



Speech By
Lachlan Millar

MEMBER FOR GREGORY

Record of Proceedings, 13 February 2019

MOTION

Bushfire prevention and Preparedness, Inquiry



Mr MILLAR (Gregory—LNP) (5.00 pm): I move—

1. That the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee inquire into and report to the Legislative Assembly by 6 May 2019 on the effectiveness of the Queensland government's bushfire prevention and preparedness activities leading to the 2018 Queensland fires.
2. In undertaking this inquiry, the committee should consider:
 - (a) analysis of fire reduction practices conducted on state owned land and national parks including the maintenance of strategic fire breaks and fire access trails and the reduction of fuel loads;
 - (b) examination of the appropriateness of funding provided by government to implement fire reduction practices on state owned land and national parks and provide for overtime for QPWS officers when they are needed to assist with the response to a fire in a national park;
 - (c) the effectiveness of the government's native vegetation and land management laws and practices in managing fire in the Queensland context;
 - (d) the reduction in the QFES hazard reduction burns in 2017 and 2018 compared to previous years;
 - (e) the effectiveness and timeliness of government issued fire reduction permits needed by landholders to conduct fire preparedness activities;
 - (f) the failure to implement any of the Auditor-General's recommendations from *Bushfire prevention and preparedness* (report 10:2014-15);
 - (g) consideration of the appropriateness of penalties for those deliberately starting fires; and
 - (h) analysis of communication practices undertaken to provide information to affected communities before, during and after bushfire events.

This motion calls for a full public and independent parliamentary inquiry into the recent bushfires crisis and the part played by the Queensland's bushfire preparation regime.

The bushfires we saw at the end of 2018 were not business as usual for Queensland; they were unprecedented in their ferocity, destruction and scale. Their locations were also abnormal. To see the lush splendour of the Eungella rainforest reduced to ashes, to lose ancient rock art in the Carnarvon Gorge, and to see large fires travel out of Mount Etna Caves National Park, threatening bats that the park was created to conserve, was heartbreaking. Worse still were the threats to towns. Sadly, we had one death fighting these fires and I pay tribute to my constituent the late George Bird. The loss of this fine young man was felt not just in Rolleston but across the highlands to the Arcadia Valley.

Queenslanders have paid a price. Their concerns must not be taken lightly, or we will come to regret it. There is one widely observed fact: the majority of these fires started on government owned land. The key question is whether the Queensland government's own fire preparations are correct, or need improvement. It would seem that the Queensland government is now a dangerous and undesired neighbour—a neighbour that does not pull its weight and then expects volunteers to risk their lives fighting the very fires its own neglect has led to. Neighbouring landholders and communities quite rightly deserve more than a market research survey and an internal review.

Under the government's own terms of reference, the Inspector-General Emergency Management will not even look at the issues of fuel management, maintenance of fire access trails and strategic firebreaks. The review will not look at fire preparations in the lead-up to the crisis. The IGEM review will look only at the quality of the emergency services response to the fires, which we know was excellent. What we really need to know is: what preparations would have improved the situation the emergency services officers faced?

In mid-October 2018, the media was reporting that, since August 2018, QFES had already attended 3,000 vegetation fires. We were still only in spring and the bureau was predicting heatwaves. What could we have done then? That is what we need to know. This is why the Rural Fire Brigades Association has described Labor's internal review as not a real bushfire review. The LNP is proposing a real review with public hearings. Committee members from all parties could talk directly to the affected landholders and communities in regional Queensland.

On Saturday, I was talking to volunteers who fought fires in Expedition Range and the Lonesome and Carnarvon national parks. Their stories were equally horrific and inspiring. Volunteers were in unfamiliar terrain that was rugged and heavily timbered. They were in the dark on dozers trying to locate an old trail to make a firebreak so that they could back-burn and try to contain the fire front. Why had Queensland's Parks and Wildlife Service not maintained the fire access trails and put in place strategic firebreaks before the fire? A strategic firebreak in the Carnarvon National Park may have protected the rock art. Strategically located firebreaks and well-maintained fire trails give firefighters more options to contain and control a fire on any fireground. Why do they seem to have all but disappeared from the national parks?

Since 2015, more than a million hectares of land has been added to the Queensland protected estates. This is reckless if the state does not expand the staff and the budgets that are necessary to safeguard that land. Volunteer fireys say that the Parks and Wildlife blokes are great, but they also say that there are not enough of them, their budgets are short and their bosses have them operating under an eight-hour rule. When they reach eight hours, they must knock off and go home, taking their knowledge of the terrain with them, and sometimes the key to the dozer.

I heard a case where hazard reduction has not been carried out in 40 years. Why were there fewer QFES hazard reduction burns in 2017-18? Let us hear if all Queensland firebreaks should be only eight metres wide. After the Crown fires, some would like to see 30-metre wide firebreaks around national parks. Let us hear if we can get a clearing permit for those firebreaks. Why has Labor not implemented any of the recommendations from the Auditor-General's 2014-15 report on preparing our communities for bushfire disaster? To get answers we must get serious and support this motion.