



Submission to:

Public Inquiry into January 2016 Waroona Fire

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Prepared by: Mr Grady Powell
Organisation: The Western Australian Farmers Federation (Inc)
President: Mr Tony York
Address: 125 James Street
Guildford WA 6055
Postal Address: PO Box 68
Guildford WA 6935
Phone: (08) 9486 2100
Contact Name: Grady Powell
Title: Executive Officer
Email: gradypowell@wafarmers.org.au

Address: 125 James Street, Guildford WA 6055 // **PO Box:** PO Box 68, Guildford WA 6935

Tel: (08) 9486 2100 // **Email:** gradypowell@wafarmers.org.au
www.wafarmers.org.au

1. The response to the January 2016 Waroona Fire.

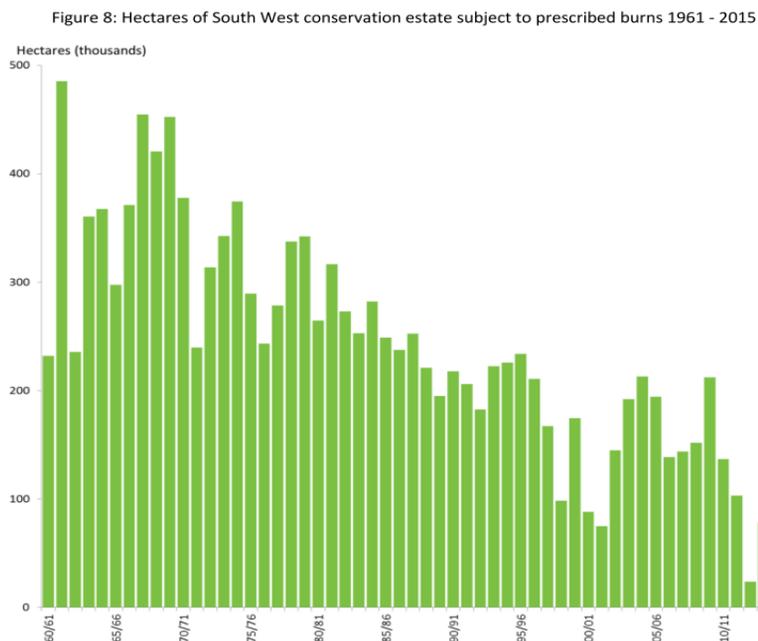
a. The effectiveness of pre-incident bushfire prevention and mitigation activities.

The South West of Western Australia is one of the most fire prone regions in the world due to a combination of a Mediterranean-type climate, which consists of hot dry summers and decreasing rainfall throughout moderate winters. These climatic conditions lead to increased fuel loads and, combined with the forestry and native vegetation in the region, create a real need for regular fire mitigation procedures to be implemented.

As a result of devastating fires in the South West in 1961, a Royal Commission was held and the Western Australian Government adopted a policy of prescribed burning of state forests and bushland. From 1962 to 1985, the severity of fires was significantly lessened as a result of prescribed burning. It is important to note that fires sparked by dry storms of Cyclone Alby in 1978 created some 65 wildfires which were pushed with strong winds. Despite weather conditions being unfavourable for firefighting, the fires were manageable due to prescribed burning, leading to fuel load reduction. This is a proven testament that thorough and regular prescribed burning has a role in protecting our communities, but also assisting our firefighters during a fire.

The Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) have a target to burn 200,000 hectares of forest and bushland each financial year. At present, Western Australia is failing to meet this target, with only 20 per cent completed this year so far (approximately 42,000 hectares burned, 32,000 of those in the Perth Hills). The previous financial year only saw 39 per cent of the prescribed burns completed in that particular reporting period.

