

**BUSH FIRES AMENDMENT BILL 2022**

*Second Reading*

Resumed from 22 June.

**MR M. HUGHES (Kalamunda)** [1.35 pm]: It has been a long time since we assembled in the chamber! As members will know, the Bush Fires Amendment Bill 2022 will amend the Bush Fires Act 1954 to instate the nationally agreed Australian Fire Danger Rating System and corresponding fire behaviour thresholds. The amendments to the act form part of the Western Australian government's response to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Recommendation 13.1 of the royal commission stated —

State and territory governments should expedite the development and implementation of the Australian Fire Danger Rating System.

Recommendation 13.2 of the commission stated —

State and territory governments should deliver education to ensure that the public understands the new Australian Fire Danger Rating System ratings, the potential danger attached to each rating, and the action that should be taken in response to each rating.

Bushfire is a seasonal danger across Western Australia, including the 448 square kilometres of the electorate of Kalamunda. From the outset, I wish to commend the selfless service provided to my community by the volunteer bush fire brigades, the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service, the emergency services and the full-time members of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services to protect both lives and property. Particularly, I want to commend the over 19 000 bush fire service volunteers across the state, comprising the 566 bush fire brigades. Without them, we would be in difficult circumstances each and every season that we experience bushfires.

In commending them, I also want to commend the McGowan Labor government for the work undertaken since the election in 2017 to enhance the state's capacity to protect our communities from, and to respond effectively to, natural disasters. Members will remember that a key part of this work was the government's effective response to the report titled "*Reframing rural fire management*": *Report of the special inquiry into the January 2016 Waroona fire*, which was tabled in Parliament by then Premier Barnett on Thursday, 23 June 2016. However, it took the election of the McGowan Labor government to respond to the Ferguson report's recommendations.

Just to remind members, the Waroona fire, which gave rise to the special inquiry, burnt out over 70 000 hectares of land. In that fire, two people died and at least 166 buildings were destroyed in Yarloop, with only 90 buildings surviving. In total, 181 buildings and structures were lost, with a total cost of fighting the fire, the damage and the resulting loss estimated to be in excess of \$155 million.

The Ferguson report recommended that the WA state government create a rural fire division to enhance the capacity for rural fire management and bushfire management. It also recommended that this function would establish a centre for fire management. Following the election of the McGowan government in 2017, the concept of a Bushfire Centre of Excellence was discussed at the Bushfire Mitigation Summit and the inaugural Western Australian Prescribed Burning Forum, which I attended. It was agreed that creating and capturing learnings through the Bushfire Centre of Excellence would build bushfire capacity for the future. As a result, the state government announced a comprehensive rural fire reform package in 2018, in response to the Ferguson report recommendations. Changes included the establishment of a rural fire division within the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the establishment of the Bushfire Centre of Excellence. In March 2019, the Shire of Murray was selected as the preferred centre location. At the time, I was disappointed that the proposal for the location in Stoneville, in my electorate, was not successful. The decision was made following an extensive request for proposal process whereby local governments across the state would formally express their interest. The permanent state-of-the-art buildings housing the Bushfire Centre of Excellence were opened in January 2021. The centre of excellence operates with a number of specific guiding principles, not least to decentralise the delivery of the centre's training programs and services, which it is doing in an admirable fashion.

I am pleased to note that the Bushfire Centre of Excellence is committed to gathering traditional and cultural knowledge about fire practices. To achieve this, the centre has established a cultural fire program that will consider how best we can link contemporary fire management with traditional fire practices. As we speak, a mixture of traditional and contemporary practices is being used across WA, with great success. I note the announcement made this morning by the Minister for Environment about that particular initiative. The intent of the cultural fire program is to support the development, implementation, coordination and promotion of both existing and future fire mitigation programs.

Closer to home, a little more than 12 months ago we experienced the Wooroloo bushfire. From that, lessons were learnt, in addition to those learnt from the 2014 Parkerville, Stoneville and Mt Helena fires. I want to remind members of the impact bushfires have upon our community. In the Parkerville, Stoneville and Mt Helena fires,

57 residential properties were destroyed, six were extensively damaged and numerous sheds and other structures were also affected. Although no lives were lost or serious injuries reported in those fires, 1 386 people were registered as evacuees with the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and the Australian Red Cross. During the recent Wooroloo fire, which started on 2 February 2021, more than 140 firefighting appliances and 280 firefighters from various agencies attended in the first 12 hours of the incident alone. The first reports of property damage were received a little over an hour after the start of the fire, as it rapidly spread through the semirural townships of Wooroloo, Gidgegannup and Tilden Park.

