

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

THURSDAY 29TH NOVEMBER 2012

EYRE PENINSULA BUSHFIRES

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:56): I rise to support the motion of the member for Flinders that this house notes the extraordinary efforts of all emergency services personnel and all volunteers in their response to the bushfire near Sleaford Mere and Coomunga. I speak not only as a member of parliament, but also as a volunteer. I note the extraordinary efforts of volunteers all across the state, especially most recently in the Port Lincoln area. The town was certainly under threat. Some buildings did go down at Tulka but, in the main, as far as I understand, there were no serious injuries. Things went pretty well in relation to the firefighting effort. This takes some government activity, but the biggest effort here was by the volunteers, whether they were firefighters, ambulance personnel or SES personnel, and I note the contribution of the schoolchildren in helping set up the camps.

We have to ask ourselves why we keep getting these fires—and we will get them forever in this dry continent. As with the member for Morphett's amendment this morning in regard to the Native Vegetation (Road Verges) Amendment Bill 2012, we need to seriously look at how we handle native vegetation in this state, whether it is on private property or on government land. Certainly in the Port Lincoln area and in other areas of the state, this is absolutely essential. Too many times in recent years we have seen these fires flare up in scrub areas close to towns, especially in Port Lincoln, and I note that a lot of the native vegetation there was on private land.

We need to give people the opportunity to put in place decent breaks so that when these fires happen we can get far better control. We just cannot keep risking the lives of the people fighting these fires. It will happen again and again, as we have seen in history. Going back to 1983, we lost many people in the terrible Ash Wednesday fires. In recent years on the West Coast, sadly, quite a few lives were lost. We have seen terrible eventualities of fire in this country. Everyone needs to wake up, certainly everyone in this parliament. We need to amend laws to give people better rights, better access and better opportunities for clearing appropriate firebreaks—without going overboard—to make sure that people can manage fires.

There was a fire incident recently in Ngarkat in my electorate. The firefighters on the scene wanted to burn back, but they were all too concerned that they could be charged with something if it went pear-shaped. As the winds were about 90 kilometres per hour, they all knew that the fire would come out anyway, but the powers that be in the CFS decided that the break would be the Mallee Highway. Before the Mallee Highway and between Ngarkat and the Mallee Highway there is plenty of farmland, so that land was going to be sacrificed.

So CFS volunteers on the ground need to make sure they know the full aspects of their authority. They need to know, and it is quite legal if they need to light a burn-back. But people get jittery on the ground; they are frightened of legal consequences when these things happen. I think there needs to be some education to make sure people are on the right track and to make sure that people will not be under any legal responsibility if they do have to do a burn-back in these situations.

While we are debating about the volunteers over on the West Coast, I would like to digress a little and thank the volunteers right throughout the state recently with the lightning strikes, and especially around my area and further down the South-East. Our farm lost only a few acres, thankfully, due to prompt neighbours who turned up and put the fire out quickly and we only lost a few acres of wheat. They were all out fighting fires all around the place and they put in a magnificent effort, as people have done on the West Coast.

So, I certainly commend all of our volunteers, all our firefighters, all our ambulance people, the schoolchildren, as I mentioned earlier, and everyone who gets involved. I note that there has been better use of aircraft in recent years in fighting these outbreaks. I commend everyone for their involvement and I commend the member for Flinders for bringing this motion to the house.