

Submission to
The Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review
From Peta Townsing

Mr Mick Keelty APM
Chairman
Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review

Dear Mr Keelty,

Introduction

I make this submission from the perspective of a resident (not from an organisation) of the southernmost part of the Darling Range system who, as with other residents of the inland South West, has experienced similar bushfire events as occurred in the Perth Hills. The most recent were in January and February 2009 which affected people, properties and land in Bridgetown and Balingup. I found the terms of reference a little too prescriptive so have tried to go back to first principles about bushfires in the South West with a strong emphasis on prevention rather than trying to fight the fire once it has broken out. However, my submission does covers much of the Terms 1, 2 and 3. I realize this submission could be better organized, but I hope you will consider what I have to say. It is a big field and the more I learn, the more I find there is to learn.

Background

For most of my life I have been a keen gardener, I have a science degree and have taught maths and science, including biology, at high school level. I also have a deep love of wildflowers, finding orchids and growing trees, developed largely through my mother's influence. I am a long-time member of the Australian Garden History Society which studies the evolution and development of gardening in Australia.

Having being brought up in Perth during the late forties and fifties when Perth was little more than a large country town I had a semi-rural upbringing in what were then outer suburbs of Perth, namely Mount Hawthorn and Mount Lawley. It was in Mount Lawley that I first saw a wildfire when the Scaddan pine plantation was burnt. Two years later, when I was about 12, I witnessed a bushfire crowning and jumping a 20 metre fire break to burn the rest of the plantation. This area is now called Menora and has aged person accommodation in place of the pines.



Perth, apart from its perimeter and areas such as the Hills, has become much more urban. There are ordered parks, not much natural bush left, and there is plenty of concrete and bitumen.

I bought a small property in Bridgetown in 1988 partly because it was not urbanized and had good gardening conditions. By the mid-nineties I had moved there full time.

I felt I had an appreciation of what it was to live in a semi-rural environment, though I was not very well equipped to cope with a bushfire.

In December 2003 we and Bridgetown had a lucky escape from a fire which came very close to the town. *See the photo on the left.*

Firefighters and water bombers helped save the day, although the fire strength diminished, anyway, at 5 pm with a sudden drop in wind and a lower temperature so luck played a part.

The fireball as it came up the hill on the western side of Bridgetown was several times the height of the tall timber on the hill. The hillside on its eastern slope was grazed, so there was less fuel to burn which also helped slow the fire.

Lessons Learnt

From my upbringing and later experiences I have a developing appreciation of fire and its dangers. Particularly after the fires of summer 2009 I have been researching fire retardant gardening and the general firewise concepts as contained in such publications as the ACT brochure, "Firewise Home Gardens". (See attached).

For people brought up on farms or in small country towns, where there is an ongoing risk of summer fires, the understanding of fire behaviour and the need for tidy farms and low fuel levels is accepted. Paddocks near the homestead are actively grazed with the grass being kept low. Annual grasses - green in winter and gold in summer - are highly inflammable in summer and can take a fire rapidly to a house or to bushland. Awareness is high and there will usually be a family member in the local bush fire brigade.

Changing demographics.

In the past twenty or so years there has not only been a "sea-change" phenomenon, but also a "tree change" one. Typically, people in middle age or nearing retirement are seeking a change from the hectic pace of city life, so look to buy a place in the country to grow their own vegies, plant a garden, be involved in a more village type of life and be closer to forests and farmlands. Certainly many of

the people who come to live in the Blackwood Valley have an urban background with a significant proportion coming from Britain which is highly urbanized.

For some the “tree change” can be closer to Perth in places such as Baldavis or Bindoon or an area in the Perth Hills where they can be quite near to Perth and yet live close to bushland.

Thus these newcomers have little concept of the risks from fire when living in these zones, sometimes described, as living at the “rural interface” or the “urban forest interface”.

The mediterranean climate

In the Southwest Land Division, which includes Perth, the climate is designated as being mediterranean with long, hot dry summers when there may be no rain for five months and a cool, wet winter. This is a fairly rare type of climate in the world which occurs only around the Mediterranean Sea, the Cape province of South Africa, Southern California and parts of Chile. It is not the climate of the eastern seaboard of Australia. Some areas of South Australia and Victoria also have a mediterranean climate with little summer rain. Typically the rains for us can begin in May and for the next three months the bulk of the rain will fall before tapering off in September and October.

