

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

Tuesday, 29 May 2012

PRESCRIBED BURNS

Mr VAN HOLST PELLEKAAN (Stuart) (15:29): I rise today to advise the house of a very alarming incident that occurred in the electorate of Stuart. On Monday 7 May, a prescribed burn got out of control in the Wirrabara Forest. For the benefit of the house, a prescribed burn is when the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, or another qualified government department, deliberately burns off some land so that it might help with fire prevention down the track if another accidental bushfire takes place. The very unfortunate situation here is that a prescribed burn that was intended to burn off 35 hectares of land in the Wirrabara Forest actually burnt 800 hectares, and it burnt 800 hectares because the prescribed burn got out of control.

What we had was an out of control bushfire started by a government department—a very alarming situation. That meant that the CFS had to be called in to try to put it out, which it did very professionally. I say professionally with regard to the way the CFS operates. Well over 100 CFS volunteers were called out of their beds, away from work, away from whatever they were doing for the rest of the week, to help, and they were working hand in hand with paid staff from DENR and ForestrySA. Quite avoidably, we had a situation of a bushfire out of control, started by a government department and then volunteers had to come to put it out.

How did this happen? Let me make it very clear that I am not here to try to get any individuals in any sort of strife. I want to focus on the system. I want the system to be fixed so that this never happens again. Sadly, this is not the only time this has happened.

Approximately a year ago, a very similar incident occurred at Panye Station in the Gawler Ranges, and I am sure everybody in the house remembers that. Let me quote from an article from *The Flinders News* from last week (a local newspaper in the electorate of Stuart). The article, which is titled, 'Crews pleaded for burn-off delay', states:

Crews given the task of conducting a burn-off in the Wirrabara Forest pleaded with their superiors to cancel the operation, fire-fighting sources say.

The crews told ForestrySA that it was too dangerous to go ahead because of the weather conditions, but the operation continued.

That is an incredibly alarming report, and based on information coming directly to me from local constituents it is an accurate report. It should be incredibly alarming for everybody in this house. The real concern, apart from the fact that it got out of control and people's lives came close to being put at risk—there was approximately half a day where homes were in the path of the fire, but that was averted by the good work of the people on the ground and also by favourable, or improving, weather conditions—is the fact that the orders came from Adelaide, I am told, that the prescribed burn should not be stopped.

The reality is that the burn took place on the wrong day. For Saturday and Sunday the weather conditions were forecast to be quite favourable, the high temperatures for the days were forecast to be in the high teens with low winds. Yet, for the Monday and the Tuesday

(and the burn was done on the Monday) the forecast weather conditions were for the high temperatures to be in the high twenties with high winds. So, it was well forecast, and in fact so well forecast that everybody in the district knew about it. I live in Wilmington, only 50 kilometres away, and people were talking about the fact that early next week the weather was going to be pretty unpleasant and that farmers should not consider burning off, because this is the time when people do burn off. This prescribed burn was planned for a day when weather conditions were inappropriate. There is no getting around that fact.

I look forward to receiving a copy of the internal review from the minister. I have asked the minister for that review. I say again that I am not out to condemn anybody, from the people on the ground who lit the fire all the way through to the top of the department. The reality is that I want the minister's department to conduct a thorough and open review of what happened. The review must include direct and clear directions for improved practice in the future so that this never happens again.

People's lives cannot be put at risk. The environment cannot be damaged. Think about the number of animals, native and feral, their lives are each just as precious if they are going to be burnt to death in a fire. Think about the number of households nearby on the outskirts of Wirrabara Forest which were also put under threat. I look forward to receiving the report from the minister.