

**SUBMISSION TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND  
JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE**

**BY THE AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' UNION,  
WEST AUSTRALIAN BRANCH**



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## **AWU SUBMISSION TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE**

The Australian Workers' Union (AWU) thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission into the State's fire preparedness for this year's fire season.

The AWU is the Union representing frontline bushfire fighters engaged by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). DEC officers, managers and other staff are represented by the CSA.

These submissions are intended to relate only to those areas of AWU coverage though they may also be applicable to other workgroups. The AWU submissions are in no way intended to be critical of DEC, its employees or management. The AWU's main focus is on ensuring DEC has adequate resources and capability to fulfil its obligations to the community and provide a safe working environment for employees. The recent Albany 1 Fire where four AWU personnel were injured highlights the hazardous and unpredictable nature of bushfire fighting.

DEC has responsibility for fire management of around 26 million hectares of parks and forest in addition to a further 89 million hectares of unallocated crown land.

The AWU submissions are made in relation to the following observations and recommendations:

### **FERGUSON REPORT 2010 [1]**

#### **Observation 15.**

Maintaining the DEC fleet of tankers, bulldozers and low loaders is crucial to DEC's fire management and control capacity.

#### **Observation 16.**

A DEC fire management staff succession plan would minimise the loss of core fire management skills and experience in the future and provide a planned approach to development of prospective fire management staff.

#### **Observation 17.**

A staff recognition and reward framework for services to fire management should be considered for DEC fire staff.

#### **Are resources sufficient to undertake duties imposed by legislation?**

Amber Status (satisfactory –keep improving)

Comment: DEC operates in an environment of competition for scarce resources. The recently reviewed system for funding DEC suppression budget should be monitored to

ensure it does not lead to “cost based” operational decision making (versus ‘risk based’ operational decision making).

**Is there a succession plan in place for key personnel?**

Red Status (Unsatisfactory – Action required)

Comment: More work is required to develop a staff succession plan so that current generation staff can be replaced into the future.

**KEELTY REPORT into MARGARET RIVER BUSHFIRE 2011 [2]**

**Recommendation 3**

The Department of Environment and Conservation review its implementation of the findings of the Ferguson Review conducted in 2010.

**Recommendation 5**

The Department of Environment and Conservation explore human resources models that:

- Make succession planning a priority;
- Look at options for the attraction and retention of staff; and
- Review how the salary levels of staff matches the decision making required in major activities such as prescribed burns.

**Recommendation 6**

The Department of Environment and Conservation review its practices and procedures in the undertaking of prescribed burns so as to fully utilise the skills available to it in a seamless way including but not limited to:

- Volunteer bushfire brigades, especially in regard to use as a resource of local advice; and
- Staff of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia.

**AWU SUBMISSIONS**

**1. RESOURCES**

DEC fire fighting resources consist of an extensive fleet of fire fighting vehicles, equipment and heavy machinery. The personnel to operate that fleet is a key part of DEC’s fire fighting resource.

**Fire Fighting Fleet**

The AWU understands DEC has adequate fire fighting trucks and equipment to undertake its role but urge a review of further protective safety measures for the fleet and personnel in particular.

The Albany 1 Fire on 12 October 2012 resulted in serious injuries to four AWU personnel caught in a burnover whilst in their vehicles.

It is accepted that a vehicle offers the best chance of survival in a burnover and with DEC attending to over 600 bushfires each year, the danger of being caught remains ever present. It is timely to review the range of measures available to enhance the chances of survival if caught in such scenario. These include:

- Radiant heat shields
- Sprinkler/spray system on the vehicles.
- Deluge system of foam.
- Heat proofing of all cable and pipes that are critical to the vehicle's operation.
- Manual override of "fail code or limp mode" on new vehicles. This is a system designed to protect the engine and transmission by reducing power. It may however prevent a vehicle from escaping a dangerous situation at a critical time.

The AWU is not in a position to recommend any particular system at this stage but call for all options to be thoroughly investigated including drawing on the experience of other bushfire services across the country.

### **Fire-fighter Manning Numbers**

DEC's fire fighting resources and capability include a professional and dedicated workforce with extensive bushfire fighting experience. The AWU understands the fire model [3] requires 299 fire fit personnel in the Southwest Forest regions. Over recent years DEC has operated with substantially less personnel than the fire model. The numbers below are total manning numbers (including around 15 personnel not fit for fire duties).

Fire Model Manning numbers	299
Manning number 2010/11	264
Manning number 2011/12	267
Manning number 2012/13	286

Whilst still below the model number, the AWU welcomes the increase to the manning numbers for the upcoming fire season to 286. The AWU calls for the full manning number of minimum 299 fire fit to be restored over the next 2 fire seasons. Maintaining adequate manning numbers is also crucial to ensuring training and development can occur and allow for succession planning.

