

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES (BUSHFIRES COMMITTEE) AMENDMENT BILL

30 April 2009

Adjourned debate on second reading.

(Continued from 5 March 2009. Page 1865.)

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:07): I also rise to support the member for Davenport's motion to elect a standing committee from this place after the next election. I think it is very wise that he has portrayed it in that light.

We have to be very aware of the threat of fire. My own house has been at risk. However, it is on a farm, and we surrounded it not only with CFS units but also farm units and we managed to save it. It was 10.30 in the morning on a 45° day, and a fire was accidentally lit in a 14 bag per acre (or almost three tonne per hectare) wheat crop. If members have never seen a fire burn through a wheat crop, it is something to see, especially with a bit of wind behind it. We tried to catch it before it reached any native vegetation on our property but we could not get to the front in time.

Fire management is absolutely essential in this state. We have seen what has happened interstate recently. There was obviously a major problem with respect to notifying people, but there is a major problem with educating people in a broader sense about the risks and threats, especially in relation to where they live. If you live on the side of a hill, fires race uphill. I certainly acknowledge where the member for Davenport has come from in putting forward this motion. I have relatives who live at Blackwood and, if we experience anything like the fires in Victoria, God help them all.

Where I live on the Dukes Highway, anyone who travels through there (I know the Hon. Bernard Finnigan from the other place does) would know that you can go along a small section (about 25 kilometres) of road between Coomandook and Coonalpyn. A lightning strike lit up the scrub next to my property three years ago, and other fires have started from wheel bearing failure on trucks or trailers on the Dukes Highway. I am a member of the Coomandook CFS and, to their credit, my CFS colleagues get out there every time this happens and deal with it.

We must also acknowledge the contribution of farmers and their own units, and I hope that how farmers can fight fires does not get tied down in bureaucracy. I know there is talk about compensation for this and that. I have seen farmers' units get to a fire, because they are right there, and put out the main blast even before the CFS can get there. So, there has to be proper synchronicity between the CFS and farm units. After I had the fire on my own property 10 years ago I upgraded from an 800 litre firefighting unit to 4,600 litres and, I tell you what: you can put out some fire with that.

Mr Pengilly: Especially if the pump starts.

Mr PEDERICK: Yes; as the member for Finnis said, especially if the pump starts. I must admit, I have a very good little Honda pump on that unit. I remember that fire. I was a candidate and I was in my campaign office in Murray Bridge (so, it was in February three years ago), and it was all happening. I got Hayden, the man who leases my place, on the phone and he hooked up an articulated tractor and we had quite a unit, not only for access but also for hitting the front of the fire. The roadside trees on the Dukes Highway were blowing flames 25 metres into the air, and it was something to fight. The aircraft were flying straight down the highway putting it out, and semi-trailers turned around and got out of there because they could not see for the smoke and ash.

I certainly think that we should establish a standing committee on bushfires. As I indicated earlier, we have seen the carnage that happened in Victoria and we should never underestimate the threat of fire. It was not until we had the major event on Kangaroo Island that the government believed it needed to have an Elvis style air-crane in the state. It looked at bringing one in from Melbourne when we need it, but that is just too far away.

I read in the press recently that a 747 quick-loading fire tanker will be trialled. I know Bob McCabe and his team at Aerotech and other crop-duster pilots who are contracted. I

know that Bob is contracted to the CFS, and there are other pilots around the state who have the ability to get off the ground quickly and get up there and fight fires.

However, in saying that, I also acknowledge the issues we had with the Port Lincoln fire, where a crop-dusting pilot who wanted to get off the ground became tied up in the bureaucracy, and he could have done a lot of work. I think we have to make sure that these people can act, and worry about the bureaucracy later. That is the biggest problem with fighting fire: the bureaucracy gets in the way and people become fearful of the consequences.

In the same period when my place burnt there was a fire at Ngarkat, which burnt for about eight or nine days. If only we had personnel—and I acknowledge that we had tired personnel on the Lameroo side of that fire. New South Wales units were brought in, but those people were used to fighting fire on hard ground and were getting bogged on the sandy tracks and paddocks and on the edge of the park. Essentially, we were better off without them, because we had to go in and rescue their vehicles.

The issue was whether we could have back-burned that morning, but people were wondering where they fitted in with the Native Vegetation Act and that sort of thing. They did not realise that, if they really needed to, they could have overridden that act as long as they went through the chain of command. It needed to come from the fire ground, because 90 kilometre winds were forecast, and that fire ripped out of the Ngarkat Conservation Park. The reserve line was the Lameroo road; the Mallee Highway. I have seen a few fires and I have seen 90 kilometre an hour winds: a highway was never going to stop that fire, let alone save the thousands of acres that would be sacrificed before it got out of there. We need sensible native vegetation management, and not just in the parks. More work has been done in recent years, but I ask whether it is enough. We need firebreaks of a decent width—firebreaks of at least 60 metres around the edge of national parks. Ngarkat Conservation Park—

Mr Pengilly: Six kilometres, I reckon.

Mr PEDERICK: Six kilometres. Ngarkat is like a magnet for lightning strikes. It is a natural event, and up it goes. The issue is that, when it does burn a fence line with farm land next to it, there is no guarantee at all that the farmers will get any compensation for fixing that fence. It is up to the government's discretion, so I think that rules it out. A property owner at Parrakie has a six-foot high fence, which is basically vermin proof, with netting on the bottom and cyclone and barbed wire on top of that. It costs probably \$10,000 to \$20,000 a kilometre to erect, and he had quite a few kilometres of that fence burnt.

I want to talk about what happened on Kangaroo Island. I went over there a week after those fires with a mop-up team from the Murraylands Strike Force, and those fires affected a massive amount of Kangaroo Island, as the member for Finnis has rightly acknowledged. There was a terrible loss of life with that young lad, yet we still get tied up in the bureaucracy. Many people were keen to help out on Kangaroo Island. They flew in from interstate. As to my team—which I did not lead, by the way—we were fine on the Saturday; we went over there for a weekend and put out quite a few spot burns around Vivonne Bay, but the next day we got turned back three times and, in the end, the crew just got cranky. When we were given the option to stay or go, because a plane was waiting to bring us back to Adelaide, they just said, 'Let's go. There is no direction.'

I acknowledge that it is very hard to sort out the amount of men and vehicles, but it has to get better because the numbers of CFS people has declined in recent years. We certainly need them on the ground; we do not want to put people off. These were people who were more than happy to give up their weekends (longer, in some cases) to go over there and do their bit for their fellow man, as I saw when I had my own fire three years ago. People from all over the South-East, including Strathalbyn, were only too happy to assist.

With those few words, we have to make sure that we do not put off our volunteers. We need to get rid of the inane bureaucracy that ties everything up and get on with the job, because we have put off our volunteers and we do not have a fighting force. I commend the bill.