



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

Hansard 23 October 2002

FIREFIGHTER ASSISTANCE

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (5.57 p.m.): I move—

In light of the prolonged drought and subsequent critical fire risk, that this government ensure that land under its control has adequate firebreaks, and that access roads used by fire fighters are clear of debris, including overhanging limbs to provide maximum protection for firefighting personnel, volunteers and civilians, and further that the government review the scope of equipment available for fire fighting.

The predicted bushfire hazards that the state is facing over the coming summer months are extreme and all possible methods to reduce the loss of vegetation, homes and possessions and, most importantly, lives must be utilised. There exist grave concerns among those who are at the front line of firefighting.

The cause of these concerns does not hinge on just our ability and preparedness for rural fire services to handle any potential fire outbreaks but also on the causes and effects of fires and individual community preparedness and awareness. Before going too much further, I am not taking away or minimising the fact that this government has seen fit to increase funding to rural fire services. The government has supplied protective clothing, walkie-talkies and other necessary equipment. The problem arising from reports from many of the rural fire services is that the firebreaks on crown land have not been kept free of rubbish build-up, that burn-offs on crown land have not been conducted in the winter and that the firebreaks are not only not maintained but also in some cases are not wide enough. It is amazingly frightening to see flames leaping across the existing badly maintained firebreaks as they pass between the tinder dry treetops. The claim that forestry and national parks are adequately staffed, with their constant letting go of or not replacing transferring or retiring staff, is questioned. It is recognised that forestry land is farmed in terms of plantations and is considerably cleaner than national parks where no weed and rubbish control is practised. In some shires—and I use Cooloola Shire as an example—approximately 45 per cent of such land is crown land.

In an idealistic world the lighting of fires would be left to mother nature, but we cannot rely on her being the only fire starter; we can rely on some pyromaniacs putting property and lives at risk. One of the biggest concerns is this deliberate lighting of fires by firebugs. Based on previous causes for fires in Queensland and other states, these firebugs are primarily responsible for the dreadful toll on property and resources. Crown land policy of closing forests and allowing this build-up of combustible material allows them plenty of opportunity. This closing of forests has been described in the United States as neglect through mismanagement. It has been recognised that the germination of seeds, et cetera, which has been cited as the major reason for closing the forests to allow for forest regeneration, has in fact opened the forest to more intense, hotter and longer burning fires which, in turn, is more devastating to both the forest and wildlife—not to mention the threat to those asked to protect homes built along the edges of these forests.

One indisputable fact is that the existing laws have not been a deterrent to firebugs. Disturbingly, there is the possibility that no law exists which will deter the psychologically dysfunctional people who seek to destroy property and endanger lives. Education of the effects backed up by possible graphic footage to show the effects of such acts, shown throughout the education system, may bring the message home to some. However, firebugs, despite being a major cause of serious fires, are only part of the problem. No community is immune, whether rural or coastal, and we have seen the recent reports coming from New South Wales.

Water sources are rapidly dwindling and it may sound dramatic to say that in some areas the lack of water will restrict the ability to fight fires. If we think that is pie in the sky, just ask the people in towns such as Blackbutt at the top of the range who are suffering extreme water shortages but are surrounded by forestry in an area which is experiencing tinder dry conditions. They are currently endeavouring to tap into the Wivenhoe pipeline but experiencing native title delays. Without the water, they are at the mercy of many a bushfire.

The member for Bulimba visited my electorate recently and he was met with the expression 'green drought'. For those members who do not know what a green drought is, it is when an area has had minuscule amounts of rain just enough to have dry parched brown grass turn green. But it does not grow. It looks good but it does not even cover the ground. The feed in the Nanango electorate should be knee high at this time of year—not the height of the edge of a 20c piece. This year is the first time I have seen roses dry on the bush as if they were dried for flower arrangements and crumble to dust at your touch. It is dry out there, conditions are critical and everything must be done to ensure the safety of our firefighters, volunteers and civilians. Not to do so will constitute a dereliction of our duty of care. This brings us to the very people we rely on to stop these tragedies—the SES personnel, the volunteers that put their lives at risk every time they go out to fight this fire curse.

