

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

THURSDAY 10TH MARCH 2016

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT (MISCELLANEOUS) AMENDMENT BILL

Second Reading

Adjourned debate on second reading.

(Continued from 11 February 2016.)

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:58): I rise to support the Emergency Management (Miscellaneous) Amendment Bill 2016. This bill was introduced into this place on 11 February by the Premier. Its focus is to provide the legislative framework for the management of emergencies here in South Australia. It seeks to ensure that our state has the capability to properly manage any state emergency by articulating the key elements of the state emergency management arrangements, including roles and responsibilities under those arrangements. What the bill seeks to do is:

1. clarify the authority of the State Emergency Management Plan;
2. enable the efficient operations of the State Emergency Management Committee;
3. ensure the emergency management arrangements are clearly defined;
4. provide for protection from liability, and I think that is vitally important;
5. provide objects and principles to address clarity on role and function;
6. clarify powers that may be exercised in relation to disconnection of water and drainage; and
7. clarify various emergency management definitions.

This bill has come about because of a legislative review which was undertaken by the State Emergency Management Plan and formulates the role of hazard leaders and zone emergency management committees within the structure of South Australian emergency management arrangements. The Local Government Association have been consulted. The concerns they initially had with the bill regarding the acknowledgement of their role have been addressed, and they have no concerns with the current bill.

I am also pleased that, as part of this bill, it is for the government to absolutely ensure protection from liability for those people who act in good faith in accordance with the act. The bill will extend appropriate coverage of individuals executing directions in accordance with the State Emergency Management Plan, and this option will allow any group of persons carrying out directions or requirements issued under either the act or the State Emergency Management Plan to be provided with appropriate protection.

I think, certainly in relation to this liability protection, and I have spoken of it several times in this place, it is absolutely necessary that people are aware of the protections they have, especially when they are out fighting fires and need to address local issues on the ground, at the fire front, and make the right decisions when the fire is in progress. I have indicated before that there was a poor decision made somewhere up the chain when a back-burn was not done in Ngarkat not that many years ago and a fire came out towards Parrakie and Parilla. If the burn-back had been lit that Sunday morning, it would have pulled that fire up before it reached the farming land.

That is the type of decision that we need made on the ground by local commanders. They could be in touch by radio and mobile phone at times, depending on the coverage, to advise what they are doing, but we need people to take appropriate, direct action. I think we live too much in a world where people are so concerned about what the consequences are. The consequences of not doing that burn-back that day were that many hundreds of acres were burnt out, and we had farmers on ploughs trying to pull it up, and then people out on the land trying to stop the fire from getting further.

We have to make sure that the individuals on the ground are covered, whether or not they are in a farm firefighting unit. We cannot operate in our emergency situations without those farm firefighting units. I think of the recent fire out in Billiatt towards Lameroo, where there were many ploughs run into the ground and many utes driven to extinction in trying to keep ahead of the blaze that essentially burnt out very close to 100 per cent of Billiatt Conservation Park.

This is not to detract from our formal emergency services like the Country Fire Service, of which I am a member as are many members in this place as well, but it is all a combination. As the member for Light said, our air assets are vital to firefighting. We have seen so many times that, when the air assets have been used appropriately, we get great results.

The air assets have better direction. I think the direction generally used to be to protect only assets, but now I believe they will be sent to many more fire fronts to try to contain the blaze before it gets anywhere near assets, which is a much better role. I have spoken many times in here of the role that Aerotech and the McCabe family and others who join them play in these programs of fire suppression.

You only have to look at fires like Sampson Flat, Pinery or smaller fires. I have certainly been involved in a lot of firefighting; I have done plenty of burn-backs. We have had to put out accidental fires, and you soon get to learn the nature of the beast. One thing you do learn very quickly is that it can be very unpredictable sometimes, and you need to get those air assets in, hit it hard and knock it out, then get in the ground crews, whether they are CFS trucks or farmers with their own private vehicles, who can do the clean-up and do a great job.

We do need to be absolutely certain and not make excuses when, I believe, sometimes poor decisions are made. I think poor decisions were made in relation to Cherryville. For the next few days after that event, the government was making excuses about why the planes did not go up: 'Oh, it wouldn't work.'

Obviously the edict was drilled down through the MFS and CFS, who said, 'Oh, no, it was just not going to happen,' for whatever reasons.

I cannot remember the myriad of reasons now; there was a range of reasons why the planes would not have worked. I diverge well away from that. I think the planes should have gone up and, if they had, I do not think we would have lost anywhere near the amount of scrub and farmland and dwellings that were lost in that fire. I believe it was firmly the government's problem in regard to the fact that they would have had to spend money to get those planes back out of contract and into firefighting mode at the end of the season. I believe it would have taken less than an hour to convert back those planes that had been converted for crop-spraying or for other jobs.

