



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR BARAMBAH

Hansard 16 October 2001

MAIDENWELL RURAL FIRE BRIGADE

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (11.50 a.m.): I wish to draw to the attention of the parliament the plight of one group of volunteers throughout Queensland, and that is the rural bush fire brigades. The rural bush fire brigades are operating under adverse conditions at present. If we go west of the range and even to the bottom of the range, which is not far from Brisbane, we can see the smoke haze that is continually lingering over the communities in those areas.

For example, the small town of Maidenwell consists of a pub and one very small shop with a fuel bowser. The rural bush fire brigade there is made up of volunteers, as they all are. Since 1 October, they have been continually fighting fires. This very small community has very limited access to funds. The levy collected by the shire council in that area raises approximately \$2,600 to \$2,800. That is not too bad—it is more than some rural bush fire brigades have—but it is a lot less than others have.

The brigade has to cover approximately 24,000 hectares of very rugged mountainous terrain. It is heavily treed and extremely dry. Its combustibility is such that sometimes it might be better just to let it go. In this area there are a lot of people on five-acre or larger blocks. Whether one has 1,000 acres or five acres, either way the levy is \$15. That is all most of these people can afford. It is a very low socioeconomic area, with many people on pensions or the dole.

There is approximately 50 kilometres of sealed road in the whole area. The rest consists of dirt tracks and roads. Any repairs to the vehicle are paid for by the brigade and come out of its \$2,800. Over the past 12 days it has attended seven fires. Approximately 7,000 hectares have been destroyed in that time. The fuel cost in that time has been \$500-plus, which is a huge chunk of that \$2,800. The fire season has not even started, so what impact will the remaining amount have over the rest of the year? Virtually none! It will disappear in a flash.

The part that bites most is the fuel cost. These people are forced to pay 95c a litre at the one bowser in their tiny little town with one shop and one pub. Many rural fire brigades have a BP card which they can call on, but not this small group. The reason the brigade uses the little shop on the corner with its one bowser is that the couple who own it are prepared to open at any time of the day or night and they make sandwiches to feed the men and women. Both men and women fight the fires and man the stations.

Out of that \$2,800—and, as I said, it is more than some have but less than others have—they pay for repairs, tyres, phone calls, electricity and so on. It is getting to the stage at which it is no longer viable for them to have raffles to even raise a bit of extra cash. They fear that a lot of people who call on the firefighting service will be knocked back because they will not have the fuel to even get to the fire.

Some of these men and women have been working 12-hour shifts. Concern has been raised about the need for a counsellor, as it is feared that some are cracking under the pressure. Why are they cracking? That is happening because many people whose properties are threatened by fire are abusing volunteers and giving directions as to how to fight the fires. Some have even been confronted with machetes. This is not a very pleasant situation. I would ask that people on properties in rural areas get to know the bush fire brigade members and get them onto their property so that they can assess the fire dangers and the various ways in which they can fight fires.

Although trained to assess situations, these men are not going to risk their volunteers if they are not familiar with the terrain. As I said, in this area it is particularly steep and often there are tanks and

buildings that the firefighters know nothing about. The abuse they cop when these go up in smoke is appalling. It is suspected that most fires have been started through arson. We believe that charges are pending.

Time expired.