The Department of Parks and Wildlife's inability to meet its own targets creates unrealistic and unachievable amounts of fuel to be burned off for the following year. It also creates a dangerous environment for future prescribed burning to occur, and presents high fuel loads that could lead to catastrophic fire conditions. It is fair to assume that the intensity experienced in the Waroona fires can be attributed an increased build-up of fuel loading as a result of declining back-burning. This, in conjunction with DPaW's focus on metropolitan-based burns and neglect of regional centres, has led to an environment that is vulnerable to catastrophic bushfires. The graph below demonstrates the declining prescribed burns achieved in the South West.



Source:
Major Incident
Review of the
Lower Hotham and
O'Sullivan fires,
DFES 2015, p.17

It has also been suggested that fire mitigation through back burning does not last as long as it had previously. When back burning was conducted in an area it would typically be some eight to 10 years until it would need to be re-addressed. In current times, we are seeing the same back burning practices lasting only four to six years. With current fuel loads being estimated to be 30 tonnes per hectare (forest and bushland) and farmland consisting of four tonne crops with eight tonnes of matter, fires can be expected to be hotter and larger. It is imperative fire mitigation is completed properly and, for it to remain effective, prescribed burning will have to be undertaken more regularly and much more extensively than the current status quo.

b. The effectiveness of emergency management plans and procedures.

A farmer, resident or business owner knows the lay of the land and residence better than any visiting fire brigade. For an emergency management plan to be effective, the landowner must be present to implement all appropriate strategies. The first issue that arises is roadblocks and access to property during a fire emergency.

There appears to be a lack of common sense and consultation when Western Australian Police and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) install roadblocks. When primary producers have been agisting livestock when under threat from fire, there have been instances where the trucks have not been allowed back onto the property despite there being further stock or humans on the property.

There have also been instances where farmers have been required to enter their properties to milk their dairy herd, or feed livestock. A cattle producer from Preston Beach has 6,000 cattle on his property that require regular feeding; however, the carting of feed was hindered due to the roadblocks surrounding his property. After extensive negotiation, the landowner was eventually permitted to cart two truckloads of feed into the property. However, on the Friday morning, he was again refused access. Primary producers are faced with a situation where they are forced to make a decision between going around roadblocks against the advice of emergency services, or ignoring the obligations associated with owning livestock and face consequences under the Welfare Act. WAFarmers cannot allow its members and other primary producers be in such a position, and reaffirms the position that there needs to be provisions around roadblocks that allow farmers to freely enter their properties to feed livestock and perform other essential work when it is safe to do so.

Further examples have been experienced by the dairy sector in the fire affected areas. Many dairy farmers required access to their properties with fuel and diesel to ensure that generators powering refrigeration facilities were operational. Without generators, the milk cannot be kept at the agreed refrigeration rate, leading to the milk spoiling and having to be discarded. This has serious repercussions for the business as it is a loss of income, but also for processors as they have commercial contracts that must be fulfilled.

The dairy industry's reliance on power generation extends further than refrigeration, with the milking rotary parlours, pumps and storage all requiring power to operate. This is essential to the operation of the dairy itself, but extends as far as being an animal welfare issue. A dairy cow is a highly productive animal, requiring milking twice a day. If the animal is not milked it can lead to the udder bursting, which is painful for the animal and will likely lead to the cow having to be euthanised.

The importance of allowing a landowner to their property was evident during the Margaret River fires in 2011. The building manager of Walcliffe House was unable to pass the roadblock to turn on the building's fire reticulation. The procedures and processes surrounding roadblocks appear to be black and white, and if there was provision for leniency within this framework there is a possibility the heritage listed building would still be in situ.

The alternative to roadblocks is the use of traffic management and detours. Moving traffic safely around or through the fire ground is more efficient for commuters, emergency workers and landowners. Due to the unpredictable nature of fires, the current procedure of closing roads and having traffic backed up leaves them vulnerable in the event of the fire front shifting directions.

c. The effectiveness of the suppression strategies and tactics used during the fire.