I refer to an article in the *Courier-Mail* on 27 May which stated that a confidential report by the government appointed Linton inquiry team warned that the roles and tasks of many State Emergency Service units might have to be cut back so the state government could meet its duty of care to volunteers. It says that Queensland's 60,000 fire and emergency volunteers face needless risk because of poor training and a chronic lack of resources. Does that mean emergency workers may not be protected by WorkCover if injured because of serious equipment and training flaws? If so, what is the government proposing to do to rectify that?

If the fires are to be as bad as predicted, that is one issue that should be addressed with urgency not only to meet WorkCover requirements but other issues raised in the report. The report is very critical of some SES groups with primary response roles which do not have the necessary equipment. Some volunteer units do not have sufficient radios, and a large proportion of the radio equipment is outdated and in need of replacement. The report summarises the following four main points: massive problems with communications including 28 black spots around the state; no statewide induction training for new emergency service volunteers; volunteers having to pay 50 per cent of boot costs and many complaints about respirator quality; and about 30 per cent of surveyed firefighters had no radio training. It is a disgrace to allow such an important service to deteriorate to the extent it has. The report also warned that in a major incident involving several brigades it would mean the incident controller could lose communications due to the high volume of radio traffic.

The government report also found that only a very low percentage of Rural Fire Brigade volunteers had obtained even minimal level competency. If the Linton inquiry team report is accurate in its findings that chronic underfunding would not allow the RFS and SES to support modern volunteer emergency organisations adequately, it is an indictment on the incompetence of this government. It is human lives we are talking about. It is people's homes and properties, and it should be a priority of the government to ensure that everything is done to protect them.

In January the federal minister put forward a proposal for an army of unemployed to be sent into the bush during winter to fireproof forests if the state governments agreed. Trained adequately, it could be an avenue worth pursuing. The Queensland SES minister was quoted as saying—

...the scheme might have some merit in bolstering Queensland fire hazard reduction program.

After the report by the Linton inquiry, it appears to me that it should have been acted on immediately, but was it? We have just come through winter and I ask the minister what has been the outcome of that proposal and what would have been the advantages to every Queenslanders? We have one very dangerous situation facing us, and any disastrous outcomes will rest fairly and squarely on the government's failure to act. Hazard reduction has proved invaluable in other states, but according to the minister—and I quote him from the same article—

We have a policy in Queensland where not only our rural and urban firefighters, but other departments such as Primary Industries, Natural Resources and the EPA have hazard reduction programs as well.

Well, earlier this year I wrote to the minister on behalf of concerns by a council and citizens in my electorate over the removal of hundreds of tyres that were a fire hazard. Months later, the EPA was still arguing about who was responsible for that hazard. I hope the EPA is reducing fire hazards at a much faster rate. Most members will know that my husband is an agricultural pilot and we have often been amazed that Australia does not utilise a valuable fire fighting tool located in every crop growing area. In Canada, America and New Zealand many larger crop spraying aircraft have been and still are used to aid in fighting fires in areas which are difficult for firefighters to work reasonably safely, but small enough not to need the likes of Elvis. Elvis's benefit in one season has been well documented. Many agricultural aircraft have a far greater capacity than some of the helicopters we see used on TV. I ask

the minister: has the utilisation of these aircraft been considered; and, if so, what was the objection when, as I stated before, these aircraft are used in other countries?

It was interesting to read in the *Weekend Australian* on 30 December last year that a leading CSIRO researcher, Phil Cheney, warned that more prescribed burning off is the only way to guarantee a reduction in fire risks, but urban sensibilities and ignorance often thwart such programs. He said that the fuel on the ground is the only thing we can manage. Mr Cheney said—

If you want to reduce the intensity of the fire, you have to reduce the amount of fuel producing the heat. In the Blue Mountains it was said that there was a lot of criticism from the public who do not like burn-offs. People's concern about smoke has been one of the key factors hindering agencies in doing prescribed burning.

Mr Cheney also said that many people do not understand the fundamentals of fire. The establishment of the Regional Forestry Agreement and the virtual closing of many forests has seen the removal of state grazing permits. These permits allowed the grazing of cattle amongst the trees, but not all of the annual shedding of bark and other rubbish discarded by our unique flora was kept to a minimum. The rapid proliferation of our native undergrowth and its annual dieback was kept in check.

Over the past few years we have seen the build-up of this combustible material which in some cases has become an almost impenetrable wall and which in the current extreme conditions will only compound the difficulties our fire fighting services will be confronted with when the time comes as it inevitably will. History has shown us repeatedly the truth of these words. I only hope I am wrong.