

Native Vegetation Council – March 8, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): I rise to address some issues from the member for Fisher. I think farming practices have certainly improved, especially in the latter years and especially in confronting drought. I address this issue over native vegetation, in support of the member for Finnis, as it affects Kangaroo Island, because it does affect the whole state. There has been good land in the past that has been legally cleared but, because the farmer did not keep up, there has been regrowth. It is good heavy red ground suitable for farming, with no problems of drift, but, due to the way the situation is, that land cannot be opened up again. I think that is a terrible thing to happen, as I speak here today.

In saying that, I also indicate that we need to leave cover on sandhills, we need to have cover along fence lines, so long as it is managed properly, and farmers recognise that, especially in light of the recent droughts of 2002 and the current one we are experiencing. With respect to these fencing issues, some of our farmers are almost in terror of the Native Vegetation Council and the Department of Environment and Heritage when it comes to touching a tree and whether they can legally replace a fence.

An honourable member interjecting: Intimidated.

Mr PEDERICK: Yes; absolutely intimidated. They are frightened that they can remove only a metre of scrub line to replace a fence. Anyone who has had anything to do with fencing knows that you have to get in there with tractors and post-hole diggers, etc., to do the job properly. Older members who were involved in clearing country years ago and who have participated in tree planting programs know full well the great resource that trees in the right place can be for a farming operation. However, people need to be able to run their operations without the fear that they will be convicted or penalised just because they replace an old fence that is amongst trees.

I wish to reflect upon fire issues, especially around parks like Ngarkat National Park, Flinders Chase on Kangaroo Island and Messent further down the South-East. My electorate covers about half of the Ngarkat National Park, which comprises quite a few thousand hundred hectares of land, and it is regularly on fire with lightening strikes—it seems to attract lightening strikes—but there never seems to be enough fire break work done around the edge of this park. If you talk to the department, it says that it does not want to run the big scrub roller too wide, it does not want to chain anything down, and fire breaks are the farmers' responsibility.

If farmers all ran with that attitude, we would basically be sued right off the land. It is just outrageous that there cannot be a 60-metre break, just chained, around the edge. I realise rolling a decent break around a park would be too expensive, but if it was chained, so you took that crowning effect out of a fire, it would assist the CFS crews on the edge of the fire. The CFS crews do a great job; they always sit outside a scrub fire because it is sensible. Why risk your life and get trapped in there when you can just sit out on the edge and put it out? However, without adequate breaks it just does not happen. The issue with this is that, as soon as a fire does break out, especially if it is intense because it does not have a decent break, and it is a crowning fire, it just takes off and roars through the farmland.

On about the weekend of 20 to 22 January last year, we had a fire in Ngarkat. The forecast for the Sunday of that weekend was for 90 knot winds which would force the fire north, out on to the farmland. The local farmers were willing—and one of them especially said, 'Look, I can send my 10 year old boy out with a firelighter, we can do a burn-back and save everything from being caught.' Sure, the scrub was going to go but, guess what? They were too concerned about contravening DEH regulations, the fire

came through, tore up the area they were to back-burn, and the fire spread to hundreds if not thousands of acres of Mallee country. One thing we have to remember here is that the second fall-back line for the CFS that day was the Mallee Highway. Friday was about 45 degrees—and I was dealing with a fire on my own property—but no highway was going to stop a fire of that intensity, especially with high temperatures forecast for the whole weekend.

The CFS is a great organisation; I am a member, and many members here are too. I have had it on authority that the CFS can override the DEH regulations on burn-back and that sort of thing. I think there needs to be more clarification on this, an education program, and for CFS members to have the authority to do burn-backs when it is essential, because I know next time it will happen. Farmers lose their fencing and they do not get any acknowledgment from the government on whether it will be paid for or not. I know that since then some agreements have been reached. A farmer who built six foot high fences to keep vermin out has not, I believe to this day, been compensated adequately. In saying that, farmers still need to have adequate protection on their side of the fence. I think more work needs to be done around national parks, and we need more cool burns. Regarding one cool burn at Messent, I think about 25 per cent of it was to be burnt. They had a good burn all right; the troops ended up burning about 75 per cent, so that saved two more trips down there.

Fire is a natural thing. People say parks like Ngarkat have had the guts burned out of it. Someone said that to me on the radio one day when that issue was being discussed. I am well aware of it; I farmed right next to it at a lease property at Tintinara. The issue of scrub fires is huge. The biggest pity is that for some reason, when there is a fire in scrub—and we had another one early this year down our way, and the fires need hitting the next morning to kill them off—the powers that be do not wish to spend the money to send planes in because it is not asset protection, it is just scrub. I can tell members that when those fires come out of the scrub, then it is asset protection, and it hits the fan, so to speak. So, we need to address this huge issue. Some people need to get out of their bureaucratic boxes, come out, have a good drive around and see what goes on in the real world.