I know in relation to the Wangary fire, which was right near the member for Flinders' properties over on the West Coast, some decisions were made where some private operators did not take off because of the contractual arrangements. I would like to think that there are better plans in place so that, if for whatever reason the contracted planes cannot be there at that minute, and if there is the option for private contractors to go up, there can be arrangements in place so that if the plane is available and is loaded with water and gel, they can do the job.

And they do a great job. I heard only the other day about the special fire equipment that is based at Keith for fighting in the parks. One of the blokes operating it down at, I think, Messent Park needed a fair few loads of gel dropped on him and, in the end, he could not see out of the machine because he had so much gel over the tractor. And it protected him, which is the role of the planes, and that is fantastic.

In a smaller fire we had at Coomandook several years ago, which was nowhere near the size of Pinery or Sampson Flat, a friend of mine and his family for whatever reason did not get out quickly enough. They went into the bathroom and filled the bath with water and, luckily for them, when it got pretty hot outside, a plane came over the top and dropped a load of gel on the house and that fixed that. They do great work. I think, especially in relation to Cherryville, we just cannot be nitpicking about what these planes cost. They save many lives. It is great to think of the number of lives they have saved.

They have also saved so many assets. One issue in relation to firefighting is that people cannot get into their homes if they have left or have been away for the day because they cannot get past the police roadblocks. I can understand that the police do not want to have loss of life, but I think there needs to be some flexibility around that where people are caught by accident. I was up around Hamley Bridge around sections of the Pinery fire—

Dr McFetridge interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: I'm on a roll, Dunks; don't tell me—with the Natural Resources Committee. We heard some interesting stories. I think it was the Bubner property where the wife actually made what would have been a heartbreaking phone call to her husband, who was playing bowls, and said, 'I think my time has come,' because the car would not start and she could not leave. It was

probably a blessing that the car did not start because she was in the house when the fire went over the top. She managed to get out and use buckets of rainwater to put the fire out because the other pipes had melted. I am sure John Bubner could not have had a better sight than to see his wife putting the fire out when he got there.

There is also another story that came out of there about Peter Angus and his family. You hear these almost bizarre stories. His father was doing such a great job in rounding up stock. This is one of the harder hit areas up past Mallala. It is a lot sandier country. The country is just drifting. There is nothing you can do; there is no management. You cannot hit it with a cultivator or rough it up, as they have in some of the heavier country, because it is just blowing away anyway.

Peter was not at the farm. His father was doing something with fighting the fire and Peter got in touch with him on the phone and said, 'Well, don't you think we ought to save the stud stock?' 'Oh, that would be an idea.' So, he rounds them up, gets them out of the path of the fire and gets them into the yards. Then he was trying to save some of the commercial sheep. The fire was essentially following him down the roadway and eventually he had to cut and run himself and get out of there.

The fascinating thing is that Peter Angus ran into his uncle by chance in Mallala (I think); it was outside away from the farm. Peter was just in a vehicle, but his uncle had a tank of water on the back of a ute. Somehow he managed to get back into the fire zone and put out his neighbour's house and then got to his house. We saw the damage where the fire had actually taken out the hessian-type pergola area on the side of the house and had started burning the woodwork up against the stonework; it was that close. He said that if he had not run into his uncle and had not managed to get back there, they would have lost their house.

There are other stories of very historic homes that have been lost because people were not there. I know it is a matter of risk and a matter of what you think you can manage, but I have had reports from people in the hills who have said that if you are going to stand and fight, sometimes that is the best method. You just stay inside, wait until it goes over the top and then put it out, but that takes a bit of courage and I certainly would not have my family on board; I would tell them to go and I would stay there and wear the consequences. Something that needs to be weighed up is letting people back in and how we manage that. There needs to be a bigger discussion about that because I do acknowledge the risks and what could happen in the confusion, but we do lose a lot of assets.

I would like to acknowledge all of our emergency services people, whether they be paid or volunteers. They do such a great job. This bill is about putting in a management committee to be in charge of a state management plan for these major events so that there can be a coordinated response, and not just the response after an event has happened, but the mitigation and planning for what could happen into the future.

As the member for Light indicated, with the upgraded farming methods we have had for over 20 years and things like no-till, where you can grow a pretty handy crop on not much rain, you probably have what is essentially a five tonne to a hectare stubble. You do not get much rain, so then you grow a two tonne to the hectare crop, but you have all this fuel there, and that is exactly what happened at Pinery. It was like the perfect storm. Whether the crops had been reaped or not, there was still such a huge fuel load and away it went.

Since then there has been some discussion about whether we have one of those big planes that can suck up straight out of the sea and that kind of thing for fighting fire. That is something that needs to be addressed, but, as I said, we cannot take it away from the air elements we have now. Elvis and all of the operators like Aerotech that are in the air do a fantastic job. Perhaps it might mean that more of those type of planes need to be contracted for that quick hit at the fire front, that quick hit to save people who are in dire straits, especially in their own homes, and other associated incidents.

I would certainly support this bill. I hope we get the right outcome and let us hope we do not have to invoke it too many times into the future.