




Speech By
Stephen Andrew

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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MATTER OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Central Queensland, Bushfires

 **Mr ANDREW** (Mirani—PHON) (2.35 pm): I rise again to speak on behalf of my community about their concerns following the Central Queensland fires which occurred three months ago. As recently as last week, the Mackay mayor was quoted as saying, 'All the QFRA experts are too busy up in Townsville and the north-west floods, and it will be another month before we can even start talking about burn-backs and land management.' Unfortunately, these things do back up like that.

These delays amount to setting much of Queensland up for a repeat fire season, as properly planned and managed controlled burns can only happen in cooler months beyond April and need to be finished by September as the summer heat returns again. I honestly fear that we could wind up engulfed in an even bigger inferno. Upwards of 10 years worth of fuel load still remains in my electorate across all of the state forests and up in the ranges.

Quality rainfall and lack of cyclonic winds has been wonderful for our sugarcane growers and the graziers unaffected by the bushfires, but the extraordinary amount of grass regrowth on neighbouring state forests and national parks is once again adding more material to the pre-existing fuel loads in those areas. Whilst the media were quick to report all of the green regrowth in the upper Pioneer Valley, not everywhere has bounced back.

The intensity of fires destroyed decades of old trees along with every piece of ground cover, leaving barren and exposed soils behind, especially on the slopes of the Clarke and Connors ranges. I am especially disappointed in the efforts by some agencies tasked with reef protection and land management. As soon as the crop dusters were finished dropping loads of water on the fires, these agencies should have been championing the same equipment to stay around and drop much needed grass seed to accelerate the regrowth and, in turn, minimise unwanted erosion and run-off to our Great Barrier Reef.

Where credit is due I tip my hat to those pilots who performed the water-bombing task. Indeed, the 737 loaned from New South Wales scored much of the publicity and glory, but without the bush ingenuity by some locals to dramatically modify the short Finch Hatton 'international' airstrip overnight, several townships would have been lost. That would have been a long-term disaster for tourism in the upper Pioneer Valley. Fortunately, the heroic combined efforts by many hundreds averted such a calamity. I urge as many people as possible from Brisbane and from interstate to visit the Pioneer Valley area. There are beautiful spots such as Finch Hatton and the gorge, Broken River, Eungella, Crediton National Park, Pinnacle, Gargett and the Teemburra Dam. They are all open for business again.

Speaking of the hardware used by the rural fire brigade units to put the fires out, I found it inexplicable to have volunteers put at risk, with elderly rural units failing on route to or at the fire front. I know of several brigades that had been asking for months previous as to the whereabouts of their long-promised replacements and availability of P3 masks to fight grass fires.

Rather perversely, the answer was forthcoming when dozens of brand-new rural fire units in convoy from Brisbane turned up outside the Koumala Pub. These were manned by Western Australian RFS people. Furthermore, I question what was achieved by not dispersing these interstate people to better exchange knowledge and skills with the local crews and work together. I would certainly hope that these brand spanking new rural fire trucks have since been distributed to the needy units and that they are now no longer being used as centrepieces for media grabs and being delivered in a piecemeal style.

To finish off the strongest message delivered by the rural people across my electorate, this state must get its act together and properly manage seasonal burn-off permits. Likewise, it must ensure that the fuel loads that have been building up in the state forests and national parks are taken care of in a timely manner.