




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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LEGAL AFFAIRS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (3.22 pm): The national bushfire crisis over Christmas was a bleak start to the New Year for many of us, including Queenslanders and Australians who had their homes destroyed, family members lost and jobs gone and who experienced significant dislocation. We had a terrible fire season—28 lives were lost and 2,000 properties were destroyed—and we know that the season is now very unpredictable.

When talking to this committee report I get distressed that we are somehow trying to sugar coat things by saying that we are getting better and we are doing well because clearly the evidence on the ground is that we are far from there. Some would argue that we can control drought and heat, but I believe that we can do practical things on the ground to better prepare and mitigate bushfires. It has been argued to justify this that if humans are causing climate change then we need to reduce the avoidable carbon emissions from large-scale bushfires. It is a must.

Fuel hazard reduction burns are no silver bullet and they do not alone prevent or arrest bushfires. They are exactly what they are called—‘fuel reduction’ to lower the intensity of fires. Regular low-intensity fires will reduce undergrowth and lower canopy density in balance with the forest ecology. Big, hot and intense fires will cause an explosion of eucalyptus regrowth. It looks green but it eventually chokes out the forest and leads to even bigger and hotter fires in the future without further intervention like cool burns more regularly or other low-risk mitigation works.

I acknowledge that fire is not the only fuel reduction option. There are lots of low-risk, low-intensity activities that can reduce fuel loads on site-specific and broader forest areas. Controlled grazing reduces dry fuel matter and improves forest soil health. Selective forestry practices reduce undergrowth density and fuel loads. They reduce canopy density which reduces canopy connection and canopy fires and increases light and water penetration which improves soil moisture.

We must maintain firebreaks and fire lines to allow access for our rural fireys and urban fireys to conduct fuel reduction burns and to control fires, to implement safe emergency back-burns and to segregate if a fire is wide enough. Green buffers with reduced stem density and fuel loads can allow for fire protection and mitigation. Control of noxious weeds and woody regrowth reduces fuel loads and increases forest health. Control of feral animals reduces weed incursion and soil disturbance. Maintenance of open grass lands and open forest structures reduces fuel loads and fire intensity, reduces regrowth and acts as a buffer to less fire tolerant and sensitive forest systems.

A missing component in a lot of the debate is a shared responsibility. I welcome the federal government’s intervention. Many homes and structures have been destroyed because they were surrounded by vegetation and built on woody ridges or on the tops of mountains. I emphasise the need for a shared responsibility for stronger planning controls, stronger building codes like shutters and sprinklers, and better education on the need to clear around properties.

While the First Australians implemented firestick practices, there is a large amount of scientific evidence to suggest that climate variation has had a significantly larger influence on our vegetation composition. That is why when we do these reports we must look more broadly and put a lot more effort into prevention. We need to respect and harness the prevention and firefighting knowledge in our rural and regional areas and do what we need to do to reduce this bushfire risk.

We know that most of the recent bushfires have been started in or have been exacerbated by national parks. This is shown through quite accurate and publicly available government mapping. Huge fuel loads in densely vegetated forests not only impact those forests directly but also impact adjoining land holdings. Most of the vegetation not in national parks is also heavily regulated to restrict vegetation management and fire mitigation activities.

A disturbing trend this fire season that has not been addressed was that most of these fires were deliberately lit or accidentally lit. Since the start of 2019 there have been more than 180 alleged arson cases around Australia. Police arrested 183 people for lighting fires in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

You will never stop bushfires in Australia. Our landscape and forests have evolved with and from fire. However, we can control the frequency, intensity and areas affected by bushfires. This will take more than talking about climate change or having IGEM reports on every fire. We simply must do more cool burns. It requires a wholesale review of our land and forest management and a commitment by all levels of government and all communities to implement strategic, practical and achievable bushfire mitigation measures.

We have converted vast areas of native forest into unmanaged fire traps and we have restricted human access and endeavours in the misconceived pursuit of a flawed concept of an environmental utopia. There is so much more we have to do. The result is that native forests and their biodiversity were left in ash, billions of wildlife cremated and rural communities in ruin.