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Minister for Emergency Services; Corrective Services

Our ref: 65-15818

State Coroner
Coroner's Court
Level 10, Central Law Courts
501 Hay Street
PERTH WA 6000
Email: coroner@justice.wa.gov.au

Dear Ms Fogliani

The State Government of Western Australia wishes to provide a response to Coroner Linton's recommendations (Attachment 1) arising from the Coronial Inquest as a result of the 2015 Esperance bushfires which included the Cascades, Merivale and Cape Arid fires.

The bushfires in Esperance in November 2015 were some of the worst fires in recent Western Australian history. They had a devastating impact on the Esperance community, especially those who tragically lost family and friends.

The Esperance bushfires were followed in January 2016 by the Waroona Fire, a tragic bushfire event that caused two fatalities and significant destruction to property, livelihoods and the environment. As you would be aware, the Waroona Fire was the subject of a Special Inquiry, the findings of which were tabled in Parliament by the former Premier in June 2016.

The emergency management landscape and framework has undergone significant reform since 2015. The State Government has invested heavily in the creation of the Rural Fire Division within the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) to increase the focus on bushfire management, particularly mitigation. DFES is now a holistic emergency management agency, focused on prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

The State Government's commitment to bushfire management in Western Australia has been further demonstrated through the:

- establishment of a Bushfire Centre of Excellence to enhance capacity and capability and build skills, knowledge and experience in bushfire management;

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- creation of the expanded State Bushfire Advisory Council to provide advice and recommendations to the Minister for Emergency Services and the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner on issues of strategic importance in relation to the bushfire management sector;
- formation of the Interagency Bushfire Operations committee to coordinate all aspects of bushfire management across Government, including research, information, technology, doctrine, operations and aviation; and
- investment of more than \$50 million in bushfire mitigation, with this funding helping to address serious bushfire risk across the State, including assisting local governments to develop Bushfire Risk Management Plans.

Importantly, we are now starting to see the results of this enhanced focus on bushfire management. The integration of enhanced rural fire capability and expertise into DFES' procedures, planning, policy, and operations has strengthened collaboration and interoperability within the agency, and also between DFES, local government and bushfire volunteers. The substantially increased funding and establishment of the Mitigation Activity Fund and Bushfire Risk Management Program are assisting local governments to identify and treat bushfire risk across the State.

To date, 82 local governments are now participating in the program, accessing more than \$20 million in funding. In addition, the first-of-its-kind Bushfire Centre of Excellence is now operational, running training courses and a Traditional Fire Program from its temporary facilities in Pinjarra. The new permanent facility will be completed in December 2020, creating a home for bushfire training, knowledge and engagement in Western Australia.

Late last year, \$96,140 was provided to the Shire of Esperance to fund a Bushfire Risk Planning Coordinator for six months to begin development of a Bushfire Risk Management Plan (BRMP).

The Esperance BRMP has identified 2,084 assets so far that have been mapped, their risk assessed and recorded in the DFES Bushfire Risk Management System. The Plan is 95% complete with nearly 250 new assets added between July and September 2020.

Members of local Bush Fire Brigades have been incorporated into Project Advisory Teams as part of the DFES Asset Design and Delivery Model to inform the requirement and the specification of firefighting appliances to suit local conditions.

Specifically, a Bushfire Fleet Mobility Working Group was established in December 2019, with members including DFES, Shire of Esperance personnel, volunteers and subject matter experts who work together to define opportunities to enhance the mobility of the fleet in local terrain.

As a result, earlier this year DFES undertook trials of modified firefighting trucks to improve the all-terrain capability of the firefighting fleet which is now in the final stages of the procurement process. This includes fitting appliances with the Central Tyre Inflation System which will provide further safety protection to career and volunteer firefighters.

Improvements to crew safety and digital communications have been delivered through the deployment of the Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) capability as part of the comprehensive crew protection system which also includes burnover blankets, radiant heat shields, under body critical component lagging and shielding, in-cab breathing systems and external cab protection water deluge sprays. In addition, super single tyres will be trialled on selected appliances following final engineer assessments to ensure compliance with legislative requirements.

In the last four years, the State Government has invested over \$110 million in both career and volunteer fleet appliances. Of that, \$96 million was for volunteer fleet appliances, representing 90% of the total allocation of funding.