The endemic vegetation is highly adapted to this climate and can survive for months at a time without water. In the Perth Hills and the Darling Range the predominant vegetation type is that of Jarrah Marri forest with an understorey of perennial shrubs and grasses. On the Swan Coastal Plain there is Tuart woodland with patches of Jarrah, Marri and Banksias. Wildflowers emerge from July onwards peaking in September and October before becoming almost dormant through the hot summer months.

Fire occurrences

Fire is a frequent summer feature of the forest and more open woodlands of the South West. This pattern of burning is similar in other mediterranean climate regions. Caused by lightning or human activity, fires are not always disastrous in their effects as many of the wattles and other plants rely on fire for their seed to germinate and to bring about the removal of old vegetation and the recycling of nutrients. In fact many of the plants are practically designed to burn and will either be propagated from seed by the exposure to fire or smoke, or, will regenerate through the means of lignotubers or epicormic shoots.

In the excellent local publication “A Guide to Conserving and Interpreting Gardens in Western Australia” (1), the early colonists met with fire soon after arrival. I quote from the Guide. “The survival of the Aboriginal people also depended upon their frequent burning of the countryside, a practice that, because of the threat it posed to settlers’ homes and stock, influenced the layout of colonial properties. Until she became aware of the practical implications, Janet Millett, the York clergyman’s wife who wrote a vivid account of the colony in the 1860s, questioned why every tree was cleared from the vicinity of dwellings.”

From the early days of the colony it was the custom to keep the bush and dry grass away from the houses.

Gardening trends

Gardening can be defined as growing plants in a controlled way in order to create surroundings that are pleasant in which to live.

In the sixties and seventies there was a drive to find plants suitable for the sandy and alkaline soils of the new suburbs west and north of Perth and, as a consequence of the demand, nurseries that specialized in Western Australian native plants were developed. As well, drier winters in the seventies brought about water restrictions and government advocated the use of drought tolerant plants in gardens. Many of the native plants introduced to gardens in these early years became straggly, were generally unsuitable for gardens and were replaced (1).

In the eighties and nineties there was a resurgence of interest in cottage gardens and for more traditional garden ornamentals, such as heritage roses, because of interest in restoring older-style houses, as well water storage had improved and reticulation systems were more accessible.

However, in this century with restrictions again on water usage and the increasing interest in the environment, coupled with improved native plant cultivars, there has been an increasing focus for gardens to be made up exclusively of native plants especially those endemic to the South West Land Division. In fact the growing of local plants has overtones of patriotism with some property owners advocating the use of native plants, exclusively, with almost a religious fervour. These owners are, in effect, embarking on revegetation projects rather than carrying out gardening. The difficulty with this approach is that most of these native plants are inflammable.

The Water Corporation tends to support the former view with many of its recommendations for the types of waterwise plants to grow resulting in native plants being endorsed. On its website it has recently added a rider about fire prone areas which is encouraging.

However, it says under the Waterwise Plants for Wesern Australia section:

“Do you live in a fire prone area? There are plants that are both waterwise and firewise. Find out more:

Waterwise and firewise plants” which links to the website of the Australian Native Plants Society (Australia). The message seems to be “Grow natives, especially WA natives”.

Given our climate and water constraints it makes sense to select from the mediterranean climate regions which gives a much wider selection of plants from which to choose. In addition, by selecting from a wider palette, plants can be chosen which are not flammable indeed there are plants which have fire-retardant properties. If well maintained they will not actively feed a fire and will reduce the impact of the fire.

(1) “A Guide to Conserving and Interpreting Gardens in Western Australia” compiled by John Viska for WA Branch of the Australian Garden History Society, 2007. Available from John Viska,

The current situation

In the South West, including Perth, we live in a mediterranean climate with long, hot, dry summers. The native vegetation is adapted to these conditions including a dependence on being burnt periodically to regenerate. Over the past twenty years city people have moved to the fringes of the city and to country towns to enjoy a semi-rural lifestyle. Many have adopted a "grow native" theme for their immediate surroundings or have left natural bush on their property and have encouraged the retention of bushland nearby. Some will have standing dry grass near their house which is highly inflammable.