### **Volunteers**

The AWU reiterates the submissions [4] made to the Ferguson inquiry in relation to volunteer fire fighters. Volunteer can provide valuable assistance to DEC's efforts from time to time; however they are not and should not be seen as a substitute for a paid professional bush fire fighting service. Most volunteers have other employment and responsibilities. Volunteer fire fighters cannot be rostered or placed on standby for an immediate response. To an extent the efforts of volunteers have allowed Governments to abrogate their responsibility to adequately resource and staff DEC.

It is the AWU position that a positive relationship with local volunteer fire fighting organisations should be maintained and encouraged but this should not be allowed to impact on the requirement

to maintain adequate numbers of DEC fire fighters. Volunteers are not a substitute for the professional bush fire fighting capabilities of DEC.

## **2. SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Succession planning was identified by both the Ferguson and Keelty reports as being a crucial issue for DEC. Ferguson recognised the value of DEC staff at every level in delivering fire management and one which must not be underestimated. Keelty also recommended succession planning be a priority for DEC. It was recognised that the specialist skills are attained through many years of training, practice and development to attain a high level of competency. The retention of experienced fire management staff is crucial to maintaining DEC capability and is applicable to every role within DEC.

Retirements from DEC over the coming 5 – 10 years represent a further challenge to DEC fire capability with the potential loss of fire fighting experience.

AWU membership details give a good indication of the age distribution of DEC employees and support the need for urgent succession planning at all levels. The table below show some 39% of employees are aged 50 or over. Many of those employees may either retire or become unfit for fire duties potentially leaving DEC critically short of the necessary bushfire experience in the future

Many of those employees have an immense wealth of experience and knowledge, often 20 years or more, that need to be passed on to the new employees.

Age Group	% of AWU members
60 and over years	14
50 – 59 years	25
40 -49 years	29
30 – 39 years	15
20 – 29 years	14
Less than 20 years	3

Source : AWU WA Branch DEC membership

Succession planning requires a long term strategy to ensure those skills are passed on and will require the investment in adequate resources.

### **Training**

The key to succession planning is the opportunity to attain additional skills through training and development. The AWU submits this requires adequate personnel to allow training to occur. This

view is supported by the 2011 Integral Development Report [5] into succession planning for DEC Regional Services. That report proposed a number of solutions including the recognition that adequate numbers of full time staff are recruited to manage the range and complexity of the fire management area.

New AWU employees commence work with two experienced employees to ensure their safety and allow proper training to occur. Prescribed burning is recognised as one of the best way for new employees to gain fire experience in a controlled environment. Unfortunately most new employees are engaged as seasonal employees after the completion of the spring burning program. For many their first fire exposure is at a bushfire. The AWU has long called for an increased focus on fulltime employment rather than seasonal employment. The AWU understand approximately half of seasonal employees leave DEC within their first two seasons. The skills and experience gained in that time is then lost to DEC, forcing the recruitment and training of new employees. Providing fulltime employment will assist in the retention of staff as recommended in the Keelty Report.

Machine Operating at the fireline is a specialised skill that is crucial to successful fire suppression. However training opportunities for new operators are restricted and DEC has been increasingly reliant on external contractors which does not increase DEC skill base.

Prescribed burns also offer the most suitable opportunity for training on loaders and dozers. Time and resources need to be dedicated to ensure that enough employees are trained as competent machine operators.

Fire behaviour varies with the types of vegetation and experience in various types of forest should be encouraged by utilisation of staff from various Districts wherever possible.

Employees outside of the Forest regions often have limited exposure to fires but may be called upon to assist at major incidents in other Districts. The AWU recommends that those employees are more widely utilised and exposed to fires in different environments to gain broader experience and skills.

The level 1 Fire Fighting Course for all new employees gives an excellent introduction to aspects of fire fighting and includes an emergency drill in the event of burnover. However there is little or no further emergency drills or exercises after the initial training. The AWU recommends such training is routinely undertaken at each work centre to ensure high proficiency in dealing with an unexpected emergency such as burnover.

### **Recognition of Fire Duties**

Despite fire control forming the core duty of DEC employees represented by the AWU, there continues to be a reluctance to recognise the workgroup as “fire fighters”. It is a long held source of disenchantment that DEC bushfire fighters are highly regarded and recognised by external parties but continue to be referred to as “conservation employees” by their employer. In line with observation 17 of the Ferguson report, it appropriate to reconsider the position title and job descriptions with one that recognises the importance of the fire management functions.

### Classification Structure

The classification structure as it applies to AWU workgroup should also be reviewed in response to Ferguson observation 17. The classification structure has its origins in the construction and engineering industry not fire management. Despite piecemeal amendments over the years the structure does not adequately recognise employees with extensive bushfire experience and has only limited career path opportunities.

Approximately half of DEC bushfire fighters are at level 2.6 with no further advancement possible or recognition of years of bushfire experience (in particular competency in areas of the State with different fire behaviour). The AWU has previously sought a complete review of the classification structure including the creation of a "senior fire fighter" role.

