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Natural Resources Committee: Annual Report 2013-14

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:45): I rise to make a contribution to the 99th report of the Natural Resources Committee, that is, the annual report July 2013 to June 2014. I note that, apart from going through the natural resources management boards' levy proposals right across the state, there were some fact-finding missions at Whyalla, issues around bushfire preparedness of properties in bushfire risk areas, discussion around prescribed burning and fire management in the Mount Lofty Ranges, Upper South-East dryland salinity and flood management, visits to the APY lands were proposed and there was debate about that, and the Eyre Peninsula water supply final report.

As I mentioned in this place before, I will declare an interest here. My wife, as an environmental scientist, was involved in the integrated natural resource management sector when it was first initiated in the state and I share some of her frustrations in the amount of reporting that has to be done by legislation. The sooner that the 2004 NRM Act can be amended to make it better for everyone, it will be better for the whole state.

NRM boards do a lot of good work, but there is frustration in the community that a lot of it is done around making sure that the reporting is up to speed with reports that have to be redone every five years or every three years or whatever the time may be. As the member for MacKillop indicated, there is a frustration across the state, and certainly throughout my electorate, with regard to vertebrate pests and weeds.

I think weed and roadside weed management is one that gets brought to my attention many times and it seems to be it is a 'take all' policy by many farmers just because of the size of their properties and the management around weeds on the roadsides. If they can get the end of a boom sprayer in there that is what they will use, so you basically take everything out. That is not good in all areas, especially if someone has some plant life or young trees that they want to establish, so then it becomes a bigger job to manage around these areas. It certainly is an issue that does get harder as there are fewer owners of properties, as farm sizes get bigger and there is less time for people to devote to these tasks, but I certainly note with interest the issue around prescribed burning.

I have spoken in this place many times around prescribed burning and the issues that have come with that. I think prescribed burning is a great tool to

keep down fuel loads if managed correctly, and this is the key point. If it is managed correctly it can be a great thing, but the problem we have seen over the years—and I raised this with minister Hunter from the other place during estimates—is that a lot of these prescribed burns, which are supposed to be controlled, get out of control.

Mr Treloar: Who is going to fight them?

Mr PEDERICK: Yes, and that is the other point. The member for Flinders raises a good point: who is going to fight them, especially on Eyre Peninsula? Because of the outrageous rises in the emergency services levy there are more and more brigades that are now saying they will not fight fire on government land, yet we had a minister in this place yesterday interject and say, 'Oh, we have got our own firefighters.' The minister needs to have a look because, last time I looked, firefighters who work for the department of environment—and I do not want to besmirch their name—knock off at 5 o'clock and the fire is still burning. That is when the volunteers really come into play, as they would have for the rest of the day anyway, if they are at the fire front.

We have certainly seen parks like Messent in the South-East or in the Gawler Ranges over on Eyre Peninsula where prescribed burns have got way out of control and overachieved. When I say 'overachieved', that is not a good thing. That means that instead of perhaps burning a third or a quarter of the area that the department wanted to burn, they have managed to burn two-thirds or three-quarters, so you would hardly call that a controlled burn.

In all seriousness, I think there is a real issue now with the emergency services levy debate around who will fight these fires. I would not blame CFS brigades for sitting on the edge of a park, whether it is on Eyre Peninsula around the Gawler Ranges or down around Messent near Keith or the Ngarkat park, or even for the few remnants that were not burnt in Billiatt in the last big fire in recent times. I would not blame both farmers and CFS for sitting in the adjoining land and fighting it as it got to them. I certainly acknowledge that breaks should be ploughed and everything should be done on the private property to prevent it from going further.

In regard to burning, it is about natural resources management but it is also heavily related to controlling park fires. There is a situation that I have mentioned in this place before. Nearly nine years ago there was a fire in the Ngarkat park and it was heading towards the grazing and farming land to the north of the park. This was going to come out at around 100 km/h, if not more, so the people of the fire front said, 'We need to back-burn because it is going to come out and hit us anyway.'

It seemed that no-one had the gumption or the courage to light the fire or they did not get the instruction from further up because, instead of doing a back-burn, which would have been highly sensible because that part of the park was going to burn anyway, the defence line was made at the Mallee Highway. If you have a high wind, a highway is not going to stop a fire, not by any means, and that is not to think about the thousands of acres of land that are going to be burnt before it gets to there and the risk to farmers' built assets—homes, sheds, etc.

Guess what happened? That afternoon, the fire came out and, thankfully, it was managed quite well before it burnt too much pasture land. There does need to be some sense around prescribed burning. It does need to be controlled and people do need to understand that they are covered by at least two acts of legislation if they do a burn-back during a fire period to save other property. I think this is a problem that has not been well orchestrated throughout the community, whether it is in volunteer ranks or elsewhere, because people are spooked by the Native Vegetation Council. I think they have a lot to answer for in this, because we need to protect people's livelihoods and their homes.

In saying that, I commend the report. I think there is endless work the Natural Resources Committee can be involved in. Certainly, in recent times, they have been involved in my electorate with issues around the River Murray and I commend the work that was done there. The Presiding Member of the committee always makes sure that local members are involved and I appreciate that every time. It is a great functioning committee and, as we see water flows slowing down into the River Murray at the moment, we need to keep our eye on that and make sure that, into the future, all the ideals of the Murray-Darling Basin Plan are implemented not just for the sake of this generation but for future generations through this state.

So, I do commend the work of the Natural Resources Committee. I know there is some debate about levy rates, and that will always go on—especially the ones that get proposed above CPI. I note that in regard to natural resources management there is also plenty of room for improvement on the ground around the state on how we manage our resources.