

## HANSARD

### Speech by Dr Mike Nahan on Prescribed Burning

**11 MARCH 2009**

**DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton)** [5.51 pm]: In my response to the Premier's Statement, I would like to add to the Premier's condolences and the condolences given by the Leader of the Opposition yesterday to the victims of the bushfires in Victoria.

I lived for more than a decade in Melbourne and spent many wonderful weekends with my family at a friend's home in Marysville. It was a lovely village, surrounded by large forests of mountain ash, with beautiful walks, lyre birds and excellent coffee shops. It is now all gone—the home, the town, the streams, the trees, and the birds are all dead and burnt.

Hopefully, the town will be rebuilt, albeit at great cost and over time. Some of the region's heritage, both built and natural, is gone for good. It is a tragedy, as both the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition mentioned yesterday.

The lesson for us is that, but for the grace of God and luck, it could have been us this year.

Indeed, the evidence is that unless we take action to reduce fuel loads in our forests, it is only a matter of time before we experience similar devastation in Western Australia.

This year's fire was not the first time Marysville has been affected by fire. It was also affected by the fire of 1939, called the Black Friday fire, which devastated Gippsland. After that fire, the government of the day—in common with the current Victorian Brumby government—called a royal commission; this was the Stretton royal commission, a very famous one.

A major finding of the Stretton royal commission was that Victorians should look to Western Australia for leadership in fighting forest fires and managing fire in forests, and specifically that Victoria should adopt Western Australia's recognition of the fact that fire is a natural—indeed, essential—part of the Australian environment, and that Australia's bush has evolved with fire.

Aboriginal people have, for tens of thousands of years, managed the land with frequent fire. In fact, the evidence is that Aboriginals not simply managed the land, they altered the environment to create an environment that needs frequent fires.

The royal commission also said that if fire is kept from our forests for long periods, fuel will build. If the fuel is not reduced, it will eventually cause catastrophic fires called crown fires.

Anyone who watched television over the past month or so will have seen the devastating effects of crown fires. The fire does not go along the ground but gets among the upper reaches of the trees and spreads in a manner that overwhelms firefighters and towns.

Crown fires in eucalyptus forests also throw out spot fires and burning embers that run kilometres in front of the fire. My friend's house was destroyed kilometres before the fire front arrived. This is what happened in Marysville in 1939 and 2009.

The lessons of the 1939 fire were learnt and led to the implementation of an ongoing program of prescribed burning. The program helped to avoid major crown fires in Victoria for decades.

However, by the 1980s the commitment to prescribed burning began to wane in Victoria, and by the end of the 1990s the commitment had waned significantly. In fact, the evidence is that the level of prescribed burning at this time was a third of the level recommended by experts and was inadequate. Large areas of the forests were not touched for decades.

The result was a growth in the number and intensity of serious fires in Victoria over the past decade. After each fire, the government would commission an inquiry or review, and each would conclude that there were inadequate levels of prescribed burning. After each inquiry the government promised to do something but did nothing.

The level and coverage of prescribed burning in Victoria has not increased and fuel loads have grown to dangerous levels, culminating in the catastrophic fires of last month.

The lessons for us in WA are real. The failure to act on prescribed burning as recommended by the scientists and experts will eventually result in catastrophic impacts; it will catch up with us. There is no running from it.

It is better to act now, in advance of a disaster, than to try to act in the midst of a disaster. Important things get lost in disasters. Priorities are given to saving people, building houses and roads, and making insurance claims, rather than taking preventive action.

The problem lies with effective political leadership and effective management. We must heed and act upon these lessons or we will inflict upon ourselves a similar disaster to that experienced in Victoria this year.

Although Western Australia has been, and is still, a world leader in prescribed burning research and management, the commitment to and performance of prescribed burning has waned 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 during the 1990s without adequate debate and review.

Since 2000 the Department of Environment and Conservation—the agency given carriage of the planning and implementation of the prescribed burning program—has failed to meet even this reduced target.

Between 2000 and 2008 the average annual area of prescribed burning was only 149 000 hectares, which is 25 per cent below the target. This created a backlog of 400 000 hectares.

**Mr M. McGowan:** How much per annum?

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** The area was 149 000 hectares against a target of 200 000 hectares. This inadequate program of prescribed burning has resulted in a large increase in fuel load. Large areas of Western Australia have fuel loads on the same scale as in Victoria prior to the recent fire season. Therefore, large areas are subject to an extremely high risk of crown fires or other catastrophic fires.

The Bush Fire Front, which is an association of forestry experts—largely ex-Department of Conservation and Land Management and Department of Environment and Conservation

employees—carried out last year, right before the fire season, an analysis of a number of communities in the east and south of Perth to rank the level of bushfire risk.

The areas of highest risk of crown fires are the Perth hills area, extending out from Walyunga, around Armadale, and as far as Mt Helena and Chidlow, and especially the areas adjoining the long, unburnt national parks and the regional parks along the scarp; the Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge, extending from Dunsborough down to Karridale, including Yallingup and Margaret River; and the town of Denmark and the surrounding urban residential and rural subdivisions.

