush fire brigade firefighters exposed only to bushfire smoke should be subjected, either compulsorily or of their own will, to wearing closed-air breathing apparatus.

Mr P.B. Watson interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Albany, I call you to order for the second time.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: It has nothing to do with the money; it is to do with the scientific requirement of whether their exposure to the smoke would have any kind of impact or carry any carcinogens. I put to the house that if we look at all the fundamental bases on which we have proposed—we have already passed some—the next tranche of legislation to do with bush fire fighters and career firefighters and everyone else being exposed to carcinogens and giving them the presumptive legislation coverage, I would argue that if there was any chance whatsoever that bushfire smoke carried carcinogens and could result in someone contracting cancer, no-one here would ever go to another smoking ceremony at an opening. I saw many members of this place at the opening of Fiona Stanley Hospital, where a lovely smoking ceremony was done by the Noongar people that exposed everyone there to bushfire smoke.

Several members interjected.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Seriously. There is no requirement, as far as we are concerned, to give bush fire fighters closed-air breathing apparatus systems. In closing, on top of all that, almost every single bush firefighting unit is the responsibility of local government.