The Western Australian Planning Commission allows subdivisions in these semi-rural areas. Councils often support these subdivisions, sometimes zoned as "Rural Residential" or similar. The same Councils may actively support the growing of local native plants and even forbid the removal of native trees close to the house.

Suggested Improvements

As described above all the conditions are in place for bushfires to destroy properties in these rural interface areas each summer. In my considered view, these settlement systems have to change.

After the Toodyay fires, the Lake Clifton fires and the recent Kelmscott/Roleystone fires when numerous houses were destroyed, there needs to be a major rethink of housing in these susceptible areas at the urban rural interface. Although no lives were lost, over a hundred houses have been lost with more than a hundred households deeply affected. It is no small thing to lose one's house and for the Government to find this acceptable (West Australian, Premier Barnett comment page 7, February 11, 2011) is missing the point.

I recently met an American woman whose house was destroyed in the Los Alamos fires in New Mexico in the early 2000s. This well-adjusted, articulate person told me how it had practically destroyed her identity, how it had taken five years to overcome the trauma of the loss and why she thought losing one's house was a terrible calamity.

I would not be writing this submission if I did not think that these losses were preventable. To have one or two houses burn over summer is regrettable, though understandable, but to have 72 houses burn in the recent fires in Kelmscott Roleystone means that something is seriously wrong with our planning rules and the governments' (State and local) duty of care to these people.

If Government in the form of the WAPC allows a subdivision to go ahead in an area close to bushland or pasture then there needs to be steps taken to ensure that people buying land in the area are not put at undue risk of fire. They need to be educated about the risks and be able to be in a position to make informed decisions about their properties.

Some of these steps could also be applied retrospectively to residents already living in fire-prone areas such as the Perth Hills and in small country towns.

These steps could include:

- reducing proximity to bush by clearing a buffer zone at least 100 metres wide that contained no bushland and that was regularly mown and planted out with fire retardant plants, possibly deciduous trees;
- that titles to the properties have a caveat on them warning that they are about to buy into a fire-prone area;
- that the local Council offers educational material about living in a fire-prone area and requires new arrivals to attend a course;
- that the local Council sends a Fire Education Officer around to each individual property each year to offer practical advice about garden layout and plant choice. This advice would include how to maintain a garden to ensure that fuel in the form of dried grass, fallen gum leaves, overgrown, woody plants, etc. was minimal;
- that funds be provided to subsidize the removal of inflammable trees such as Tasmanian Blue Gums.
- that only in extreme cases where warnings have been given, that landowners be penalized for not carrying out fire breaks and hazard reduction. A person's home is their castle and an undue punitive approach can be counter-productive. Unlike, say, traffic laws when the greater community is affected by dangerous driving and penalties must apply for transgressions, an unkempt garden will more affect a householder, not the wider community. The principle needs to be "You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar".

On a more general level, these steps need to be considered:

- that more research be carried out to identify fire-retardant plants and gardening in a waterwise and firewise way;
- that less emphasis be given to the growing of local native plants, given that so many will simply add to the fuel load;
- that country towns and the semi-rural areas around the metropolitan area appraise their proximity to bush and take steps to reduce the fire hazard by clearing and more prescribed burns;
- that the waterwise campaign - which is largely about persuasion and not about penalties except as a last resort - adopted by the Water Corporation be the model for introducing the firewise concept. In my view people need to be informed about the need to be firewise in the semi-rural areas and be given practical options about the plants to use, the design to implement and the reasons why.

The prevention of bushfires is very important in the South West if we are to save lives and homes. Much of what I have outlined involves the individual householder and their immediate surrounds. I have not been so concerned with wildfire prevention in forests distant from towns, that is quite well handled by DEC. It is the semi-rural areas with people living in them that have to be made safer. And the best people to do that are the owners, but they need education and support, with government leading the way.

Peta Townsing

Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review

14 April 2011

Perth Hills Bushfire Review 2011

Submission by W. Luff



21/3/2011

1. The adequacy of the current preventive measures are glaringly inadequate. Prescribed Burning is a hazard reduction tool that effectively reduces dead leaf matter in a safe manner. And can be implemented during the winter months during dry days depending on the geographic le areas. Small landowners, many of them are neglecting their obligations, especially the 1 acre to 10 acre lots FESA and Council Rangers should be directly involved in assisting landholders to burn off their small properties.