The Bush Fire Front says, according to my notes — Of these areas, the Perth hills has the best access to firefighters but the highest populations and most to lose. Denmark has a rather milder climate, but far and away the heaviest fuels—these include karri forest last burnt in about 1940—and very poor fire fighting capability.

Leeuwin-Naturaliste has the worst problem during the summer school holidays, when packed with holiday-makers. The thought of these people — that is, the holidaymakers — trying to evacuate themselves along the narrow twisting roads of the region (Caves Road), in the company of fire fighting appliances, and in the face of a large bushfire, is an absolute nightmare. Many people would die.

I think we saw this in the case of the Victorian fires, when people fled in a hurry on a single road and in a panic smashed into other cars. The fire then came through and killed them all.

The Bush Fire Front is also very concerned about forest towns such as Jarrahdale and Dwellingup. Both of these towns are highly vulnerable to fires sweeping through from the ex-Alcoa mine sites. Pemberton is also vulnerable, as is the Warren National Park, parts of the tingle forest and important karri regrowth forests.

We must act. We must learn the lessons from Victoria and from our past success. Failure to do so will result in loss of life, homes, communities and heritage, natural and man built. The people in the Department of Environment and Conservation, in my mind, know what to do.

While the agency has lost a great deal of expertise in recent years—some left because of their age and others left in frustration—it still has sufficient expertise to set the right targets and carry out the appropriate scale and level of prescribed burning.

Indeed, DEC is still one of the world's leading centres of excellence on the science and management of prescribed burning. The problem has been that it has been constrained or restrained from doing the right thing, from doing what it knows needs to be done and from undertaking adequate preventive burning of our state forests to protect us and the environment.

Clearly, prescribed burning is controversial and can be unpleasant. Understandably, I believe that the public has an innate fear and dislike of fire. Fires are dangerous, can do damage, can scar the environment, can pollute the air and can alter the environment.

Anyone who has fought fires knows this. People have regularly and loudly complained about the smoke from prescribed burning, and politicians such as us have too often, I think, reacted by greatly restricting the times and areas available for burns. This must change.

People hate to see and regularly complain about black-tinged bush caused by prescribed burning. They believe it is a sign of excessive rather than necessary burning. Government and its policymakers have responded with a weakened commitment to prescribed burning.

A growing number of people have also succumbed, I believe, to the false belief that less harm to the environment, life and dwellings will be achieved by adopting a hands-off or leave-it-to-nature approach to the management of our forests.

These people are organised, vocal and political. They have acquired political influence, particularly through the Greens and their de facto coalition partner, the Labor Party.

They have been given great influence over the policy governing the management of our forests, and they have used this influence to restrict and restrain prescribed burning.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** What would be your optimum —

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** I will get to that. Of course, all these concerns and all these people must be listened to. Their arguments must be examined. They have the right to be heard and to participate.

However, they should not have undue influence. Their views must be subject to rigorous independence science-based assessment, and we must take due heed of the long-term consequences of delay in or lack of preventive burning.

We must convince people in the metropolitan areas—that is a task for me in Riverton—that, as part of living in Western Australia and managing our environment, we must tolerate smoke from prescribed burning.

It is part of life. We must convince people that fire is a part of the environment and must be a part of the management of forests, and that a charred tree is better than an incinerated tree.

We must convince people that man and fire are integral parts of the management of our forests, that a hands-off approach will destroy the forest, that policy must be driven by science, not ideology, and that we must manage for the long term, and not with myopia.

We must change the policy settings and the way they are set and enforced in Western Australia.

The Conservation Commission, which is the institution currently vested with the ownership of state forests, with determining policy settings for the management of forests and with auditing DEC's performance in carrying out the management of forests, is, I think, from its own statements and actions, not committed to adequate levels of prescribed burning.

The Conservation Commission, in its submission to the Environmental Protection Authority review of the fire policies and management practices of the then Department of Conservation and Land Management, stated — It is concerned at the effect that the use of a prescribed burn annual area target (200,000 ha) has on further polarising stakeholders involved in the current fire management debate.

That is, it does not like the target because people do not like it. It went on to state — it should not be seen as a target rather it should be viewed as a measure of the level of activity undertaken.

In other words, the 200 000 hectares target is not a target; it should be deemed as the amount achieved, even if it is not.

The Conservation Commission went on to say that other indicators that are more aligned to fire management and fire suppression should be used as opposed to those targeting prescribed burning.

In other words, the debate should be shifted from prescribed burning to fire management and suppression. I might add that fire suppression is a necessary ally of the management of the forests—but only an ally.

This view was pursued by the Conservation Commission in its audit of DEC's prescribed burning program.

In its latest audit—that is, 2009—it expressed no concern over the failure of DEC to achieve its 200 000 hectare target, nor does it detail the shortfall in prescribed burning. It was moot on it.

I suggest that the Conservation Commission's statement and the response go a long way in explaining why the level of prescribed burning in WA is declining and why we have systematically failed to meet the targets since the creation of the Conservation Commission in 2000.

