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MLA Calls For Action on Prescribed Burning Targets

Dr Mike Nahan, the Member for Riverton, said concerns being raised in Victoria calling for stronger government efforts to meet recommended prescribed burning targets were pertinent for Western Australia.

Dr Nahan said WA is facing the threat of a tragic event like the recent devastating Black Saturday fires unless there are significant and rapid increases in the levels of prescribed burning locally.

"Very few Western Australians realise that our State's recommended prescribed burning targets have not been met for the last eight years," said Dr Nahan.

"As a result, we also face the very real threat of a catastrophic wildfire just like the ones that devastated parts of Victoria earlier this year with such a high loss of life. Like Victoria, we have not taken action to reduce the fuel levels that have built up in our forests."

Dr Nahan said in Victoria, some critics are now calling for the prescribed burning targets there to be tripled.

"Even before the current Royal Commission into the Victorian tragedy, 15 other studies covering previous fires in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales conducted over the last decade, all recommended that increased prescribed burning be undertaken to mitigate the risks of catastrophic forest fires," said Dr Nahan.

Dr Nahan said Western Australia has been, and is still, a world leader in prescribed burning research and management, yet its commitment to prescribed burning levels has been allowed to wane to dangerously low levels.

"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," said Dr Nahan.

"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 needs to stand up and explain to the public of Western Australia why it has allowed prescribed burning targets to decline to such dangerously low levels," said Dr Nahan.

"It should also outline what it plans to do to ensure that Western Australian communities living near heavily wooded areas are not subjected to a catastrophic fire."

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

"I believe 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 our forests," said Dr Nahan.

"A charred tree that regenerates from a prescribed burn is far better than a totally incinerated landscape, with the loss of life, wildlife habitat and property devastation that results from a catastrophic fire."

"If we do not act we will inflict upon ourselves a disastrous fire similar to that experienced in Victoria this year."

Dr Nahan has a Petition to the Legislative Assembly calling for the State's recommended prescribed burning targets to be met. Copies are available from his office on 9457 1282 or they can be emailed on request.

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