As you may be aware, the Esperance Shire currently has 16 Bush Fire Brigades, a State Emergency Service (SES) Unit, a Volunteer Marine Rescue Group, and a Volunteer Fire and Rescue Brigade. These volunteer groups are directly supported by a DFES District Office with a District Officer (Natural Hazards), Community Emergency Services Manager, Area Officer and an Administration Officer.

In addition, DFES has reduced the size of its Great Southern region by placing an additional Superintendent in a new region created in the Upper Great Southern. This has reduced the workload of DFES Officers responsible for the Esperance and surrounding local governments.

To further support local Bush Fire Brigades, through the Emergency Services Levy, the State Government has contributed funding for four new fire stations in Esperance, including:

- Co-located Quarry Road Bush Fire Brigade and Esperance Emergency Support Unit facility;
- The first ever facility for Howick Bush Fire Brigade;
- Scaddan Bush Fire Brigade facility; and
- The first ever facility for Coomalbidgup Bush Fire Brigade.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) also has significant resources in the area.

The State's aerial fleet consists of 31 aircraft and includes the Erickson Aircrane "Georgia Peach" which can drop up to 300,000 litres of water – the equivalent of ten backyard swimming pools – every hour.

Largely situated at nine main bases around WA, the fleet also has 30 regional bases and 70 helicopter landing sites available during the season. Jointly funded by the State and Federal Government, the fleet can be mobilised within 15 minutes. DFES, as a matter of routine, allocates and positions its fleet and support personnel well ahead of forecast poor or deteriorating fire weather conditions.

Since 2015, fixed wing aerial suppression assets have been deployed to Esperance or Ravensthorpe when forecast conditions predicted an increase in bushfire risk. Between 2018/19 and 2019/20, aerial intelligence and suppression aircraft were deployed to support the Great Southern region on eight occasions.

In February 2019, DFES deployed two newly implemented aerial capabilities in support of the Esperance Bushfire Complex with the B200 King Air Linescanner and a medevac helicopter.

In partnership with DBCA, an additional radio repeater was installed at Peak Charles in June 2020 to improve radio communications in the northern part of the Esperance Local Government area.

DFES has also enhanced its incident management capability, including the creation of multi-agency Pre-Formed Teams that can be promptly deployed to Level 2 and 3 incidents.

In October 2016, the multi-hazard Emergency WA website was launched in collaboration with DBCA, the Bureau of Meteorology and Geoscience Australia to improve the delivery of high quality, relevant information to the public during emergencies.

Emergency WA provides a live feed of all incidents reported to DFES, allowing the public to find out about a fire as soon as it is reported via triple zero. It contains critical information and warnings about fires, floods, storms, earthquakes, cyclones, hazardous material incidents and prescribed burns information from DFES, local governments and DBCA. This platform also publishes Fire Danger Ratings and declared Total Fire Bans.

The State Government has provided \$15 million over two years for emergency services volunteer infrastructure projects. This stimulus investment will provide essential facility upgrades and improvements (including water tanks) to ageing facilities that no longer meet operational requirements and lack basic amenities.

More than 90% of Western Australia is classified as bushfire prone, the continuation of an annual bushfire awareness campaign is essential to keeping the risk of bushfire top of mind and to encourage the community to prepare.

To this end the WA Government has committed \$1 million for a new media campaign to build on the good results of previous years but target complacency and get people to take action.

While the current research tells us that the community understands the dangers of bushfire (The I Am Fire campaign saw the number of people who were aware of the risk of bushfires jump from 36 to 52 per cent), it also shows that people are not converting this understanding into the development of their own bushfire plan.

The new 2020-2021 campaign will tap into the psychographic behaviour of people by demonstrating the consequences of not having a bushfire plan through realistic, humanised scenarios in an emergency bushfire situation.

Following a successful trial, DFES has also introduced Portable Automatic Weather Stations (PAWS) which provide valuable insight into local weather conditions. PAWS can be quickly deployed by road or air and monitors the local weather conditions that can influence bushfire behaviour. Together with the Bureau of Meteorology's existing automated weather stations, data relating to temperature, humidity, wind and rainfall can be swiftly accessed by emergency services on the ground.

The State Government is committed to preventative emergency management strategies including bushfire reform, which strengthens efforts to keep Western Australian communities safe and provide support for DFES staff and emergency services volunteers.

We acknowledge that a copy of this response may be included in the Coroner's next Annual Report and made available on the Coroner's website.

