



12 March 2009

Local MLA Calls For Action on WA Bushfire Threat

Dr Mike Nahan, the Member for Riverton, called on the Minister for Environment and the Government to fulfil the State's prescribed burning targets to lower the fuel load that has built up in the forests before Western Australia experiences a tragic event like the devastating fires in Victoria.

Dr Nahan, in his first speech to Parliament this year, said WA faces a very high risk of crown fires, where a fire gets into the upper reaches of trees and spreads in a manner that overwhelms fire fighters and towns, because the State's recommended prescribed burning targets have not been met.

"Even before the current Royal Commission into the Victorian tragedy, 15 other studies covering previous Victorian fires, the Australian Capital Territory fires and the New South Wales fires have been conducted in the last decade. This is not the time for more reviews on prescribed burning – it is time for action," said Dr Nahan.

"The lesson is that, but for the grace of God and luck, it could have been us this year. Unless we take action to reduce the fuel loads in our forests, it is only a matter of time before we experience a similar catastrophic fire."

"Just imagine the Leeuwin-Naturaliste area in the southwest at the height of the summer holidays and there is a huge bushfire. Thousands of holidaymakers and local residents would be trying to evacuate along the narrow twisting roads of the region as fire fighters fought the blaze. It would be an absolute nightmare."

Dr Nahan, who personally knows some of the people from Marysville in Victoria, said the commitment to prescribed burning began to wane in that State over the last two or three decades.

"During that time, the level of prescribed burning was a third of the level recommended by experts. The number and intensity of serious fires grew and after each fire, the Victorian Government would commission a review, and each would conclude that there were inadequate levels of prescribed burning," said Dr Nahan.

"Western Australia has been, and is still, a world leader in prescribed burning research and management and yet, the commitment to prescribed burning has waned to dangerously low levels here too."

"For decades, the annual target for prescribed burning in WA was in the vicinity of 300,000 hectares a year. That was reduced to 200,000 hectares a year during the 1990s without adequate debate and review. Since 2000, the Department of Environment and Conservation, the agency in charge of the prescribed burning program, has failed to meet even this reduced target."

"Between 2000 and 2008, the average annual area of prescribed burning in WA was only 149,000 hectares, which is 25 per cent below the target. This has created a backlog of 400,000 hectares where the fuel levels are now extremely high."

Dr Nahan said the Conservation Commission in its 2009 audit of DEC's prescribed burning program expressed no concern over the failure of DEC to achieve its 200,000 hectare target, nor did it detail the shortfall in prescribed burning.

"The Conservation Commission's statement and the response go a long way in explaining why the level of prescribed burning in WA has been allowed to decline and why we have systematically failed to meet the targets since the creation of the Conservation Commission in 2000," said Dr Nahan.

Dr Nahan said he is aware that prescribed burning is controversial and that many people find the resulting smoke unpleasant.

"We must convince people in the metropolitan areas that fire is a part of the environment and must be a part of the management of forests. A charred tree that will regenerate from a prescribed burn is far better than an incinerated landscape, property devastation, loss of human life and the total loss of habitat and wildlife that results from a catastrophic fire."

"I have been heartened to hear the Premier say that he intends to undertake a thorough review of the Government's approach to prescribed burning and that more needs to be done."

"There is no doubt in my mind that if we do not act on prescribed burning as recommended by the scientists and experts, and we continue to ignore the overwhelming tragedy that has befallen our fellow Australians, we will inflict upon ourselves a disastrous fire similar to that experienced in Victoria this year."

Media Contact: Mike Nahan 9457 1282 or 0412 911 969