



Speech by

**Mrs D. PRATT**

**MEMBER FOR NANANGO**

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Hansard 6 November 2002

**EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (4.31 p.m.): I rise to speak to the Emergency Service Legislation Amendment Bill 2002. The minister will be more than aware by now that Emergency Services, which embraces the ambulance, fire services and police and the protection of our volunteers are issues in which I am particularly interested. Although at times I have acknowledged the minister's efforts regarding the safety of our volunteers and all involved in emergency services and the supply of necessary infrastructure and equipment, it is an area which I believe—and the minister will agree with me—will always need attention.

In a motion I moved a couple of weeks ago I touched on many issues surrounding the whole issue of emergency services such as the ever increasing danger to our firefighters because of the failure by departments to clear debris and overhanging branches from forests and reserves under their control to provide maximum protection for firefighting personnel, volunteers and civilians. Also at the time I asked that the government review the scope of material available for firefighting. It would appear that the government has done so with the use of fixed wing aircraft.

I have received correspondence from aircraft operators who had made a wonderful community-minded gesture to government during the last financial year, and I would like to read from that letter. It states—

As background, during the bad sunshine coast and Gatton fires of a couple of years ago the local Downs Aerial Operators got together and agreed to be available to assist on a community help basis in the event of a local emergency.

James Tait (from Keyland Aviation) acted as spokesman for us and wrote and received the following correspondence.

Our aircraft are the same capacity as most of the aircraft brought in from St George and the Southern States and we have all the licences and expertise required. Except for one southern aircraft specifically set up for firefighting (this equipment computer controlled to give a set application rate or multiple on/off application and costing about \$100 000 just for the equipment). We could have done exactly the same job. Not only that but we had numerous aircraft instantly available. We could have been there on Thursday helping, not Saturday p.m. and Sunday a.m. when things got out of control.

If the government wanted to obtain services and pay for them, why not get the locals who employ and support the local area all the time? We are suffering from the drought also and are trying to remain in business to help the farmers when things come good.

As a further example of the insult to us I have included a letter from the University of Queensland. For two years we have provided an aircraft and pilot for absolutely no charge for the university to run its Aerial Application course for the forestry industry. This course is to educate forestry officers on the uses and technology of aircraft for use in forestry applications including fire control. What a way to thank us!

To address the issue that the aircraft used were 'local'. The company 'Crop Care' at Cecil Plains is owned by another company called Aerotech Australia. It is based in Tintinara South Australia and operates a small satellite base at Cecil Plains. They usually only bring aircraft to the Downs on an on demand basis.

Jones Air at St George has no aircraft based on the Downs and never has had. They are not local and if they had had work elsewhere they would not have come. The same can be said of Aerotech and any other Southern Aircraft. Rebel Air is from Trangie NSW and has never operated on the Downs.

I personally rang the Police at Tara and Toowoomba offering our services. They both advised the control center and rang back and said we weren't required.

The authorities were aware of the local operators because I was rung by a government department at about 9 p.m. Saturday night asking us if we could supply Avgas and AvTur in drums to the planes fighting the fires.

I have contacted all the local operators and all are disgusted with what happened and we feel that houses and property would have been saved if the locals had been given a go especially in the early stages of the fire given the times it took to bring in outside operators.

For those who missed the point, what we have here was a group of operators who were prepared to give their time and aircraft free if the government had paid for just the fuel. Their time and the wear and tear on their aircraft is no little donation to the community. Five operators, namely Keyland Aviation, Dalby, Gwydir Air, Millmerran, Darling Downs Air Spray, Kupunn via Dalby, Ag-Av, Dalby and Rural Aviation, Jondaryan—all community-minded operators—offered their services. We are talking about the availability of 25 aircraft for Queensland Emergency Services to access at a very minimal cost of the fuel. Between them they have 16 aircraft with a capacity of 2,000 litres plus and nine aircraft with 700 litre capacity. Details of these operators and their aircraft were sent to the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority Service and they received a letter in reply, both of which I will table.

During the time when the offer was made, and up to 2001, Darling Downs Air Spray was contributing free of conditions to a training course for the forestry industry. Many rural firefighters are very intense about nothing except doing an excellent job. I have a lot of interaction with the brigades in my electorate. I hear a lot about their concerns regarding the need for extra equipment when it arises and the internal conflicts between members of the committees involved.

I currently have an issue which is ongoing and I would like to read a response from the department into the record. It states—

I am regretful that you have drawn my district staff into what appears to be an internal squabble within the brigade and then seen fit to complain about their efforts to sort out the mess. I am assuming that this type of situation is possibly the reason for the inclusion in the bill of the section that states 'The Minister may dismiss a person from any office of the committee if the Minister is satisfied it would be in the public interest to do so.'

I have some trouble with this particular clause in that I can see a perversion of justice being introduced when often the reason for a conflict and the request that a person be dismissed may be a verbal interpretation of a situation based purely on the opinions of clashing members. These conflicts can be, and often are, resolved by the membership and I would hate to see someone dismissed because of a bias when people are perceived by the department as making a complaint about a member of the department.