FESA and Council Rangers should be directly involved in educating landowners in their legal obligations, and the art of using a fire rake and knapsak in the housekeeping of their properties. And establishing pumps and sprinkler systems in difficult areas.

2. Over the recent years Government and Council policies have neglected the safety of the landowners and and the public who frequent their lands. And it is going to get worse, purely with population growth. Councils in particular are restricting landowners from reasonably protecting themselves. Councils are hiding behind environmental policies set by uneducated and unqualified people, who make a blanket assumption.

Over many Years many educated an qualified people have expressed their concern about the way the hills population are in danger of their inactivity in fire control. Only to find, People, Governments, So called Enviromentalists, have tried to prove these good people wrong. Its not until we get a Kelmscott fire That we look for someone to blame.

Policies cannot be the same in Wyndham as they are in Walpole.

3. The options available to landowners and residents in bushfire risk management.

As a retired Fire control Officer, A message to all concerned. IT IS A PROVEN FACT, that prevention and housekeeping of Private and Government and Council properties SAVES MILLIONS OF DOLLARS.. in fire suppression. There is only one option available, and that is, for Government, Councils and the community to get together and formulate a plan, and clean-up the

offending properties . And get the area safe . By that I mean People, Property ,and Environment.

4. Communications can be overcome . No matter how good communications are there is always someone who will miss out. The old loudspeaker of the back of a ute is very effective.
5. In my experience Improvements cannot be made until Government , Councils and the Community get together and form an action plan. Improvements would have to be that FESA and volunteer brigades provide resources and help landowners out . One improvement could be . Insurance Companies to provide an incentive for landowners to have equipment and sprinkler systems. Such as ; sprinkler system around or through the house. And steel shutters on the windows. Property Ploughed or cleaned by livestock. There are many ways.
6. I have investigated the area where the fire occurred in Armadale Kelmscot. There are many houses that were burned show ,an over abundance of vegetation. It is amazing that more houses were not burned and there are many reasons why.

My theory for the fire travelling with such velocity is .

On the day of the fire ,we had extremely strong E-to NE winds. When the winds crossed the escarpment and carried on causing an Eddie or low pressure pocket under the escarpment. This followed by an strong funnelling wind down the Canning valley , along with high fuel loads , there was nothing that was going to stop it.

Also in My experience . I have had occasion to have a person approach fire control ,and advise that he had family inside the fire line and asked if he could go through the road block . So instead of barking threats of arrest and jail at him ,we organised two vehicles to go with him to investigate and take measures to secure the property or not. And retreat outside the fire line . This method should be exercised by the police at the road block .

There is a strong rift between FESA and other fire fighting authorities. FESA has criticised volunteers and Dept of Conservation on TV and in public. There is strong criticism of FESA not applying themselves to the fire until air assistance arrives. There is criticism about FESA claiming publicity of television and newspapers . I do not criticise any fire-fighter ,

but things must be managed.

The fire that occurred at Kelmscott ,should not be compared with any other fire that happened anywhere in Australia. In my experience there has never been any two fires the same . Apart from the similar principle methods to extinguish the fire. The volatility of the Western Australian forests takes a few years in understanding the fire behaviour and indeed the flash points ,under different weather conditions.

It may be adventurous but a successful fire plan for this area could be the blueprint to other councils to develop ,because they are having the same problems.

Over the last 20 years , a lot more people have bought up blocks and hobby farms. They enjoy the lifestyle however , they have no understanding of the dangers lurking.

If the Perth Hills Bushfire Review wish to interview me further,my details are listed below.

Wilfred Luff

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Luff', written in a cursive style.

Mrs. Lynn Shaw,

Mr. M. Keelty,
Review Chairman.
Fent Hills Bushfire Review.

Dear Mr. Keelty,

We understand living in our forested hills region has its risk element. People elect to live here because they enjoy the natural bush surroundings and unless you have fireproof buildings there is always the likelihood of homes being burned.

The bush, leaf litter, eucalypt trees are all a source of fuel and part of the forest area. The community is conscious of this and over the years have taken precautions to keep their premises safe from fires.

In fact, the occurrence of fires in the Fent Hills has dramatically dropped since being urbanised. In the past the Darling Range would be ablaze every summer.

