

FIRE HYDRANTS, COUNTRY AREAS - 28 February 2008

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:32): I move: *That this house calls on the state government to commit to implementing: (a) a fire hydrant identification system for country areas in this state; and (b) a regular program of operational maintenance checks on fire hydrants throughout this state.*

Since I first came into this place nearly two years ago, the issue of the lack of a thorough maintenance program for fireplugs in country areas has been one of my most constant concerns.

Before I go on to explain the extent and seriousness of the problem, I must make two important points. First, I believe that, given the constraints within which they operate, the CFS does a fantastic job in dealing with fires and bushfires in country areas.

Secondly, I wish to state my disappointment with what I suspect was a deliberate lack of assistance by SA Water staff in refusing my initial request for historical information on this subject, and in not returning subsequent information. This made my task in preparing this motion much more difficult than it needed to be, and I stress that I do not believe I was asking for any sensitive or confidential information.

I acknowledge that in mid-2007 the government announced a program to improve the identification of, and access to, fireplugs in regional townships—and note the reference to regional townships. This was an important step in assisting firefighters to perform their often dangerous and at times life-saving roles efficiently and effectively.

However, as far as the country is concerned, the program goes only halfway to ensuring maximum effectiveness.

For one thing, many of the fireplugs around country South Australia are not in the townships, and they are the ones that are most often overgrown or inaccessible. There was no mention of these more remote fireplugs in the minister's letter to me of 27 November 2007 in response to my request for a thorough maintenance program.

Moreover, my motion today calls on the government to finish the job properly and ensure that all fireplugs are operable as well as accessible. In other words, it is all very well to know where the fire engine is parked and have the keys, but if it does not start when you need it, it is not much use to you.

I have repeatedly raised this matter in this place, and repeatedly it has been ignored. I first raised it in June 2006, when I described in some detail a personal experience I had as a CFS volunteer with the local brigade at Coomandook.

In January that year I attended a fire so large that brigades were called in from all over South Australia—from places like Lucindale and Clayton. Well trained and with capable crews, but people who were unfamiliar with the area, they were attempting to respond quickly to headquarter demands but were having to phone around for help to locate fireplugs. At a time of urgency this is a source of frustration and delay. I am pleased that the search and find program will overcome that problem with some, but not all, country fireplugs; however, it does little or nothing to promptly ensure the serviceability of the fireplug itself.

Minister Maywald's announcement of 31 July included the following statement: Quick access to water is obviously essential in combating fires and so this project will be a boost to our state's fire-fighting efforts.

Well, minister, that overlooks an obvious point: quick access to water is not just about location, it is also about availability. It is like getting directions to a public toilet only to find that the door is locked; it leaves you in the proverbial.

In estimates on 3 July 2007, I asked the Minister for Emergency Services which agency was responsible for maintenance of fireplugs, and whether the CFS and MFS were of the view that plugs were adequately maintained. I was advised that SA Water was considering its position with regard to a memorandum of undertaking signed in October 2005 between the South Australian CFS and SA Water. Within weeks of this came minister Maywald's announcement of 31 July 2007 which, as I have said, only goes halfway.

Also present at that budget estimates session was Euan Ferguson, Chief Officer of SACFS. Mr Ferguson stated that brigades pass on to SA Water regular reports, for action, on fireplugs in need of attention. The information I have is that it can take a couple of months before a maintenance crew deals with the problem.

Mr Ferguson added that he was not able to say whether SA Water required additional resources. Is that because he does not know, or is it because he has been told not to say? In her response to my written request for action on this matter last September, minister Maywald stated that a concentrated program to locate and identify country fireplugs would 'include checking for accessibility and, if necessary, clearing debris. Any faults will be reported to SA Water for maintenance action.'

As I have just explained, that alone will not fix the problem promptly. There is no reference to the plug being tested, and it leaves us guessing as to just which faults will be identified in the program as announced. Certain equipment and expertise are needed to physically test the operation of the fireplugs. Is this part of the program announced and, if not, why not? Interestingly, in the estimates committees, Mr Ferguson commented: Fire services acknowledge that it is partly a fire service responsibility to practise setting up hydrants and fireplugs so there is an element of sharing and making sure that the fireplugs are operational.

I take it from this comment that Mr Ferguson is referring to the country volunteer crews' training activities, which occasionally involve attending and activating a fireplug as part of their training. However, this does not systematically ensure, by any means, that all fireplugs in a region are checked for serviceability.

Furthermore, when the original fireplug maintenance program ceased some time ago, local crews were expected to take on the task—unofficially, I suspect. CFS crews initially did take on that extra task in their own volunteer time. Their endeavours as volunteers, usually at a cost to themselves and their families, were already well consumed with general training, fundraising and attending public events, as well as fires.

I know for a fact that, during this time and through the following years, many of them asked repeatedly for a maintenance program to be reintroduced, all to no avail. These selfless, community-minded volunteers were pleased to hear of the identification project. One story related to me told of a time when a CFS

crew searched in vain for a fireplug, only to later discover that it had been buried under three inches of road metal.

Given the current problem with dwindling numbers of volunteers, perhaps part of the problem lies with this issue. How much are we asking our volunteer firefighters to do? Does it turn some of them off that they are expected to perform for free a task that the community has already paid for: the supply of functioning fire hydrants?

In part 4 of the Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005, under 'Functions and Powers', appear the following points in relation to the SACFS: 1(a) to provide services with a view to preventing the outbreak of fires, or reducing the impact of fires in the country; 1(b) to provide efficient and responsive services in the country for the purpose of fighting fires..

