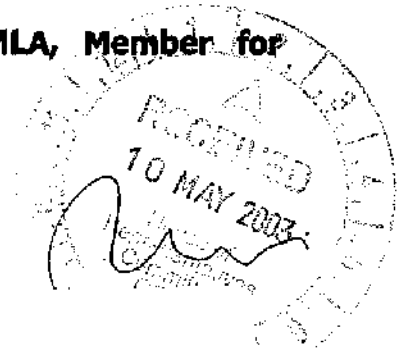


Submission by the Honourable Paul Omodei MLA, Member for Warren Blackwood

Clerk Assistant (Committees)
House of Representatives
Parliamentary Select Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Submission No.197

Dear Sir

Herewith please find my submission to the House of Representatives Parliamentary Select Committee on recent Australian bushfires.

I am a resident in the south west of Western Australia and was born in the area. My experience in farming and public representation in the district spans some 35 years.

I am deeply concerned that Governments and bureaucrats are ignoring the imminent threat to life and property by uncontrolled burning.

Rather than focus on 'after the event' or reaction to uncontrolled fires, resources need to be boosted to enable hazard reduction burns to occur.

WITHOUT SUBSTANTIAL AND IMMEDIATE ACTION MAJOR WILDFIRES WILL OCCUR. EVERY YEAR THAT PASSES WITHOUT THIS HAPPENING INCREASES THE RISK OF A MAJOR FIRE THE FOLLOWING YEAR BECAUSE OF INCREASED FUEL LEVELS.

To implement such a programme, the following is required-

1. Additional full time or seasonal fire crew members need to be appointed, for a minimum three-year term, with adequate training funds.
2. The Department of Conservations prescribed burning budget needs to be increased to allow for additional burning, including funds for extra ignition helicopter hire.
3. Additional budgets are required to maintain and improve strategic access in forests, including funds for bridge replacement.
4. Current constraints on prescribed burning, including allowing for some additional smoke over the Perth metro area on odd occasions, need to be relaxed.
5. Older Karri regrowth areas in strategically important areas need to be thinned, as a matter of priority, to allow for prescribed burning within two years of that occurring.

POTENTIAL WILDFIRE DISASTERS INEVITABLE IN SOUTHWEST FORESTS

A very serious situation exists in the southern forests of Western Australia, particularly in the magnificent Karri Forests in the southern forest region. A significant reduction in the amount of hazard reduction prescribed burning over the last twenty to twenty five years by the Department of Conservation and Land Management, has resulted in the majority of these forests carrying far more ground fuels than is desirable for realistic control of wildfire's. There are usually over 6 days every summer when "blow up" fire danger days occur – with strong dry winds, high temperatures, and low atmospheric and ground fuel moistures. This means that immediate suppression of wildfire's is humanly impossible, no matter what resources are available.

The current shocking wildfire's (many of them deliberately lit by arsonists) in New South Wales, are generally burning in open forests or woodlands and carrying far less fuel than those in W.A's Karri and associated jarrah forests. Accordingly, karri fires may burn at far greater (perhaps 20 times) the intensity (heat generation) than those in the areas currently burning around Sydney. Therefore the amount of damage to environmental and commercial values, private properties, other state assets and plantations from a single or multiple fire events here is likely to be correspondingly higher. The cost of suppression (including post fire rehabilitation) will also be exceedingly high.

At the same time, because of a (rapidly) likely serious shortage of qualified and experienced fire fighters, together with far less appropriate heavy machinery and operators (because of the decline of the timber industry), the chances of larger (or massive) wildfire's is increasing. It is no exaggeration to say that a single fire event in the karri and adjacent jarrah forests in extreme fire weather could easily top \$10,000,000 in monetary values alone. **There is also a strong possibility of loss of firefighters lives**, for various reasons.