Lightning strikes, accidental or deliberate fires are soon noticed by people, who raise the alarm for immediate action. Voluntary fire Brigades and FESA are quickly summoned besides residents themselves also assist. Hence fires in the hills have been minimised where there is habitation.

- Contd.

2.

However there is a noticeable regular occurrence of fires repeatedly in some areas of our metropolitan and outer regions every summer which appear to be deliberate. Such areas in the Helena Valley, Jane Brook, Jehu Forest National Park, Swan View, Caversham, Anangara and Baldwins.

We found the Radio Alert Announcements which kept the public informed were most helpful.

Hoping my letter will be of some assistance in your overall review.

Yours sincerely,
Lynn Shaw.

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Submissions should be submitted electronically (preferred) to:

or posted to:

Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review
Locked Bag 10, Cloisters Square
PERTH WA 6850

Note: All submissions received will be made available on the Inquiry's website. People wishing to make a confidential submission should make this clear at the time of lodgement and the Inquiry will not publish those submissions. However, people should be aware that whilst every endeavour will be made to ensure confidentiality, there is a possibility that such submissions might be released in accordance with the *Freedom of Information Act 1992*.

Contact Details

Name:	William Jones
Address:	_____
Email address:	_____
Telephone number:	_____

Organisation Details (Where Applicable)

Is this submission presented on behalf of an organisation:	Yes / No
If yes, name of organisation:	_____
Position in organisation:	_____

Response to Terms of Reference

You must address at least one of the Terms of Reference.

- 1. The adequacy of current preventative measures, specifically prescribed burning and other bushfire mitigation activities.**

COMMENT. My house is situated on the edge of Banyowla National Park. My family have lived here for 29 years and during this time have been subjected to three bushfires that have threatened our street plus three others in the vicinity, the last in 2009 which was caused by an illegal drug laboratory set up in the bush. We have never had a prescribed burn and at the present moment the amount of fuel is the highest I have seen and in my opinion is a disaster waiting to happen. In the week following the Kelmscott/Rolystone fires I telephoned Synergy as trees in the National Park were hitting the power lines on Karralika Crescent. They sent out one person who used a hand saw to cut one sapling and later on two trucks arrived and proceeded to lop the trees but left all the cuttings on the ground where they have added to the fuel build up. The Gosnells Council seem to want nothing to do with this build up as it's not their responsibility. In my opinion we have no preventative measures in this area and no prescribed burning policy.

2. The impact of land use, environmental and building laws, practices and policies in the affected areas, affecting bushfire prevention, mitigation and response and what, if any, changes may be required.
3. The actions that can and should be taken by landowners, residents and tenants in relation to bushfire risk management including undertaking vegetation clearance, operation of evaporative air-conditioners and storage and/or removal of hazardous inflammable material surrounding their dwellings and buildings. This should include consideration of associated enforcement regimes and penalties.

COMMENT. In the question of vegetation clearance rate payers are asked not to remove trees from the council verge (in our case about 5meters) these trees in most cases are gum trees. To have them removed means contacting the Gosnells Council , then wait on their expert to visit and decide on how dangerous these trees are, they do not prune the trees on a regular basis or plant plants which are to some degree fire tolerant. In fire prone areas annual inspections of blocks should be mandatory and if owners do not undertake the necessary requirements in terms of clearing hazardous materials, fines should be imposed. We have an evaporative air conditioner which we are able to have only water running through the pads, but if the power is off we cannot do anything. I would suggest that all evaporative air conditioners should have shutters fitted that automatically close if the power is cut, and all should have the capacity to have water running across the pads without the fan and electricity.

4. The adequacy and effectiveness of information and communication campaigns and mechanisms, including systems for alerting residents in relation to the fire or potential fires.

COMMENT. With all the fires that have affected us we received no information /communication as to whether we should evacuate. We live in a cul de sac there

are seven houses if a fire comes from the South , South East or East we have no escape route .The Department of Environment and Conservation have put up gates on the only escape route North along a fire break and we have never received anything from the Gosnells Council that addresses the problem of escape routes. On the day of the fires in Rolystone we could see the flames and smoke when the fire was in Clifton Hills, we were listening to the radio but even the warnings did not tell us in which direction the fire was moving and at what speed.

