




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR NANANGO

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MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Bushfires

 **Mrs FRECKLINGTON** (Nanango—LNP) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.00 pm): I was born and raised in country Queensland and I represent a regional electorate in this House. When you are from the bush, you know how harsh it can be. Queensland is a beautiful place and it gives us everything we need, but sometimes this state can just break your heart and that is what it did to so many people last week. I visited Binna Burra, Canungra, Ballandean, Stanthorpe, Bundaberg, Linville and Peregian and saw communities that had been pushed to the absolute limit. Seventeen homes were lost to the flames. The historic Binna Burra Lodge, which opened 86 years ago, was gutted. Farms were ravaged by fire and precious feed was lost.

All of Australia saw the destruction on the TV news, but we must remember that many other communities were also affected. Wide Bay, Central Queensland, North Queensland and the Far North all faced terrible fires last week, but while hearts were broken by the bushfires the spirit of ordinary Queenslanders was not. In fact the strength, courage and compassion of Queenslanders only grew as the danger increased. I am a proud Queenslander but I have never been more proud of our state than I was last week. There are no strangers in the communities I visited. Everywhere I went, Queenslanders were doing all they could to help others, and no-one did it more than the fireys, the police and the volunteers who were on the front line. They fought the flames around the clock, day after day, despite all the dangers that they faced.

The word 'hero' gets used a lot these days, but there is no other way to describe the men and women who risked their own lives to keep the rest of us safe. They showed us the meaning of courage and they showed us the meaning of community. Where would we be without them? How many homes and lives would have been lost? I cannot thank them enough and I know everyone in this House feels the same. On behalf of all of us, I say to them again thank you.

My own electorate of Nanango was among the first to be hit by the fires. On Friday, 6 September, the first reports came through of a bushfire at Goodger, just a few kilometres west of Kingaroy. Within hours, 16 crews were on the scene battling to bring the flames under control as the smoke spread across Kingaroy. Thanks to the work of local crews at Goodger and later in the week at Linville and Esk, my electorate was spared the worst but many other electorates were not so lucky. Over the next few days, the fires tore through the Gold Coast hinterland and across the Southern Downs. Fireys told me how they watched as flames ran up and over hills faster than any fire they had ever seen. The long drought and the blasting winds combined to turn the bush into a blazing furnace.

On Monday, 9 September, I met up with the member for Theodore at the Coomera Valley Rural Brigade to see how that community was coping, and they were coping magnificently. Matt Walker's team of fireys were exhausted, but their spirits were lifted by the reaction of local people. Help was pouring in. There was food and drink for the fireys, as well as a mountain of supplies for people who

had fled from their homes. A big shout out goes to the member for Theodore and his community for organising the water run to Stanthorpe later in the week to deliver drinking water to help another community whilst his own community was under threat.

I then met with the member for Scenic Rim in Canungra. I have seen the aftermath of fires before but nothing can prepare you for the shock of seeing ordinary communities which have been consumed by flames. It was incredible that no lives were lost. The locals knew that they had been lucky. We met so many wonderful helpers from the local QCWA and the Salvos. There were people directing traffic and food and there were those who continued 24/7 to battle the blazes around the clock.

That is where I met Pamela and Stuart Skeen who moved to Beechmont 25 years ago and made their beautiful home for themselves in the hinterland, but that home was reduced to ashes when the fire swept through. When I met Pam and Stuart on the Monday, they were not complaining. Pam told me with a bit of a smile that she grabbed her most important possessions—her husband Stuart and then her beloved canaries, her shoes and a bag of Stuart's underclothes. Pam is definitely the kind of woman you need in a crisis.

Stanthorpe came close to suffering the same fate as Beechmont. Along with the member for Southern Downs, I met rural fireys as they snatched a moment's rest at the Ballandean Tavern. Rural firey Graham Parker showed me firsthand the front line of the fire and explained to me the desperate need on the ground to back-burn to save those homes. They described the awesome intensity of the fires and told me how close those homes came to being lost. They were too modest to say it but it was only their bravery and the true Queensland grit that saved them.

I saw firsthand the remains at Stanthorpe. Sadly, many homes were lost. Kim Vogel was taken in by Pastor Jeremy Greening after the home where he had lived alone had been destroyed. Kim is 79 years old and homeless, but he was still cracking some pretty awesome jokes. Kim proudly showed me around the ruins of his home and how he had done the right thing and had trimmed the vegetation around that home, but sadly the fire was too fast, too hot and too devastating and it took his home—the only one in his street. Kim's niece reached out to me when she saw pictures of Kim, the member for Southern Downs and me on my Instagram. They run Just Garlic in Kingaroy and she said, 'I was so glad to see him smiling.' She told me that even the bushfire could not keep their Uncle Kim down. All the best to Kim Vogel and his family.

I saw the same defiant spirit among the police and the fireys at Peregrin Beach. The member for Ninderry introduced me to many of his old QPS mates who had been on duty when the bushfire broke out on Monday evening. With the flames right behind them and around them, Gabby, Cam, Diesel, Mark and Peter all helped evacuate every single home in the path of the fire. Some of these coppers were motorbike cops. They did not even have the PPE gear to wear, but they just got on and did that job and saved the lives of people by evacuating them out of their houses. Thanks to the fireys and the emergency services, Peregrin was saved from destruction but it was a close run thing.

As well as the emergency services workers and community volunteers, I want to recognise those members of parliament—the members for Ninderry, Theodore, Scenic Rim and Southern Downs—who helped their communities to react. Some even fought the flames and they brought their communities together. I also wish to thank the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, and his wife, Jenny Morrison, for their visit with me and the member for Scenic Rim to Canungra and Binna Burra. I introduced the Prime Minister and Jenny to the stoic, beautiful soul that is Pamela Skeen and her husband, Stuart. Pamela and Stuart lost everything but they still managed to explain to the Prime Minister, Mrs Morrison, me and Jon their plans to rebuild in that beautiful part of the world. They will rebuild and put their canaries back and it will be wonderful for them. They will look forward to having that cup of tea when she gets back into that home that she will rebuild.

Like I said, I wish to thank the Prime Minister and his wife, Jenny, for their visit. As we have seen before, the Prime Minister never forgets the people of Queensland. He was there when we needed him and so were his federal colleagues. It was great to see the federal members Scott Buchholz and David Littleproud in the Scenic Rim on that day as well.

The bushfire crisis is not over. We face weeks and possibly months of danger. Our priority today must be to ensure that our emergency services have everything they need to deal with this threat. However, we must also be prepared to learn lessons from the past 11 days. I believe Queensland has been far too complacent about the threat of bushfires and that must be corrected. However, there is one lesson that has already been learnt and that lesson is that Queenslanders will always pull through. No matter what challenge we face, we always come together. I promise the people who have suffered in those fires—people like Kim, Pamela and Stuart—that they will never be forgotten by me, they will never be forgotten by the LNP and they will never be forgotten by the Prime Minister.