The report into the Lower Hotham and O'Sullivan Fires, handed down in December 2015, measured the performance of the Incident Management Team (IMT) against the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS). Within AIIMS there were specific functions that the IMT must fulfil to manage a fire emergency, such as: control, planning, intelligence, operations, investigations, logistics, finance and public information.

The report has anecdotal evidence that DFES and IMT are regularly under-resourced with state assets, and that decisions made are inconsistent with the KPI's outlined in the AIIMS framework. An emergency situation requires quick thinking and prompt decision making. DFES has developed a culture where they have become risk averse, and this has stemmed from a fear of facing repercussions after a fire. This culture needs to be stamped out as fire management and prompt decision making is essential in any unified firefighting effort.

d. The effectiveness of the incident management, including coordination of the agencies, volunteer fire and emergency services and interstate assistance.

The coordination of the Waroona fire has drawn criticism from many stakeholders, and these issues appear to stem from the apparent divide between career firefighters, volunteer firefighters, DFES and DPaW. Further, there were assets ready and available to assist the firefighting efforts by way of farming firefighting equipment. An example of assets not taken advantage of was the assistance offered by the forestry industry. These additional resources could have been instrumental in assisting the firefighting efforts in Waroona and Yarloop.

Farmers attend bushfires to extinguish them, not for any other reason. Farmers, landowners and volunteers possess vast knowledge in firefighting practises, but also hold invaluable local knowledge of the landscape itself as well as contacts for people within the locality. Capturing this local knowledge and expertise can prove essential in combating fires.

In the case of the Waroona fires, the local expertise offered to assist the firefighting efforts was refused by DFES. WAFarmers recognises a fire ground can be a dangerous environment; as a result, every precaution should be taken to keep humans safe from harm. However, if farmers are arriving with personal protection equipment and additional machinery and firefighting equipment, those assets should be harnessed, not turned away.

The advantage of utilising farmers is they have the ability to patrol their own properties and neighbouring areas to control ember attacks and spot fires. This is a highly efficient way of preventing the fire spreading and creating a larger fire front for firefighters to tackle. Utilising

local knowledge has a much broader scope to impact fire efforts than simply utilising DFES career and volunteer firefighters. Allowing farmers access to the fire ground would significantly bolster the assets at the Fire Control Officer's disposal, which could lead to reducing the loss of crops, native bushland, livestock, properties and human life.

e. Protection of essential services infrastructure and access to essential services (power, transport, water, communications) by emergency services organisations and community.

During the fire emergency, there were reports that there were difficulties in accessing water. Some residents suffered reduced water pressure and, in some instances, the water was cut altogether. This restricted water access seriously impacted residents' ability to prepare for the imminent fire. Those residents who wished to stay and defend their properties were left vulnerable by the lack of water infrastructure. This particular scenario would have resulted in the loss of property, as any effort to stay and defend property would have been rendered ineffective. Further, leaving residents without access to water could have led to a loss of life.

With uncertain water resources in the fire affected areas, there have been suggestions that fire tankers had to leave the fire zone and refill at an area that had sufficient water and flow rates to fill the tankers. They then had to travel back to the fire ground to resume firefighting efforts. Tankers having to commute to refill leaves people and property vulnerable to fire, but also results in key firefighting assets sitting idle, leaving or rendered ineffective which is simply unacceptable in a fire emergency, especially an emergency of the scale Yarloop reached.

There needs to be contingencies put in place when it comes to power and water during a fire emergency. Water for combating fires must be trucked in if there is no access to reliable scheme water with sufficient pressure, or access to dams or catchment areas. Furthermore, all firefighting pumps are powered by diesel motors and generators, so emergency services will need to ensure they have access to reliable fuels rather than relying on existing power sources or local fuel and diesel suppliers. Having a broad range of reliable firefighting assets will create a stronger effort in combating bushfires with minimal interruptions, particularly those that were experienced in this fire.

f. The effectiveness of public messaging including the adequacy and timeliness of emergency warnings issued to residents and visitors.