I was 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. I support his decision.

It is the main lesson to be learned from the recent disaster in Victoria. It is timely and needed. In this process, I urge the Minister for Environment to ensure that the Conservation Commission adopts and then enforces adequate levels of prescribed burning.

I believe that the strong evidence is that we need to accept and enforce targets. The targets should be expanded from 200 000 hectares to at least 300 000 hectares for the long term.

We need to make up for the 400 000 hectare backlog in the current decade to date. I urge the minister to ensure that any review, unlike the 10 in Victoria in the past decade, does not gather dust. It must be acted upon.

The forest fires in Victoria were the worst natural disaster in our nation's history. We owe it to the Victorians who were deeply affected by the fires and to ourselves to learn from the mistakes in that disaster and to do what it takes to avoid duplication.

**Mr M.P. Whitely:** Member for Riverton, did you look at the report done by Gary Nairn when he was —

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** Yes, I did.

**Mr M.P. Whitely:** I met with him when I was the member for Roleystone, so I had an obvious interest in it. He said that of the states, Western Australia had the most effective prescribed burning.

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** Yes. Fifteen studies have been done in this decade so far, covering the Victorian fires, the Australian Capital Territory fires and the New South Wales fires. In each

case, those studies state—just as I referred to in the 1939 study—that Western Australia is leading the other states in using best practice for prescribed burning, and that historically, particularly up until the 1990s, as I have mentioned, Western Australia has had the best and most thorough program for prescribed burning.

There is no question about that. I believe that Western Australia still has the best system for fighting fires, and the best expertise. The same thing has been stated in the recent study about the Victorian fires.

What I am saying is that even though the evidence shows that we are better than the other states in fighting fires, there is still an unacceptable build up of fuel, at a level comparable to that in Victoria. The commitment by the public to prescribed burning is waning.

**Mr M.P. Whitely:** I understand the dilemma that you are talking about. I was obviously lobbied heavily by both sides of the argument, but I tend to support the comments that you are making. I would rather take the precaution of over-burning than have under-burning.

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** I think the commitment in DEC has waned a bit in light of the fact that many of the people who have been fighting forest fires are getting old. That is natural. However, we have a solid institutional and expertise base on which to build. We just need to enforce the targets.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** Yes, and resource them appropriately.

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** I thank the member for Mandurah. Yes. I did not go into a whole range of allied issues. What I am saying should not be taken in any way as a criticism of the need to resource a fire-fighting force. That is absolutely necessary.

However, for the crown fires that we saw in Victoria, most of the equipment that is currently being used is not useful. There is a raft of measures that, along with prescribed burning, can be used to inhibit the build up of fuel and manage the forests.

[Leave granted for the member's time to be extended.]

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** As this state has moved out of logging, logging roads have been shut down. Many of the people who were the best firefighters were the people in logging communities.

Those communities also had equipment such as bulldozers in place to help fight forest fires. That equipment is no longer there. A large number of the farming families that have made up the bulk of the people who fight forest fires are getting old, or are busy. Also, fewer people are now living in the bush. Therefore, there are many challenges.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** The technology and the change to fighting fires from the air was not around 20 years ago. We did not have those resources and that type of response.

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** Yes, but if we have a very high risk of crown fires, we need to have that type of equipment. However, in this case it is better to focus on prevention—as it is in health—than on putting out fires.

**Mr D.A. Templeman:** Are you aware of whether there is any intention, as part of the Premier's announcement, to review the emergency management legislation?

**Dr M.D. NAHAN:** I do not know. I think that what has come out of the lessons of Victoria is that it is good to have these reviews, and they are all useful. However, even before the current royal commission, 10 studies have been conducted in this decade, and nothing has happened.

I think the Premier of Victoria, Mr Brumby, has stated nothing less than that. This is not the time for more reviews on prescribed burning. It is time for action. That is my argument.

However, we do also need to look at the legislation. I hear that there are demarcation disputes between the various departments, as there always are, and there is a lack of coordination at times.

There is also a concern in the community about the lack of preventive burning on private land. The legislation to limit the clearing of native vegetation has led to an increase in the level of flammable material on private land.

Indeed, as we saw in the Victorian fires, many people were able to save their farms or homes only because they had violated the legislation on the clearing of native vegetation.

That is an issue that we clearly need to address. Again, all we would need is a period of no rain, two weeks of 40 degree-plus temperatures and strong winds, and we could have fires in the Naturaliste area during the peak of the holiday season. We can just imagine what would happen.

There are hundreds of thousands of people in that area during the holiday season. The roads are narrow. People would just not be able to get out. That is what we face. I urge the Minister for Environment and the government to act.

**MR J.C. KOBELKE (Balcatta)** [6.17 pm]: I was pleased to listen to the contribution from the member for Riverton. I am very impressed that he would use his contribution to this debate to make quite a well-founded presentation on fire and the problems it poses and the range of issues that we need to deal with, and I congratulate him for that.