The major problem for wildfire suppression managers, besides the above, is manifold. Firstly lack of low fuel (recently burnt areas) into which to guide and hold fast moving wildfire's, heavy fuels which reduce suppression speed, and increase the risk of an escape, long distance hoppers (up to 7 kilometres), private property assets interspersed throughout the forest area, poor access (untrafficable bridges and overgrown roads). The biggest problem though is safety of fire fighters. With duty of care, a manager cannot send fire fighters into an area that is potentially unsafe. Fire fighters may also refuse to enter hazardous situations as conditions change, so the fire may run for many kilometres for one or more days without direct suppression, consuming and destroying everything in its path. (A major fire in 1937 burnt from near Boyup Brook to Walpole).

Increasing numbers of 4 wheel drive vehicles, and people recreating in southern forests during the summer months cause extra problems for fire managers who have the additional responsibility of locating (which is time consuming, difficult, and uses additional staff), warning and evacuating these people during wildfire events. Aggravating the situation from a fire protection perspective is the fact that there are large areas of established karri and jarrah regeneration that cannot be prescribed burnt until they are of sufficient size to withstand fire (approximately 25 years for karri and 16 for jarrah). Ideally the karri should be thinned say 2 years before this time to utilise the smaller material, and reduce the fire intensity when burnt. If the area is not thinned beforehand, the burn becomes very difficult, costly, and greatly increases the risk of damage to the stand. We owe it to our future generations to ensure that this regeneration is available for them to manage and utilise as they see fit. A dollar spent now to protect these areas will be returned 50 fold in years to come.

Whilst the injection of additional money for CALM's suppression budget is welcome, it is being directed in wrong direction. It should be being used to maximise areas of prescribed burning, as this is far more cost effective and less damaging than wildfire. As an example, last summers 3000 hectare wildfire in the Nuyts Wilderness area at Walpole cost CALM around \$350,000 to suppress, when the same area could have been prescribed burnt for around \$10,000. In that fire some 100 quokkas and possibly the same amount of kangaroos were trapped and burnt to death plus other wildlife. That same fire could just as easily not been contained and run for another 20 or 30 kilometres along the coast if strong winds (which are normal on that part of the coast) had occurred. What would the cost have been then?

Water bombers would not be effective with karri fires (except possibly in the initial development phase) because of the high heat generation and high canopy of the trees. In multiple fire situations (such as lightning storms- which happen frequently) or escapes from live prescribed burns (which happens occasionally if strong and unpredicted winds occur), the situation is exacerbated if backup by CALM crews from other areas are not available because of their own fire suppression obligations. The time lapse with the arrival of outside crews is also a serious problem in the early stages of fire development as fires may burn for 6 or more hours without attack. In some situations if resources are not readily available.

CALM is charged with safeguarding the forest and environment under its control, so what has caused this serious situation to occur?

- Too many constraints on prescribed burning. The total avoidance of smoke over the Perth metropolitan area from prescribed burning is one of the biggest restrictions CALM faces. (It is frustrating to have perfect conditions for burning one day only to have a request for burning rejected because of smoke accumulation conditions over Perth), then have to undertake the burns the next day when conditions are nowhere as suitable, with all the increased risk of an escape because of the wind direction.
- Burning with heavy fuels adjacent increases the chances of an escape, so more preparation and care needs to be exercised, therefore increasing costs.
- As CALM is given more and more estate throughout the state (particularly in the form of National Parks), usually without additional budgets, so fire crews from the forest regions are directed to suppress fire elsewhere. Crews travel to places such Jurien, Perth, Albany, Esperance, Kalgoorlie etc. When this occurs, burning is suspended (often when conditions to burn in Karri forests are ideal) until crews return, or backup crews from other centres are available.
- Many burns (especially for silvicultural purposes) have become smaller and more numerous (and costlier) which reduces annual burning productivity.
- CALM managerial staff have many other duties and obligations besides fire (recreation development, conservation projects) and have difficulty satisfying all responsibilities adequately because of high workloads.
- CALM budgets have effectively been reduced over the years with reduced or maintained allocations, which do not account for CPI increases over time. Insufficient finance is often not available for road maintenance or bridgework to ensure adequate access requirements for management purposes.
- There are effectively less personnel in fire crews available for prescribed burning due to other obligations such as machine operating or recreation facilities work.

