

FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES (REVIEW) AMENDMENT BILL

Adjourned debate on second reading.

(Continued from 15 July 2009. Page 3500.)

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (12:04): I, too, rise to support the bill. This is certainly a step forward, but we have to see that the planning process actually goes through to realities on the ground especially when it hits the fan, so to speak, and volunteers are right at the forefront of fighting fires.

I note that in the material provided to us by the government it looks like there has been consultation in regard to the Deputy Coroner's recommendations from the Wangary bushfire, recommendations from the ministerial review of bushfire management in South Australia and recommendations from the review of the Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005 which has brought us to where we are today.

The government has indicated that external consultation took place through the Local Government Association, the CFS Volunteers Association, the SES Volunteers Association and the United Firefighters Union. The South Australian Farmers Federation was part of that consultation process, and it also involved the Native Vegetation Council. The government also indicated that there has been consultation throughout the government departments.

The government has indicated that the act is to be reworded to reinforce the role of the commission, and this will include the role of the commission and the governance, accountability, strategic and policy aspects of the emergency services sector. It is to be noted from the briefings that the emergency management role of SAFECOM is to be incorporated into the functions and powers of the commission. The role of the board will be more focused on strategic responsibilities for the whole sector and less concerned with the day-to-day administration of the commission.

In regard to the constitution of the board—and I note that our side of the house will be moving an amendment in line with this—the board will be reconstituted and the voting members will include the Chief Executive of SAFECOM, Chief Officer of the MFS, Chief Officer of the SES and Chief Officer of the CFS. There will be a representative from the CFS Volunteers Association, the SES Volunteers Association, one nominated by the United Firefighters Union and two ministerial appointments involving experience in commerce, economics, finance, accounting, law or public administration.

It is interesting to note that there is not already on that board someone from the South Australian Farmers Federation. Given the vast area of land in this state owned by farmers, I think that would be most appropriate, but I do note that the Hon. Graham Gunn will be moving an amendment to that end. Part of the new bill advises of the disbanding of the advisory board through the deletion of this section in the act, and I note that the Chief Executive must submit a workforce plan to the commission on an annual basis.

With regard to fire management, the powers to inspect and undertake mitigation activities will be streamlined and made consistent throughout the act for both the fire services and local government fire prevention officers. It has already been recorded in this place that the current three-tiered bushfire committee structure will come down to a two-tiered structure and, hopefully, that will reduce some of the bureaucracy and there will be a statewide bushfire coordination committee with the power to recommend to the Governor the establishment of bushfire management areas with respective committees for those areas.

There will be flexibility in the amount of resources that a council can ascribe to the risk factor of fire in its district. Urban areas will have bushfire risk areas to be established following consultation with the MFS and CFS chief officers, any minister whom the emergency services minister deems has a significant interest in the matter and the Local Government Association.

In terms of the bushfire management framework, essentially there will be a state bushfire coordination committee, and that will go down through the relevant bushfire management committees, which will then flow through to local government bushfire management, the

Department for Environment and Heritage, forestry bushfire management, and SA Water bushfire management, through to the fire prevention officers.

The interim report on the Victorian bushfires has been published, and what terrible fires they were. I think that part of the problem with what happened in Victoria is that some people make lifestyle choices, but then they do not understand the environment in which they are living. It is not until you experience the horror of what happened in February this year that people fully understand the impact of living in some of these beautiful areas, and they are beautiful areas. But when you lose over 200 people you realise that fire management is not as it should be; or, even more so, the preparation and mitigation activities that are necessary in these types of areas are not in place.

I note in regard to the bill the duty to prevent fires. It addresses owners of private land and the obligations they have in protecting their land by having firebreaks and taking other relevant action in the case of a fire. There is also similar legislation in regard to council-owned land. I note with real interest that crown land also comes under this measure.

I will make some comments about crown land. The member for Goyder made some comments about this earlier. There is a real problem in seats such as mine, Hammond, and the seat of MacKillop in relation to Ngarkat National Park. It is generally a huge park of mallee; that is, where it has not been burnt. Ngarkat seems to be a magnet for lightning strikes. I think the last big one was about four years ago. Even from my place at Coomandook—we are not that far from Ngarkat—we can see the red glow in the sky, when you know that thousands of hectares are on fire.

I go back to what happened almost four years ago, and the fact that this fire was burning towards the Mallee Highway. In fact, it could have put the town of Lameroo at risk. Essentially, the CFS fallback line was the Mallee Highway. From my experience at that very same time, because I had a fire across the road from a property which was lit by lightning in the scrub, I can assure members that a highway is barely a fire break for any major bushfire. It just does not happen, and especially when temperatures are around 45°.

With respect to park management and the Department for Environment and Heritage—and it is indicated in the legislation—the government must take control of its land; and it must have adequate firebreaks, whether that is 20 or 30 metres, or even more, around the edge of the park. We need to make sure that the obligations are carried out by everyone, as they should be, under this legislation. Also, in saying that, private landholders must put in their firebreaks. However, I am afraid that if a private landholder abutting a park has scrub right up to his fence line, or within a few metres, he does not have much of a show.