In the 6 p.m. debate I also questioned the impact on surrounding property owners with regard to the failure of government to be a good neighbour and keep the property under their control in control. I have here a letter from a gentleman by the name of Graham Fredericksen of Kilcoy. It is due to this failure by the government that he has sent to the Minister for the Environment a bill for \$6,720. His letter states—

Please find enclosed an invoice to your department for damages and labour incurred from a bushfire that came from a section of National Park-controlled land and destroyed part of my banana plantation over the period Monday 21 to Thursday 24 October. The fire started on a part of Reserve SF792 immediately north-east of our freehold Portion 439 in the Jimna-Conondale ranges of Kilcoy Shire on or about Friday 18 October.

I lost a considerable amount of potential income from the fire as well as time spent fighting it, and also had to seek help from an outside volunteer bush fire brigade on two days to save what I could of my life's work. No effort was made by National Parks whatsoever to help me or even warn me that the fire was coming, despite the fact that your officers knew of the fire well before I did, and despite the fact that I had recently had a lengthy discussion with National Park senior range David Pengally about not wanting any fires in the vicinity of my plantation.

Only a few weeks before, I had met Mr Pengally and two of his colleagues on the road in the National Park directly above my plantation where another fire had been burning.

I was watching this fire to make sure it didn't cross the road to where it could threaten me when they came driving along—'monitoring' the situation, they told me. I then explained my concern about fires in the area: I had burned fire breaks around three sides of my plantation last winter but had not burned the side facing National Park because it was too dry and the National Park land hadn't had any fuel-reduction burn-offs for a long time—making it too dangerous for me to risk burning out National Park.

...

The Government has seen fit to shift control of this land to your Department from its previous managers ... State Forestry—who conducted regular fuel-reduction burn-offs in the cooler months—and it is up to YOU to manage the land properly, and that should include a 'good neighbour' policy. You may want your land to be a pristine wilderness national park, but all LAND still HAS to be MANAGED, whether it is a banana farm, a suburban block or a national park: noxious weeds, feral animals, and property-threatening occurrences like fires HAVE to be MANAGED and CONTROLLED.

If you have any queries about the above, I can be contacted on ... at nights. Also, the operations log book of the Villeneuve Bushfire Brigade chief can be made available to you to check out his report of the situation. Or you can speak to Kilcoy Shire Chairman Terry Dredge and Councillor Ken Kropp who inspected the source area of the fire first-hand during the middle of the fires.

I sincerely hope the matter of my compensation can be dealt with swiftly and amicably. The amount of compensation requested is very reasonable and failure to pay will result in legal action against your Department as the fire was clearly a National Park responsibility.

These are the kinds of issues that I have brought up many times, that is, the damage inflicted to the neighbouring properties of these areas. It is something that the minister would be very much aware of because it is his officers who are asked to combat these fires. With the constant letting go of or not replacing transferring or retiring staff, the claim that Forestry and National Parks are adequately staffed is questioned very strongly. This government, which by its lack of action reveals a certain ignorance about fires, will be forced to learn a lot about the fundamentals this summer.

Forestry state grazing permits allowed the grazing of cattle amongst trees and much of, but not all, the annual shedding of bark and rubbish discarded by our flora was kept to a minimum. These permits are no longer renewed under the regional forest agreement and the rubbish builds up. In some cases, this rubbish build-up has become an almost impenetrable wall. It is human lives that we are talking about when they go into face fires. It is people's homes and property and it should be the priority of all governments to ensure that everything is done to protect them, and I believe that the minister is endeavouring to do just that. In the *Weekend Australian* on 13 December last year leading CSIRO researcher Phil Cheney warned—I have mentioned this before, but I believe it is well worth repeating—'that more prescribed burning off is the only way to guarantee a reduction in fire risk, but urban sensibilities and ignorance often thwart such programs'. He said that the fuel on the ground is the only thing that 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.

For all the concerns I have brought forward and many other speakers have spoken about today, it must be recognised that whether it be fire services, ambulance services or emergency services, whether paid or volunteer, the personnel put 110 per cent effort in at all times. It is only during a disaster that the true calibre of people comes to the fore and all petty problems get put to one side. I commend all the services in the Nanango electorate for what they do, especially their continual push to achieve maximum resources for the district's benefit. It must be recognised that there is a definite limit to available funds and that all that is asked for cannot be given, but each and every one of these groups must be given an A for effort in trying to obtain the maximum.

The aerial ambulance and the flying doctor are regular service providers in our area, as is the emergency rescue helicopter. There are many people who are extremely grateful for the existence of these services. A recent air show had to be halted while the more important service of the air ambulance was required by a distressed constituent. The professionalism of the service had many believing that it was in fact part of the air show and they applauded as the aeroplane took off. The SES personnel provide services in all manner of ways. As in the air show, they do various tasks from traffic control to raising funds. It does not matter what the task; they will always be available to provide manpower. This Saturday the local Blackbutt SES will hold an awareness day, and I do not think we would find a more active branch anywhere than the Blackbutt SES. It is holding this awareness day for the general public. All in all, I do not believe that there is a single person in Queensland who has not been a part of or a beneficiary of the emergency services in this state. I commend everyone who has contributed.