5. Improvements that can be made in relation to the coordination of activities across all levels of government, including with volunteer groups.

COMMENT. We do not have a water main in our street; we have to draw from the road below. When we have fires the fire fighters have to continually take their trucks to the hydrant located on that street which means we are unable to evacuate due to the traffic chaos. There should be a government investigation into the provision of hydrants in fire prone areas. When the power goes out we loose our water as the pumps located below are unable to work unless a generator is brought in which has happened when our power supply was being upgraded.

NOTE. It is to be hoped that Mr Keelty will take time to meet some of the individual person who have made submissions, not only those in the fire area but all along the Darling Scarp.

As a point of interest in September 2010 my wife caught a man lighting a fire in the National Park. He ran off and luckily she was able to put the fire out. She phoned the police to report the matter, we were contacted by FESA as to wether the fire was out, but we are still waiting for the police to turn up and take a statement. (It was a Sunday)

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Contact Details

Name:	<i>RICHA MASEN</i>
Address:	
Email address:	
Telephone number:	

Organisation Details (Where Applicable)

Is this submission presented on behalf of an organisation:	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If yes, name of organisation:	
Position in organisation:	

Response to Terms of Reference

You may choose to respond to one, some or all of the Terms of Reference.

- The adequacy of current preventative measures, specifically prescribed burning and other bushfire mitigation activities.**

Mr Mick Keelty

Mr Rich Maslen

Perth Hills Bushfire Review 2011

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Locked Bag 10

10 Cloisters Square

Perth WA 6850.

Dear Sir,

I am a long serving bush fire brigade member and the immediate past Chairperson of the Midwest Gascoyne District Bushfire Operations Advisory Committee. A committee formed to represent the Local Governments of the Midwest Gascoyne region in relation to all matters involving bushfire in the region.

I have a passion in ensuring the safety of West Australians in bushfire.

I wish to address the first term of reference of the review: **"The adequacy of current preventative measures, specifically prescribed burning and other bushfire mitigation activities."**

Please find attached a paper on this matter.



Rich Maslen

AM, AFSM, JP.

21/03/2011

RICHARD WALLACE MASLEN

Positions

1952 – 1953	Councillor	Town of Geraldton
1967 – 1991	Councillor	Shire of Greenough
1969 – 2010	Chief Bush Fire Control Officer	Shire of Greenough
1979 – 1985	President	Shire of Greenough
1987	President	Shire of Greenough
1977- 1991	Member	Country Shire Councils' Association Executive
1984 – 1986	President	Country Shire Council's Association
1984 – 1986	Executive Member	Australian Local Government Association
1979 -1991	Member	Bush Fires Board
1979 – 1993	Member	Agricultural Protection Board
1980 – 1989	Member	WA Local Boundaries Commission
1979 – 1986	Member	Mid-West Regional Advisory Committee
1986 – 1992	Chairman	Country Planning Council
1986 – 1995	Chairman	Abrolhos Islands Consultative Council/Abrolhos Island Consultative Committee
1987 – 1991	Chairman	Northern Regional Planning Committee
1986 – 1988	Councillor	Australian Bicentennial Committee (WA)
1987 – 1993	Executive Member for Australia	International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) Executive Committee
1989 – 1993	Vice President	Asia Pacific Region IULA
1989 – 1993	Member	Geraldton Mid-West Development Authority
1999 – 2005	Member	Bush Fire Services Consultative Committee
1995 - 2005	Chairman	Bush Fire Services Consultative Committee
2006 – present	Member	Bush Fire Grants Committee

RICHARD WALLACE MASLEN

Awards

1969	Justice of the Peace
1990	Freeman of the Shire of Greenough
1990 Life Member	Country Shire Council's Association
1990 – 2002 Trustee	Country Medical Foundation
1991 Recipient	Australian Fire Service Medal
1992 Recipient	Order of Australia (OAM)
1993 Recipient	National Australia Day Council Local Government Community Service Outstanding Achiever
1994 Recipient	WA Australia Day Council – Chairman's Award for Outstanding Community Service
1999 Recipient	Local Government Medal
2004 Recipient	Bicentenary Medal
2006 Recipient	FESA Outstanding Achievement Medal
2007 Recipient	National Medal (55 years' service)
Foundation Member	Geraldton Apex Club
Foundation Member	Torchbearers for Legacy

The adequacy of current preventative measures, specifically prescribed burning and other bushfire mitigation activities.