Much of this work can only be done in the drier summer months, which conflicts with burning operations. Wages staff numbers have been reduced by 40% over the last 20 years.

So what needs to be done to resolve this situation?

- The State Government should publicly affirm its strong support for prescribed burning and direct CALM to maximise burning as a cost effective way of protecting and maintaining environmental and other values, and minimising the potential for large scale devastating wildfires. Additional funding should be allocated to ensure this objective is met. Failure by CALM to achieve a satisfactory level of protection may lead (and ultimately the Government) open to legal claims if properties are burnt as a result of not meeting their protection targets. Should a firefighter be killed as a result of working in an unsafe environment, similar claims could be pursued also.

- The public's attitude to prescribed burning needs to change, to one of support for hazard reduction prescribed burning. Ideally, whenever they see smoke (from burns) they should think "Good, CALM is protecting our forests (and animals) from wildfires". In 18 years as Regional Fire Officer, John Evans of CALM Fire only had 3 complaints regarding smoke from prescribed burns (all from new arrivals to the south west) yet I have seen towns like Manjimup and Pemberton frequently blanketed in smoke with visibility down to 100 metres with no complaint. They understand the need for burning and protecting the forest and their towns and farms. City people need to be more tolerant of smoke. Asthmatics and other people with genuine respiratory complaints may need to be given protective equipment, but this is a small price to pay to ensure protection of the forests. Regular burns are also needed to provide fauna such as wallabies with food.
- Allow for increased levels of smoke over Perth and other major centres. Even Sydney (after the 1995 fires) has legislation to allow for the completion of part completed burns or initiate essential burns if no other options exist. The most stable and suitable winds for burning in WA are from the southeast, which unfortunately (occasionally) causes smoke haze over Perth. To require burns to be conducted with winds other than those suitable puts more pressure on staff and crews, and greatly increases the risk of an escape. It is crucial that this constraint is removed to allow CALM to utilise suitable weather for burning, when it occurs.
- Significantly increase funding for additional (part-time if necessary) fire crew members (there are plenty of timber workers currently available), equipment, and aircraft hire for prescribed burning operations and fire suppression operations. CALM firefighters normally work twelve-hour shifts (far greater than other government firefighters). In the near future, in multiple fire situations throughout the state, there is very likely to be a serious shortage of experienced CALM firefighters to allow two fully serviced shifts per day to operate. Very few bushfire brigade personnel are qualified or experienced to operate in forest fire situations, and therefore could only be used in support roles away from the fire face.
- CALM should purchase additional suitable heavy machinery for operation by experienced CALM personnel. In times of bushfire crisis the availability of alternative suitable machinery cannot be guaranteed – without it huge financial losses will occur, far more than the cost of one new machine. Experienced operators employed by timber companies have already stated that they will refuse to operate their machines on fire suppression (unless life is threatened) as a protest at their loss of employment in the timber industry because of the new labour government forest policy.