During the government briefing, the Chief Officer of the CFS indicated that there will be some more flexibility as to what clearances of trees and scrub can be around homes, and I hope that comes to fruition. I do not think you can have a standard amount of clearing—not in the vast diversity of the way people live in this state.

I note the comments from the member for Fisher that we should not have people living in these high fire risk areas, but the problem is that they are already there, well up into the Hills in Blackwood, Belair and right across the hills face zone. Unless you are going to shut down those suburbs, we need to manage them properly and make sure that people have the appropriate clearances. Quite frankly, if there is a big fire up in that area, I believe it will be a death trap because there is so much growth up there. We need to make sure that people have flexibility, that they take notice of what they need to do around their properties and get on with it.

I am not just referring to private land but also to council land because sometimes some of that land gets left; this also relates to crown land, and that is one of the sticking points. It is about working with the lifestyle choice that some people have made, but they have to understand the environment they are living in and that they must have proper clearance. They cannot have trees overhanging their house or it becomes an absolute death trap. Proper clearance management has to be employed, otherwise we will see a massive death toll from fires in these areas.

I have already mentioned the Liberals' amendment to put a South Australian Farmers Federation member on the board and I have been talking about the responsibilities of

government. There has also been some talk about slow burns and managed burns, and I think this is a program that should be kept up and there probably should be more of it in our parks. I know that, at times, the government and the services overachieve; sometimes it does not get out of the park. It probably should be applauded. During the fire several years ago in Messent near Keith I think they were going to burn 25 per cent of the park and I think they got 75 per cent—great result!

Mr Venning: That's probably controversial.

Mr PEDERICK: No; we have to get some reality into the world. Some of these fires that have gone up in recent times have got over 60 years' worth of undergrowth—dry sticks and twigs that have built up—and, when it takes off, it really takes off. Sections of the parks through Victoria that abut Ngarkat would not have been burnt for that time. There has to be some common sense. We are not talking about rabid clearing and burning. It has happened for thousands of years: lightning strikes have burnt out thousands of hectares of this country. We need realistic management.

Also, it has to be indicated to firefighters on the ground that they have protection, and the Chief Officer indicated that three acts can come into play to protect firefighters. I remember that fire that came out of Ngarkat towards Lameroo. People indicated that they needed to do a back-burn because this fire was going to come out at 90 km/h. Between the communications, that never happened and that fire did come out. People were concerned about who was liable, and it burnt quite a few acres.

It also burnt a lot of fencing, and this is where the trouble starts with the government. It needs to take control over the fact that it is written into the Crown Lands Act only that the government may assist with the repair of fencing. I know one man who had his fence burnt who built a two metre high fence, and it does a great job; it keeps everything out. He has veldt grass and feed growing right up to the fence, and it keeps the rabbits, kangaroos and emus out of his property, which should stay in the government parklands.

I applaud our volunteers in this state and right throughout this country. They do a fantastic job. I remember going to Kangaroo Island (which is in the electorate of the member for Finniss) and doing a bit of work there with a crew from the Mallee. It was great to see so many people there helping out. Victoria came on board, and there were literally hundreds of fire trucks around the place. A lot of them did not go back in anywhere near the condition in which they landed on the island, but they did the job well. The only problem is that, as with everything, sometimes bureaucracy gets in the way. However, I guess when you are managing that size force sometimes these things happen. At the end of the day, it showed that people are committed to getting these fires under control.

I note that recently my own brigade at Coomandook received a new fire truck, which I think was built in New South Wales. I am just glad that it was not built in Queensland, for a whole lot of reasons, which I have brought up in this place before. Some trucks that came from Queensland had so many faults it was not funny. I know that there are sometimes difficulties when people are negotiating contracts, but there is certainly a very good manufacturer and repairer of fire trucks in Murray Bridge.

I indicate that I support the bill. People need to be aware that fires can start anywhere. They can be caused by lightning strikes or, when you live right next to a major highway as I do, fires can be started by wheel bearings on trucks and trailers; they let go and next thing you have a major fire. I remember ringing people down our way when I was in Murray Bridge one day and I said, 'Where is that fire?' They had not looked out to the south-east of their property and did not even know there was a fire coming at them. So, people need to be aware.

With respect to this bill, people have talked about the fact that radio stations will have to make announcements. However, I stress that these announcements must be accurate. I recall the big fire at Coomandook almost four years ago. The wife of the bloke who leases my property was out on the back road watching the gate because there was stock in the paddock, and her father from Adelaide rang and said, 'What are you doing?' She said, 'I'm just watching the gate, letting people in and out.' He said, 'I've just heard on the radio that they've evacuated Coomandook.' She said, 'Well, they'd better not, because I'm going in to the shop to get some milk shortly.' I can assure members that the fire was very close to Coomandook. I guess it is

better to have a slightly inaccurate report, but it does create some panic amongst friends and family of people who are experiencing a fire.

In general, we need to have far better management; right across Ash Wednesday, Wangary and the fires in Victoria, we have lost far too many people. A friend's father was found in a sheep trough at Coonalpyn in 1983. Thankfully, he survived that event, but I think it shortened his life quite a bit. At least he had the sense, when he got caught out ploughing a break, to jump into a trough. In general, this side of the house supports the bill, but I note that we will be moving some amendments.