Background

Prior to July 2003 the Fire and Emergency Service Authority had the responsibility for the management of unallocated crown Land (UCL) and Unmanaged Reserves (UMR) in Western Australia. These reserves pose a significant fire risk across Western Australia. Prior to the formation of FESA in 1999 these reserves were managed by the then Bush Fires Board. There was considerable expertise and formal fire management programmes in place at this time to ensure the significant risk across Western Australia was appropriately managed.

FESA/Bush Fires Board staff worked closely with Local Governments, brigades and landholders for many years developing comprehensive hazard reduction programmes. Which were discussed at community forums and with community support were maintained. The management works were reported on at fire meetings and local ownership/involvement occurred. FESA working with Local Governments, brigades and adjoining landholders were able to achieve appropriate outcomes.

In 2003 the Western Australian Government transferred the management of UCL/UMR outside of town sites to the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

FESA continues to manage UCL/UMR in town sites across Western Australia very successfully.

In conjunction with the handover from FESA to DEC there was also an increase in staffing, equipment and funding for mitigation works on UCL and UMR provided to DEC. FESA had previously received token funding only for mitigation works and not for staffing or equipment to enable the works to occur.

Consequence

DEC currently has the responsibility for the management of UCL/UMR outside of town sites in Western Australia.

The following points are of considerable concern:

- Community/Brigade involvement as a result of this transfer has declined significantly.
- Mitigation works have dropped significantly.
- Larger fires are being experienced.

- Fire-fighters and the community are being placed at risk.
- DEC relationship with the agricultural community.

Community/Brigade involvement as a result of this transfer has declined significantly.

It is important that the community and brigades are fully involved in fire mitigation measures on land within areas which they will conduct response operations. In particular adjoining landholders and brigades with responsibility for response to UCL/UMR. Since the handover to DEC this no longer occurs.

DEC conducts its fire mitigation measures largely in isolation.

As a result community ownership no longer exists and what is more disturbing is brigades losing local knowledge of works completed and other important matters such as access/egress and water points on reserves. These matters are critical during response operations.

Mitigation works have dropped significantly.

FESA/Bush Fires Board Staff discussed/reported on hazard reduction works to the District Bush Fire Operations Advisory Committee and Local Government Bush Fire Advisory Committee meetings. It is now difficult to ascertain the level of mitigation works being conducted due to the lack of reporting and information being provided by DEC.

In the first three years of operations when comparisons could be made even with increased funding DEC was not achieving results which had been achieved by FESA and the Bush Fires Board. It is now difficult to determine outcomes due to the lack of reporting in DEC's annual report. Field observations indicate significantly less hazard reduction operations are occurring, since the transfer to DEC in 2003.

The fire management plans which were previously in place are not being maintained and as a result this area has again experienced large uncontrolled fires, which had become a thing of the past. The premise for previous fire management plans was the ability to contain fires within single designated cells and the maintenance of buffers to prevent fires escaping to or from private property. This has been compromised and fires are consuming vast swaths of land putting fire fighters and community member's lives at risk.

A small amount of community time which had previously been expended on hazard reduction works has now exploded into a response requirement as the fires have become larger and of longer duration. Further exacerbating community angst.

DEC relationship with the agricultural community.

The Department of Environment and Conservation has duties in relation to land conservation. The prosecution by DEC of farmers whilst court sanctioned does not lend itself to harmonious relationships between DEC and the wider farming community.

Matters in relation to vermin affecting farmers adjoining DEC estate is a point of continued conversation in the farming community which further strains the relationship between DEC and the agricultural community. These matters are not viewed in isolation.

A trend which is developing is reluctance of the volunteer farm fire fighting force to respond to assist DEC with fires on DEC estate.

Recommendation

- That the management of all Unallocated Crown Land and Unmanaged Reserves in Western Australia be returned to the Fire and Emergency Services Authority.
- That the additional resources provided to the Department of Environment and Conservation for the management of UCL and UMR's being transferred to FESA.
- That ongoing funding be provided to FESA to ensure the management of UCL and UMR's continues to the high standards provided now by FESA in the management of town site reserves.