- There needs to be improved formal coordination and planning between CALM, Bush Fire Services, and Local Government for hazard reduction burning. Currently CALM works alone in planning its burns, but will incorporate private forests into its burns it suits. The Local Authority, assisted by Bush Fire Services should determine both long and short term strategic fuel reduction burning programmes on both CALM lands and private property simultaneously if possible.
- Local Authorities need to strongly enforce the Bush Fires Act on private forests or vegetated areas within their jurisdiction. Currently this is not being done which not only makes CALM fire suppression efforts more difficult, but increases the risk of escapes into private property whilst conducting their prescribed burns. Many properties are owned by non-resident people who have no idea of the threat their property is presenting firefighters. There are several towns in the southwest that are currently extremely vulnerable should a bushfire occur because of heavy fuels on private property and shire reserves (including roadsides). To safeguard themselves, brigade members should inspect any potentially hazardous property and if unsafe during a fire emergency, advise the owner (and shire, and insurance companies) that they will refuse to enter the property during a fire situation.
- The media need to be more sympathetic in reporting smoke over the city, or escapes from burns, especially before interviewing non accountable people from the conservation movement who see themselves as experts in all subjects, and the elected spokespeople for the entire population.
- A more balanced approach to the issue of prescribed burning needs to be presented in schools and tertiary institutions. Currently environmental academics and school teachers are presenting a strong anti burning argument to students without regard to the alternatives. CALM needs to run in-field information seminars for educators (and the media) to ensure that there is some balance to the debate.
- Ex CALM officers working for the Forest Products Commission experienced in karri fire management, likely to be transferred to other centres because of cutbacks to staff numbers should remain in this area, or be reinstated into CALM to ensure sufficient staff are available for prescribed burning and fire suppression duties. As a result of the split of CALM, there are now insufficient staff available to service fire suppression activities. Existing staff will have to undertake additional detention and duties to cover this shortfall causing additional stress to themselves and their families.
- Older karri regeneration of sufficient size needs to be thinned as soon as possible to allow it to be prescribed burnt.

Even with good planning and intentions, it will take several years of concerted effort to reverse the current situation and make the karri forest comparatively safe from wildfire threat. Unless this is done however, there will eventually and unfortunately be one tragic outcome. We don't need yet another Royal Commission after a major fire to tell us what we already know.

Prescribed burning is the only realistic broad scale way to protect the forest and other environments and fauna from devastating wildfires. Surely it is far better to decide in advance the specific weather and other conditions required and prescribe burn it accordingly, than wait for the inevitable wildfire and attempt containing it with large bulldozers, whilst damaging the environment and risking peoples lives and property. After the Brockman National Park Fire in 1983, over 35% of the mature karri trees died and the remainder were seriously damaged. Surely we don't want this to occur again over large tracts of our forests?

It is a very simple and clear choice – prescribed burning or devastating bushfires.

The following information paints a graphic picture of the areas of forest burnt and the cost to the state of Western Australia.

Prescribed burns conducted by CALM totalled 105,164 hectares, comprising 86 separate jobs.

There were a total of six wildfires that resulted from an escape from a Departmental prescribed burn. This represents one percent of total wildfires (598) attended by Departmental fire crews.

The area of wildfires from these escapes totalled 18,505 hectares. Two of these occurred in the Frankland District on 15 November 2002 when extremely hot, dry and windy conditions caused re-ignitions from unburnt pockets inside two prescribed burns that had been burnt out several days earlier.

	Lands managed By the Department (hectares)	Other lands (hectares)	Total (hectares)
Lightning (195 fires)	56,783	7,532	64,315
Arson (146 fires)	7,390	3,517	10,907
Accidents (56 fires)	181	721	902

It is not possible to accurately separate the burnt by "backburning" operations and the main wildfire. Backburning is normally undertaken when it is not appropriate to mount a direct attack on the main fire front. The factors that are taken into consideration include safety to firefighters, likelihood of success, environmental impacts of the suppression operation, nature of the terrain and soil types (eg. swamps, sand-dunes etc), values at risk and cost of operation.

The costs to the Department for prescribed burning, suppression and rehabilitation operations for each of the fire causes listed above are shown below. These figures are not final as not all accounts have been presented or processed. Costs incurred by other agencies are not included but they are likely to be small in comparison with Departmental costs.

Prescribed burning (excluding silviculture burns)	\$2,295,405
Silviculture burning	\$922,258
Wildfires resulting from escapes	\$648,094
Wildfires from lightning	\$2,857,750
Wildfires from arson	\$964,911
Wildfires from accidents	\$446,977

The incidence of wildfire could have been far worse if weather conditions were similar to the eastern states.

A Ministerial Statement to the WA Legislative Assembly by the Hon. Judy Edwards, Minister for the Environment and Heritage on 8 May 2003 is further evidence that CALM in WA is only meeting 50% of targeted controlled or hazard reduction burns. (see attachment)

N.B. Lack of resources will mean that the autumn planned burning will not be met.