The bushfire emergency gained significant radio and television attention to help residents in the area make the best judgement as to whether to evacuate or stay and defend property and livestock. There were updates hourly, although the information that was broadcast was usually unaltered. This led to the public service announcements becoming somewhat redundant. Furthermore, there were issues with the relay of information via the DFES text messaging service.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services issued the first warning on Wednesday 6 January. This particular warning included Waroona and the Shire of Harvey, which does include Yarloop, but the message did not specifically mention the town, which may have hindered the implementation of fire management plans for some businesses and residents.

The township of Yarloop was named in an alert distributed at 7.35pm, Thursday 7 January. The fire front arrived at the town of Yarloop at 8.00pm that evening, giving residents just 25 minutes to prepare for the fire emergency. The lack of notice could have attributed to the serious damage sustained by the town, including the loss of two lives. The town was destroyed in approximately seven minutes, so preparation was paramount and 25 minutes is nowhere near adequate.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Commissioner responded to media questions surrounding the details included in text messages at the time of the fire, during which he defended them by saying it was obvious there was a fire in the immediate vicinity of Yarloop. However, fires are unpredictable in nature so it is imperative that entire, accurate and regular information is relayed to the community; there is no room for misinformation and second-guessing. DFES should have erred on the side of caution and included Yarloop in all emergency announcements, especially when there was a real threat to lives and property.

WAFarmers recognises that the text messaging service is simply one of many options available to residents and should be used to supplement other sources of information, so there is some expectation that residents use other information streams. However, the text messaging service is a powerful tool as it contacts residents directly. Further to this, texts provide a real opportunity to get facts to people promptly in a form that is easy to read and understand, and it does not require the person actively go and seek the information.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Service not including a particular location, in this instance Yarloop, in the text messaging service has proven to be an oversight. If Yarloop was included in the initial text message on the Wednesday, there would have been a day for the town to prepare for the imminent fires. This available time could have been utilised to prepare the town for the fire or, if deemed necessary, evacuate entirely. Having full details disclosed via text messages could have significantly altered the events experienced by Yarloop in this particular disaster.

2. The need for further reform

The Waroona fire has often been referred to as “the fire of missed opportunity”. This reference can be attributed to the refusal of assistance from primary producers and other bodies. To counter this attitude, WAFarmers encourages the State Government to adopt a similar policy to what currently exists and works well in South Australia.

The Farm Fire Unit program allows farmers who are involved in assisting neighbours and the Country Fire Service (CFS) in fighting fires. Each sticker is valid for a 24-month period, and must be placed in the farm vehicle possessing the firefighting unit. An example of the sticker is below.



Source: South Australia Country Fire Service: Farm Unit Guidelines

The CFS hold a community event where primary producers can come together to meet each other as well as CFS firefighters. During these events, the farmer's firefighting units (tank and pump) are inspected and certified to be in working condition, and are then provided with one sticker per firefighting unit. It is the responsibility of the vehicle owner to ensure that the vehicle is serviced and in reliable order.

The meetings of CFS firefighters and primary producers also serve to strengthen the culture between the groups and unify them as a firefighting unit. A system such as this would prove beneficial in Western Australia as there is an apparent divide between volunteer and career firefighters.

During a fire emergency, the sticker would allow a farmer with his/her firefighting unit to pass roadblocks and assist in extinguishing the fire. It is the responsibility of the vehicle owner to ensure they have the necessary personal protection equipment on hand, and the knowledge of how to operate their firefighting unit along with appropriate firefighting skills. There are training courses available should a primary producer want to further enhance their skills.

WAFarmers proposes that a register be kept of people with certified firefighting units; this will allow the Incident Control Manager to see what local assets are available in the immediate area. The benefit of this is that the fire front will be able to be extinguished from a far greater range of target points, leading to the containment of the fire in a shorter timeframe.