The safe and effective response to fires is heavily dependent on the experience of personnel at the fire front who need to be constantly aware and respond to the changing conditions and fire behaviour. Additionally, the experienced employees also assume responsibility of the new crew members.

Generally the AWU classification structure is as follows:

Level 2.1 - 2.6	Crew members
Level 3.1 - 3.2	Machine Operator Overseer
Level 4.1 - 4.2	Senior Overseer (new position introduced in late 2011) Work Centre Coordinator
Level 5	District Coordinator, Specialists

By contrast, the classification structure of the Fire and Emergency Service Authority of Western Australia (FESA) provides a more structured career path with better opportunities for recognising skills and competencies. Below is the classification structure from clause 10 of the FESA Agreement 2011 [6]

Trainee Fire Fighter  
5<sup>th</sup> Class Fire Fighter  
4<sup>th</sup> Class Fire Fighter  
3<sup>rd</sup> Class Fire Fighter  
2<sup>nd</sup> Class Fire Fighter  
1<sup>st</sup> Class Fire Fighter  
Senior Fire Fighter  
Station Officer - Level 1  
Station Officer - Level 2  
Area Officer  
District Officer  
Superintendent

The AWU calls for a review of the fire services classification structure in response to Ferguson observation 17 and Keelty recommendation 5. A structure which rewards long term, experienced and competent employees will assist in achieving the recommendations of “the attraction and retention of staff” and “review how the salary levels of staff matches the decision making required in major activities such as prescribed burning activities”.

### **3. FUEL LOADS AND PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM**

The intensity of bushfire is directly related to the amount of fuel available to burn, weather conditions, forest types and terrain. The fuel load is the only factor that can be controlled by DEC and other fire fighting agencies. DEC has a prescribed burning target of 200,000 hectares a year for the southwest forest regions. The AWU is concerned that the target has only been reached once over the last 7 years leading to an accumulation of fuel in forest which will result in more severe bush fires.

This poses an increased risk to communities and all fire fighters. DEC annual report cite dry conditions for the reasons preventing the target being achieved with only limited opportunities to safely conduct the prescribed burn. The area burned reported in DEC annual reports over the past 7 shows a total shortfall of around 500,000 hectares over that period.

It is imperative that DEC has the resources and manpower to take full advantage of suitable burning conditions. It may also mean that the fire model of 299 fire fighters in the forest regions is no longer sufficient for the changing conditions and may need to be reviewed.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Prescribed Burn Achieved (Ha)</b>
2012 to date	6,500
2011/12	103,165
2010/11	137,000
2009/10	212,017
2008/09	151,818
2007/08	143,700
2006/07	138,600

*[source: DEC Annual Reports except 2012 to date][7]*

### **4. FUNDING**

The Ferguson report expressed concerns that cost pressures should not lead to “cost based” decision making as opposed to “risk based”. The AWU believes funding constraints have been responsible for the decline in the number of DEC fire fighters in previous years.

The Emergency Services Levy (ESL) currently provides funding for operating costs and equipment purchases for a range of organisations including FESA, volunteer fire and rescue services, local government bush fire brigades.



Despite being responsible for fire management on 26 million hectares of parks and forest and a further 89 million hectares of other land, DEC does not receive any funding from ESL.

The AWU recognises the proposals for increased full time DEC staffing and improvements to fire fighting vehicles will have a substantial cost. Given the importance of DEC fire management services to the community, the AWU proposes it is entirely appropriate for DEC to receive funding from ESL to maintain and enhance its fire fighting capabilities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Whilst the AWU submits that generally DEC has a solid fire management capability and preparedness for the coming fire season, steps need to be taken to ensure this is maintained. The AWU submits this includes the full implementation of the recommendations and observations of the Ferguson and Keelty Reports.

In particular the AWU recommends the following:

- Increase in fulltime manning numbers to allow training and the preservation of skills to occur at every level of DEC.
- Review of fire model numbers to ensure adequate resources for higher fuel loads and more extreme fire conditions.
- Review of fire fighting vehicles safety measures to enhance the level of protection for personnel.
- Review of the fire management classification structure and position descriptions.
- Ensure DEC is adequately funded including consideration of access to ESL funds.

## References

1. *A review of the ability of the Department of Environment and Conservation Western Australia to manage major fires* by Euan Ferguson, 6 September 2010.
2. *Appreciating the risk, report of the special inquiry into the November 2011 Margaret River bushfire* by M J Keelty, 27 January 2012.
3. *DEC Fire Model*
4. Submission by AWU to Ferguson Inquiry, June 2010.
5. *Department of Environment and Conservation, Succession Planning – regional Services 2011*, by Integral Development and Lynda Folan.
6. *Western Australian Fire Service Enterprise Bargaining Agreement 20011 (AG23 of 2011)*
7. *DEC Annual Reports for 2006/07, 2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10, 2010/11 and 2011/12.*