I am so deeply concerned about this issue that I intend to send this document to the WA Coroner alerting him to the states negligence in this matter.

Yours sincerely



Paul D Omodei, MLA
SHADOW MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE;
EMERGENCY SERVICES AND REGIONAL SERVICES

Information source John Evans, CALM Regional Fire Officer and WA Parliamentary Hansard

**BRIEF MINISTERIAL STATEMENT TO
THE HOUSE
BY
DR JUDY EDWARDS MLA
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE**

ON

THURSDAY 8 MAY 2003

REGARDING

FIRE MANAGEMENT ON CONSERVATION LANDS

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Mr Speaker, I draw the attention of the House to the impact the recent bushfire season has had on the State's conservation lands, particularly in the south-west.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management advises the season was the worst in more than 40 years in terms of the number of wildfires, their intensity and the area burned.

Since the season began, the Department has faced approximately 600 wildfires that burned through 754,000 hectares between Geraldton and Esperance.

There were three fire events of note. One fire in January at Mt Cooke, about 70 km south-east of Armadale, burned through 18,000 hectares. This was the biggest single fire event in the northern jarrah forest since the disastrous Dwellingup fires in 1961.

It is significant that the Department's Director of Science, Dr Neil Burrows, visited the fire and remarked that it was one of the most intense he had seen in his 30 years of experience in forest and fire research. The fire was so intense that it melted glass bottles and aluminium signs marking the Bibbulmun Track, and killed mature wandoo trees and wildlife including bandicoots and birds.

In the proposed Walpole Wilderness Area, a fire that began in February flared in March and ultimately burned through 35,000 hectares. This was the single biggest forest fire event in the south-west since the Boorara fires of 1967. In late March, another group of fires burned through 25,000 hectares in the D'Entrecasteaux National Park.

The costs of suppressing fires on the State's conservation lands this season is in the order of \$11.5 million.

Of the 600 wildfires, approximately 200 were a result of lighting. In fact, between March 21 and 22, the Department responded to 30 lightning-caused fires between Yanchep and Walpole. These included five strikes in the D'Entrecasteaux National Park.

Mr Speaker, the Department often receives criticism from some in the community about escapes from planned burns. It is important to report the facts of these events in the context of the totality of the wildfires that the Department is called on to control.

Of the 600 fires to which the Department responded this season, six – or 1 per cent of the total number of fires – were a result of escapes from prescribed burns.

These fires burned through 18,505 hectares or approximately 2.5 per cent of the total wildfire area. Two of these were in the Walpole area last November when extremely hot and dry conditions, combined with strong, gusting winds, caused re-ignitions from unburnt pockets inside two burns that had been carried out several weeks earlier.

The Department has achieved 105,000 hectares of its annual planned burn program of 200,000 hectares. The first part of the program in spring was successfully carried out under difficult and dry conditions. The autumn program will also be very problematic because of the pressure to burn before winter rains end the planned burning season.

The Government supports the use of planned burning to achieve biodiversity and protection outcomes and has provided additional funds to ensure that there are sufficient Departmental resources to achieve the planned burning programs. While we have had some large fires this season, there have been no incidents of the scale that has occurred in parts of Eastern Australia and the United States and this is due largely to the commitment to prescribed fire.

Mr Speaker, finally, I would like the House to join with me in commending the efforts of the Department's fire crews and Incident Control teams during what was a torrid fire season.

Fire fighting is a dangerous and demanding business. There was only one instance in which a Department fire crew member had to be hospitalised for treatment as a result of fire suppression efforts, testimony to the professionalism of the Department's fire crews. Fortunately, the injured crew member has made a full and speedy recovery.

I also extend my appreciation to the many volunteer bush fire brigades, the Forest Products Commission, the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, and the support organisations whose assistance during the fire season has been invaluable.

In particular, I'd like the House to join me in thanking the partners and families of the Department's fire crews for their continued strong support while their partners and family members were occupied with fire suppression operations.
