




Speech By
Hon. Craig Crawford

MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER

Record of Proceedings, 13 February 2019

MOTION

Bushfire Prevention and Preparedness, Inquiry

 **Hon. CD CRAWFORD** (Barron River—ALP) (Minister for Fire and Emergency Services) (5.05 pm): I rise to oppose the motion. We know that when the sun rose on 22 November 2018, it was the beginning of 14 days of what was then an unimaginable bushfire ferocity that relentlessly swept across parts of Queensland. During that period, 1.4 million hectares of land was burnt. Three thousand Queensland Fire and Emergency Services personnel worked around the clock. One hundred and thirty-nine rural fire brigades were called into action along with their fire and rescue counterparts. They were joined by 1,200 interstate personnel deployed from across Australia. I want to put on record my thanks to those interstate counterparts who reacted so quickly.

Fifty-nine aircraft water dropped water and suppressants as well as conducted surveillance. At one point, 47 of those aircraft were airborne at the same time. For the very first time, a trio of large aerial tankers were used in Queensland. Eleven million litres of water was dropped from the sky. Five hundred and seventy-one bushfire community warnings were issued. More than 50 emergency alerts reached more than a million devices. At its peak, we had more than 200 bushfires burning at the same time. All up, we dealt with more than 1,200 bushfires.

Those figures are unprecedented in Queensland's history. Never—not ever—have we had to muster our resources on such a scale to fight such severe, savage and unpredictable fires that were fuelled for months, weeks and days of high temperatures, low humidity and strong westerly winds coupled with extremely dry conditions. It was relentless. As Queenslanders, we stood strong. Were we ready? You bet we were. To suggest otherwise is to denigrate the thousands of men and women who put their own lives on the line, who left their families and their homes behind to go and help others.

Here is a challenge from those opposite. I say to them to do some research, do some reading, and contemplate the Bureau of Meteorology's special climate statement No. 67 where it says that we were experiencing an extreme heatwave in the tropical Queensland coast. That is right: our rainforests were on fire.

In Rockhampton, I watched as temperatures nudged 35 degrees. The mercury kept going north for another week, hitting 44.4 degrees on Wednesday, 28 November. For 3½ hours on that day parts of Central Queensland centred around Rockhampton recorded catastrophic fire conditions—a first for the region, a first for Queensland. Seven hundred thousand Queenslanders received a text message that said, 'Unprecedented fire weather affecting your area today and in coming days. Stay updated about fires in your area.' Seven hundred thousand Queenslanders then had to decide their next move.

I will rewind the clock for a second. The window of opportunity between the burn season when we do our fuel reduction and mitigation burns and the actual fire season is determined by the weather. It is always determined by the weather. It is always a very fine line. If it is too wet, nothing burns. If it is too dry, too much burns. In mid-2018, a core focus of Operation Cool Burn was the dry debris that was left over from cyclones Marcia and Debbie. QFES teams worked their guts out completing prescribed

burns along the coast to ensure the safety of Queenslanders' lives and property. In that same year, throughout the state more than 20,000 permits to burn were issued by QFES fire wardens. That is more than were issued in 2017.

The science tells us that it is the quality of the burn, not the quantity of hectares that burns, that really matters. In 2108, 68 per cent of high or very high hazard exposures were mitigated. That is up from 41 per cent in 2016, because we now do strategic burning. The weather beat us. The window of opportunity closed and here we are today.

Who best to oversee the review of these fires? Who best to determine if we have done everything in our power to prevent them in the first place and be prepared when they hit? The same body that was established by the LNP, the very body those opposite established with the proviso it be independent, the same body that reviewed Seqwater, SunWater and Cyclone Debbie. It is IGEM. Which is why I tasked IGEM to conduct the review into the Queensland 2018 bushfires.

I am here to tell members that every single Queenslanders, with our boots on the ground, with our hearts in our mouths and with our trust in our training and our preparation, went into battle on those 14 fateful days and we won.