In that fire, 10 500 hectares inside a perimeter of 154 kilometres were burnt, with 86 homes lost and more than 100 other structures in its path destroyed or damaged. The majority of the property losses were experienced in the first 24 hours. More than 200 properties were reported as saved during the incident, as a result of carefully planned and executed strategies, and the outstanding work of fire crews, aircraft and support personnel. Luckily, the rainfall associated with a tropical low moving slowly from the south west coast assisted in extinguishing the fire on 7 February. We were lucky in that regard.

The recent Parkerville, Stoneville, Mt Helena and Wooroloo fires are stark reminders of the ever-present risk of catastrophic bushfires in the Perth hills and the damage and disruption they cause. The independent review of the Wooroloo bushfire acknowledges the ongoing action plan for the bushfires framework review established by the state government. The report covered a number of aspects particularly relevant to the 2021 Wooroloo fire. I will not range through the terms of reference or the nine specific items that the inquiry was required to give attention to. The independent inquiry was undertaken by a three-member panel, which comprised two interstate fire management experts and a local community representative who the member for Swan Hills and I met recently at the Shire of Mundaring, where we also met with the federal minister responsible for this area. The independent review made 13 recommendations to enhance prevention, preparedness, response and recovery to bushfires in Western Australia: 10 were accepted in full, one was accepted in principle and two were noted by the state government. Importantly, several of the recommendations contained in that independent inquiry report supported the continuation of existing programs, indicating that recent investments in bushfire preparedness by the state government are well targeted.

Throughout Western Australia, fire mitigation activities are essential to help prevent the loss of life and property when a catastrophic blaze breaks out. Since 2017, the McGowan government has allocated more than \$38 million to 55 local governments to conduct nearly 5 100 mitigation activities. The mitigation activities program has proven to be a highly effective tool in boosting the number of bushfire mitigation activities being carried out each year. It is very encouraging to see more local government authorities apply for this funding for the first time. This year alone, in the electorate of Kalamunda and the neighbouring electorate of Swan Hills, the Shire of Mundaring has received half a million dollars from the fund for bushfire mitigation activities.

My community was also very heartened by the announcement in the last state budget of the \$11 million investment that will deliver Western Australia's first large air tanker for the bushfire season for the next three years. The tanker will provide a major boost to the state's firefighting capacity and reduce our reliance on national aircraft availability. In February, a large tanker such as this dropped retardant that helped staunch the fire on Canning Mills Road and Martin Road in my electorate.

The whole community needs to be alert throughout the fire season. Fire danger ratings describe the potential level of danger should a bushfire start. They are important because they provide people with information so that they can take action to protect themselves and others from the potentially dangerous impacts of bushfires. I quote —

The new nationally agreed consistent AFDRS model, a departure from the six-category system, comprises four categories—"moderate", "high", "extreme" and "catastrophic". Proposed amendments to this section will remove reference to two current Fire Danger Rating terms, these being "severe" and "very high". This amendment will ensure that activities which are currently prohibited when the ratings "severe" or "very high" are issued, will also be prohibited when the new AFDRS ratings of "extreme" and "high" are issued.

The new redesigned system will more accurately forecast fire danger in Australia. The system is a project of national significance that has been developed collaboratively by state, territory and commonwealth governments with the aim of improving public safety and reducing the impacts of bushfires. This is achieved by improving the scientific accuracy behind fire danger predictions, improving the way that fire danger is communicated, providing government and industry with better decision-making tools, and reducing the costs associated with bushfire impacts. I turn now to seasonal predictions in the new Australian Fire Danger Rating System. New seasonal prediction research was developed with fire agencies for long-range planning as part of the Australian Fire Danger Rating System ahead of its launch this year. The seasonal prediction research provides fire agencies with the most accurate information possible to prepare for fire conditions ahead of time.

In a Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre project, led by the Bureau of Meteorology, researchers developed new capability for Australia to successfully predict dangerous bushfire conditions weeks, months and whole seasons ahead, which will greatly extend existing fire weather forecast capacity. This technology will be also part of a broader aim to create seamless predictive services across different timescales, which will enhance fire agencies' long-term planning capabilities and help to make Australia more resilient to disasters. Previously, long-range outlooks released by the Bureau of Meteorology used temperature and rain measures to predict fire danger; whereas, the new methodology combines measurements of humidity, wind, temperature, rain and vegetation moisture to create longer range predictions of dangerous fire conditions. The new technology also factors in large-scale weather variability; sudden increases in stratospheric temperatures, such as the polar vortex variation that contributed to the severity of the 2019–20 fire season; and long-term climate change trends. The predictions researchers developed throughout this project by combining all these factors have been found to be consistent with observed weather conditions. This research has provided an important stepping stone for the new capabilities that are being developed within the revised Australian Fire Danger Rating System. By using the very latest Bureau of Meteorology models and a more detailed approach to bushfire fuels, which were developed as part of the Australian Fire Danger Rating System, agencies will now have access to better information to support important decisions before and during fire seasons. This research will also be used as a guide when producing the seasonal bushfire outlook, a valued industry resource that the Cooperative Research Centres program developed, and will now be published by the Australian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council to help guide public messaging about fire risk.