It also states: 3(c) provide and maintain appliances and equipment for SACFS organisations.

I cannot see how the proper maintenance of fireplugs does not fall under the requirements of these functions. Readily serviceable equipment will reduce the impact of fires and provide efficient responsive services in the country. Presumably, fireplugs are not classified as equipment because they belong to SA Water.

Here, I must reiterate the point that I do not blame the CFS for this shortcoming. This equipment is clearly not theirs, but the government has an undeniable responsibility to ensure the serviceability of this equipment. In legal terms, it must be 'fit for purpose'.

We have heard a great deal from this government and others recently urging householders and landowners to be bushfire ready. We have even seen photographs of the Premier, in full CFS garb, clearing gutters. The Premier is a volunteer with the Salisbury CFS, and I applaud him for that. However, I wonder how his fellow crew members would feel if, in responding to an emergency, they were to turn up at a fireplug and discover that it did not work. Of course, that cannot happen in the city and suburbs, where plugs are fully maintained; it is only in the country, where volunteers are expected to give even more of their own time to do the job.

The Premier was reported in the *Murray Pioneer* of 18 January 2008 as saying: Our volunteers have been sorely tested recently by a number of fires...they have demonstrated their commitment in spades and now property owners should do the same.

Mr Rann, commitment and preparation is a three-way deal. The volunteers are ready, and we trust householders are responding to your urging and that of the fire services. But what about the government? Should it not also commit to planning and preparation? Your best laid plans with the identification system will come to nothing if the fireplug does not work, no matter how quickly it is located.

In the same article from which I quoted earlier that showed Mr Rann cleaning gutters, it states: The last thing our firefighters need is to have to rescue people who have made an ill-thought-out decision.

Well, Premier, let me add to your statement: the second to last thing firefighters need is to find that a vital fireplug does not work because of your ill thought out decision not to reinstate a proper fireplug maintenance program.

Here are some more quotes that show the government's one-way attitude to commitment. These come from the CFS website and are sound advice. Under

'General housekeeping for fire safety', the public is implored to 'remove rubbish', keep relevant things in 'good repair', have garden hoses that reach the extremities of the garden and, most ironically, make sure equipment is 'cleaned and checked'.

They are all excellent suggestions. However, for the government it is a case of 'Do as I say, not as I do.'

Businesses are required not only to have appropriate fire extinguishers on station and accessible, but also to have them checked for operation regularly, at their own cost. More of this 'Do as I say, not as I do' syndrome! Premier, how about some real leadership on this issue and showing the same commitment you demand of others!

In a document entitled 'Safety in the public sector', dated 18 August 2004, to launch the 'Zero harm vision', the Premier proudly proclaimed the following: As the government of South Australia, we have a responsibility to set a best practice example in safety performance that will influence and encourage others.

He goes on to state: The government takes responsibility for ensuring all risks to public sector employees' health and safety arising from work activities are, as far as reasonably practicable, eliminated or properly controlled.

Premier, are the 11,000 active CFS volunteer firefighters excluded from this promise? I suggest that the potential failure of a remote fireplug—or any fireplug—places the firefighters at substantially increased risk.

The ability of the CFS CO Euan Ferguson to deliver on his promise, as stated in his Strategic Directions document of 2007-09, that he is fully committed to achieving the Premier's Zero Harm Vision is no doubt hobbled by the government's refusal to immediately reintroduce a proper fireplug maintenance program.

A review required under section 149 of the Fire and Emergency Services Act 2005 is currently underway, as I was advised in a letter from minister Zollo's office last September. The following requirement for the review appears in that section of the act. It provides that the review: ...include an assessment of the extent to which the enactment of this act has led to...increased efficiencies and effectiveness in the provision of fire and emergency services within the community.

In the terms of reference there is a requirement to assess whether there have been improvements in the provision of services in terms of, among other things, 'preparedness and response'. I suggest that the government has seen fit to excuse itself from the same scrutiny.

This review is due by 1 April 2008—April Fool's Day! It is hoped that this government does not make a fool of itself and ignore this most obvious fact: knowing where the fireplug is does not necessarily give quick access to water. In terms of my motion, I acknowledge the government's fireplug identification project, and now call on the government to commit to a regular program of operational maintenance checks on all fire hydrants throughout the state. I commend the motion.

Mr GRIFFITHS (Goyder) (11:47): It is my pleasure to rise to speak briefly in support of the motion from the member for Hammond. It is obvious from the research that he has done that this is a passionate issue for him. I am aware

that he has spoken on this matter several times in this house in our relatively short careers here, and I have no doubt that the member for Hammond will continue to make sure that the government is held accountable in this area.

– *Continued*

Mr VENNING (Schubert) (11:52): I rise to support and congratulate the member for Hammond on a very good, commonsense motion, as has been this member's wont since he has been here. I commend him for the work he has done and the way he has presented it here this morning. I think it is a very important issue. Being a country person and a property owner, and having gone to many hundreds of fires during my life, I have a fair bit of personal interest in this matter. – *Continued*

Mr GOLDSWORTHY (Kavel) (12:00): I, too, am happy to speak in support of the motion the member for Hammond has brought to the house in relation to the state government's committing to implement an identification system for fire hydrants around the state and a regular program of operational maintenance on these fire hydrants.

The government has the responsibility of getting hold of these issues and acting on them, not just sweeping them under the carpet, not ignoring them and hoping they will go away, because they will not go away. The government is putting the lives of community members at risk and also the lives of CFS volunteers by not paying attention to this particularly important issue. I commend the member for Hammond for bringing this motion to the house and I support it.

Debate adjourned on motion of Mrs Geraghty.