



## Country Fires (Incident Control) Amendment Bill

29 November 2000

**Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders):** The Country Fires (Incident Control) Amendment Bill has come out of public consultation and discussion between the minister and all the parties involved in fires such as the recent ones in Hambidge National Park on Eyre Peninsula and, of course, the Ngarkat Conservation Park. It is practical evidence that this government listens to constituents and acts positively. Elements in this bill arise from the constructive suggestions put forward in the very well attended briefing sessions and in the consultative process which resulted from these fires. It is not the result of any one person, but from the input of many people over many years.

The farmers on Eyre Peninsula produce around 40 per cent of the state's grain in a good year and, judging by the crops I have seen, this year will be a good one. In addition, I have a large number of national parks in my electorate. Control of fires in our crops is essential, therefore the control of fires in these parks which border on these cropping areas is of importance to the whole of Eyre Peninsula as well. Fires are caused by many incidents. Several recent ones have been directly from the use of equipment used to harvest the crops. However, one of the most treacherous and most unpredictable is lightning strike, often within the national parks.

The first attack in fighting and containing a fire is crucial. Local knowledge is essential, as is good equipment and first class training. This bill will help to ensure that the first response is fast and, hopefully, decisive, often at night or in the early morning before a fire has had a chance to build momentum. Many of the suggestions that came out of the Hambidge and Ngarkat Park debriefings did not need to be implemented by way of a bill. Many required only policy changes and their implementation. Some required only better equipment and training. Some of these changes have come to pass and, as yet, some have not.

We are fortunate that we live at a time when technology can be harnessed for our good in ways undreamt of just a few decades ago. Global positioning systems (GPS) is one of these technologies. The fire in Hambidge highlighted the need for GPS in on-ground vehicles and in aircraft used for reconnaissance. Rough terrain combined with smoke and unpredictable winds combine to make a very dangerous environment for our firefighters. GPS allows accurate plotting of a fire and the position of vehicles, therefore precise coordination of efforts to combat the fire by using resources most effectively and safely. GPS allows operations to continue during the night and in the early morning when atmospheric conditions are most responsive to controlling a fire and/or extinguishing a fire. Missing vehicles with GPS can be located quickly, providing security for personnel and relief for friends and family who often suffer for many hours wondering if their loved ones are safe.

The emergency services levy has proved its worth through the funds it has generated for the maintenance and upgrade of facilities. I have been pleased to note the ever extending provision of GPSs to emergency services, particularly country fire services and at the commissioning of three new vehicles for Eyre Peninsula last Saturday at Tumbly Bay, with the minister, Robert Brokenshire—

**The Hon. R.L. Brokenshire:** Four.

**Mrs PENFOLD:** Sorry, four—I was also pleased to see specialised mapping equipment. This equipment will soon allow for accurate maps of a region to be combined with the precise position of the fire and the location of trucks by GPS. These maps can be used for briefing units on a big screen and copies handed to firefighters. In addition, the maps can be printed off at any remote location that has a computer with a printer that is connected to the internet. Even the problem of locating vehicles so that firefighters can be relieved or just provided with food and water by backup people will be easier. Of course, none of this equipment will be useful without proper training, and I commend those volunteers who often at their own expense, attend training so that they know how to use the new equipment to its best advantage.

Farmers whose vehicles do not need to be registered for day-to-day work can use these vehicles in firefighting without the necessity for them to be registered; thus, the vehicles can be driven on public roads to access a fire. This means that a large pool of farm firefighting units is available to lift the firefighting capabilities in a district.

One of the suggestions that came from the consultation was that those using their own vehicles and equipment for firefighting have the ability to be compensated through the local controller for staked tyres and other related expenses due to firefighting, particularly in national parks.

Safety is of paramount importance in the inevitable chaos surrounding the fighting of a large fire. It is imperative that volunteers offering themselves and their machinery log on and log off. This is a self-evident safety measure of knowing who or what is where, but there is the added possibility of compensation in case of injury or damage.

Safety includes the type of clothing that firefighters wear. It would be advantageous to both metropolitan and country people to mount a public campaign explaining the flammability of different types of cloth. Many people are unaware that wearing inappropriate clothing at the scene of a large fire leaves the wearer open to serious injury or even death. People arriving to fight a fire clad only in shorts and thongs is not a myth. However, the CFS volunteers are well aware of the problem and are being provided with the best of protective clothing, at a cost at level 3, of head to toe protection, of \$1 000 per person.

Fires in national parks can have negative outcomes that do not apply in other instances. The destruction of native flora and fauna is a possibility, even to the point of extinction of a species where the only surviving species are destroyed. To combat this danger, and to eliminate or reduce the risk of farms and towns being put at risk, several measures were suggested in the consultation process.

A 25 metre firebreak to be maintained on the north, east and west sides, and a 50 metre firebreak on the south side of parks, with a cleared access road kept for vehicles in case of a need for back burning, and breaks to be chained every four to five years, are among those suggestions. The perimeter fire breaks would minimise future outbreaks into farming land and into scrub and remnant vegetation on private land which provide a valuable sanctuary for wildlife or from these areas into the national parks.

Consideration was requested to be given to dividing all large national parks such as Hambidge into appropriate sections by firebreaks. The firebreaks could be used as roads of access for firefighting machinery and vehicles, thus also providing a measure of safety for the firefighters and volunteers. The firebreaks would assist in containing a fire, thus lessening the impact of the fire on the park itself and perhaps help to protect areas of greatest biodiversity.

Controlled burning of parks has been a hotly debated topic over the years. It again came into prominence with the fires in New South Wales that caused a great deal of damage to properties on the outskirts of Sydney suburbs. Controlled burning is now being used in parks to lessen the fire danger. Controlled burning reduces the flammable matter and therefore the risk of a fire starting, or a small fire becoming a big one. Controlled burning that has been properly assessed protects flora and fauna. Small areas are burnt, thus allowing the natural process of regeneration after a fire to occur, and species are protected because they are not burnt out wholesale.

The fire in the Hambidge Conservation Park did identify one necessity that is not at first obvious, that is, the supply of water. People fighting a fire lose copious amounts of fluid and require frequent and plentiful replenishment, or they suffer dehydration that can be life threatening. Bottled water was used but it was found impossible to meet the demand. Ice and water in coolers was a more effective method of supplying the necessary fluid. Volunteers who log on and log off can be readily supplied with water and food because their whereabouts are known. It has been known for firefighters to forget to log off and to be found sound asleep in bed, blissfully unaware of the manhunt that they have caused. Water and food are crucial in maintaining the health of firefighters and in preventing collapse.

I previously mentioned the food that was supplied to firefighters at the Hambidge fire. Country Women's Association members, church and community groups are magnificent when it comes to an emergency of this nature. The generosity of country people is a byword. The resources volunteered at Hambidge, both human and machinery, were considerable. The willingness of people to be involved was commendable. Volunteers, CFS and National Parks officers worked together with the community, and catering was, as I mentioned, exceptional. However, improvements can always be made, and I hope that better equipment, appropriate training and improved procedures (some of which have already been made), combined with the amendments in this bill, will help to improve our firefighting and minimise the loss of life, destruction of property and the loss of the biodiversity that occurs within our national parks. I support the bill.