[Member's time extended.]

**Mr M. HUGHES:** I probably will not need the extension of time.

It is this latest research to inform fire danger rating calculations in Australia that the system incorporated from the Cooperative Research Centres science over the last 18 years. The minister said in closing the second reading speech that by passing this bill, the government will ensure that the Western Australian community has available to it a better system and, therefore, will be better prepared for the threat of bushfire by being an active participant in the modernised system.

I commend the bill and revision of the existing legislation to the house, which will enable us now to take part in a nationally agreed and improved system.

**MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [1.53 pm]: I would like to make a contribution to the Bush Fires Amendment Bill 2022. I state at the outset that I am the lead speaker for the opposition on this matter in this house, although, of course, the shadow Minister for Emergency Services, Hon Martin Aldridge, in the other place will no doubt ask a lot about this legislation when it gets to that place. The former Minister for Emergency Services is in this house and he will be taking this matter forward for the government. I have suggested that if he answers any questions I ask during my second reading contribution in his second reading reply speech, we may not need to go into consideration in detail. However, we will see how all that unfolds.

I am conscious that there are only a few minutes before question time commences, so I will probably not get too far into the detail of the bill. However, we know that as we approach the bushfire season this year there has been a good period of rain throughout the year and that some areas will have high fuel loads. We know that during summer over recent years some very, very difficult situations have been caused by bushfires in my electorate. In the period before I came on board, there were some major fires in the Toodyay area. I think the Toodyay fire occurred in 2010 and I was elected in 2013, but people still had not got back into their homes by that time. We know that a major fire can be very traumatic for a community. The member for Kalamunda spoke about the Wooroloo fire, which is just outside my electorate. I assure members that on the days those fires were running, in the Shires of Toodyay and Chittering people were indeed looking to the skies. I know for a fact that there were some outbreaks many kilometres away around the lower Chittering area from sparks that were carried ahead from that fire, which had to be put out in some pretty difficult country. It was a very worrying time and we know that that will have a traumatic impact on those people who lost their houses for many years to come.

I am not going to go into the details of the Wooroloo fire because there are still some issues down that way. We also know that bushfire control is a very topical issue in local governments at the moment. The Western Australian Local Government Association is looking to make some changes for an appropriate model for local governments as they go forward. I think there has been talk about new legislation to consolidate the Fire and Emergency Services Act. That legislation may change the way in which the provisions of the Bush Fire Act 1954 have been operating for the last nearly 77 years. Obviously, consideration will have to be given to that as we go forward.

Some matters have been brought to a head because some local government CEOs are especially concerned about the level of their responsibility under work health and safety regimes and that has left them feeling as though they may be exposed to unmitigated risks. Some CEOs think that some processes could be put in place that will lead to sufficient mitigation of those risk, but others do not believe that that will necessarily happen. I recently attended a number of

different zones and local governments to observe their meetings and gain an understanding of some of their issues. This issue is certainly one of the most contested and discussed by local government. I am not sure at what level volunteers have been consulted in local government areas, because they operate under many different circumstances. Some local governments bush fire brigades are comfortable to work within a shire or a local government sponsored situation; whereas, some brigades within that same shire prefer to work in line with the operations of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, mainly using their equipment, for instance, and to operate in areas where other assets are routinely needed. Here I am talking about places like Chittering, where aircraft or other resources need to be brought in because of the challenging terrain and the great risk that that bushland creates for the local community. I am not taking a position on that, but just highlighting that WALGA is working through this at the moment. I assume that by the time they arrive at a local government convention, they will have put forward a uniform position. Interestingly, they seem to be pushing a hybrid model. I do not know how a hybrid local government and departmental model will work under departmental control, but we will see how that works when local governments have gone through the consultation process. The bill we are discussing at the moment, the Bush Fires Amendment Bill 2022, is fairly simple in some ways, or apparently seems simple. It will simply change the number of indicators of fire danger that people would normally see. I think two categories are being chopped from the indicator: “very high” and, if I have it right, “extreme”, I think.

Debate interrupted, pursuant to standing orders.

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