



Speech By
Andrew Powell

MEMBER FOR GLASS HOUSE

Record of Proceedings, 20 February 2020

LEGAL AFFAIRS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr POWELL** (Glass House—LNP) (3.43 pm): I too rise to address the Queensland Audit Office report into the follow-up of bushfire prevention and preparedness. At the start, I convey my sympathies to those families who lost loved ones, to those individuals and families who lost property and to those who lost their livelihoods in the fires we have seen over the past 12 months.

What we see in this report is that the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services did not know if Queensland's fuel loads were being managed effectively. I want to give the House a really stark contrast of what happens when you effectively manage a fuel load. I recently visited David and Wendy Clark who own and operate Bellthorpe Stays Natures Retreat on Willett Road at Bellthorpe. They are quite literally surrounded on all sides by the Bellthorpe National Park. For many years, they have been dreadfully concerned at the lack of fire reduction or hazard burns being undertaken in the national park.

Fortunately, last year—and they asked me to particularly single out the work of senior ranger Nat Smith from the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service—they were able to achieve a couple of very strategic cool burns in the Bellthorpe National Park. It was just as well because during the fire season last year two consecutive fires broke out just south of Conondale and raced up towards Bellthorpe but were stopped because of the effects of those cool burns. As a result, the national park was saved, as were the animals, the birds and the wildlife in that national park. The ecosystems were saved, and the livelihoods and lives of people in Bellthorpe like David and Wendy were saved. We can compare that with what we saw at Deepwater National Park over Christmas where it is literally scorched earth. It is nothing but black sand underneath the canopy. That is the difference between using hazard reduction burns and not using hazard reduction burns.

I also want to address an ongoing concern from rural fire brigades in my area who are perplexed and angry that urban units continue to be called out before rural fire brigades for fires in rural zones. In two instances, fires broke out almost adjacent to the Narangba Valley rural fire brigade. Units in my part of the world were on stand-by as the volunteers had taken time off from their work to be in their sheds ready to be called out. They knew the conditions were dangerous enough that they would be required during the day, yet they listened to the radio as they heard urban and auxiliary units being called to these fires prior to the rural fire brigades being notified to get there themselves.

There are a couple of key concerns around this. The first is the expertise. I really appreciate the work that our urban and auxiliary firefighters do, but where does their expertise lie? In urban fires. Where does the expertise of rural fire brigade volunteers lie? In rural fires. It also concerns me that the urban and auxiliary units are then tasked to rural fires when potentially there could be an urban fire that occurs at the same time. Then we have a situation where houses are lost and lives are potentially lost. It also frustrates the volunteers themselves who, as I have said, have taken time off to prepare themselves for what could potentially happen on days like we had late last year.

The reality is that we do need an overhaul of our fire preparedness, we have to have a bushfire mitigation plan and the LNP's 10-point plan does exactly that. We will have a one-stop shop for streamlined approval processes. We will have deemed approval after 15 business days under a right-to-burn model. We will have new key performance indicators to achieve 98 per cent of hazard reduction activities. We will have Indigenous rangers to undertake traditional burning. We will establish a natural disaster cabinet committee to monitor preparations—not just the disaster itself but the actual preparations. We will monitor grazing in state forests and some national parks to manage fuel loads—that is an important step that is dreadfully necessary. We will establish urban based rural fire volunteer brigades. Again, as I said, that will lessen that requirement to call on urban and auxiliaries, and instead use our hardworking rural fireys. We will restore local control to rural fire brigades. We will establish a rural fire board. We will review aerial firefighting capabilities. We know that we are going to have more seasons like we have had. We need to be prepared. Only under an LNP government will we be prepared.