Yours sincerely

**HON FRANCIS LOGAN MLA
MINISTER FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES**

Att. Attachment 1 - Recommendations and State Government Response.

03 NOV 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STATE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Recommendation 1:

I recommend the DFES immediately take steps to create and fill the additional positions of a District Officer, Area Officer (Rural Competencies) and Bushfire Risk Management Officer to supplement the current Area Officer in Esperance. If these changes require additional funding, I recommend that the Honourable Minister for Emergency Services give priority to considering how funding can be allocated for these additional positions and then arranging for that funding to be made available.

Supported In Principle

The State Government accepts that emergency management staffing needs are continually evolving in regional WA. The State Government accepts that additional emergency management staffing may be required including in the Esperance region.

DFES has employed a Community Emergency Services Manager for the Shire of Esperance, and as an interim measure, seconded a Natural Hazards District Officer from the Kalgoorlie office to the Esperance office.

DFES is developing a risk to capability model which, when applied across the State will assist in prioritising resources to optimise operational service delivery. If required, DFES may then seek to secure additional permanent regional staff to support emergency management in the Esperance region.

Recommendation 2:

I recommend that DFES commence planning and fund allocation for a Career Fire and Rescue Service Station to service the Esperance – Ravensthorpe Community all year round, and to respond quickly to provide support to the local volunteer Bush Fire Brigades in the event of a bushfire. If that change requires additional funding, I recommend that the Honourable Minister for Emergency Services give priority to considering how funding can be allocated for the creation and staffing of such a station and then arranging for that funding to be made available.

Not Supported

The State Government does not support a Career Fire and Rescue Service Station to service the Esperance-Ravensthorpe community.

The State Government has instead prioritised bushfire prevention and allocated significant funding to bushfire risk mitigation in the region, to help mitigate against the threat of catastrophic bushfire.

DFES' Resource to Risk modelling does not support the establishment of a Career Fire and Rescue Station in the Esperance region. New Career Fire and Rescue Stations are recommended according to comprehensive risk modelling and finite resources available. The Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner has the statutory authority and appropriate operational expertise to recommend new fire stations based on need. Any departure from current practice will compromise the operational needs of the Department and deliver suboptimal outcomes to the wider community by redirecting funding from higher operational priorities.

Recommendation 3:

DFES adopt a policy by which: (i) any authorisation under s13 which is initiated verbally be made in writing (as required by the Act) as soon as practicable; (ii) a copy of the written authorisation be given to the local government or DPaW as soon as practicable; and (iii) the fact of any authorisation, once completed, be (where possible) communicated to those in the ICV and on the fireground as soon as practicable.

Supported

DFES has updated Incident Controller procedures to ensure local governments are notified in writing of Section 13 authorisations and/or handovers between DFES, DBCA (previously DPaW) and the respective local governments.

DFES has developed training materials to improve understanding of legislative authorisations and handover processes. Updated resources, such as guides, checklists and templates are currently being rolled out to in preparation for the 2020/2021 southern fire season.

An Incident Control Vehicle Reference Group is being established to define and improve standards of incident communications, resource management and information management during operations.

Recommendation 4:

The State Government give consideration to giving a higher drafting priority to the Consolidated Emergency Services Act.

Supported

Cabinet has approved the drafting of an Exposure Draft Bill. Parliamentary Counsel's Office will draft the legislation in accordance with Government priorities.

The proposed legislation will amalgamate and modernise current emergency services legislation, and clarify responsibilities for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

The McGowan State Government, if re-elected, will review a higher drafting priority to the new amalgamated emergency services legislation.

Recommendation 5:

DFES fund an additional two light tanker appliances and one heavy duty appliance to be used by the Esperance Volunteer Bushfire Brigades, at their discretion. The appliances should be provided on a permanent basis, as the Brigades need to be able to learn how to use the appliances and train on them, and the fire seasons are becoming extended and unpredictable.

Supported in Principle

The State Government supports the availability of additional firefighting resources in regional WA, including the Esperance region.

DFES is committed to undertaking a review and potential expansion of the summer season firefighting fleet allocation across the south west land division (SWLD) based on a risk to capability assessment.

Recommendation 6:

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions allocate funding to the Esperance District Regional Office to purchase an item of earth moving equipment suitable for fire mitigation works, as well as for use during a fire, together with 1.0 FTE position for an operator of the machinery, on a permanent basis. If there is insufficient funding within the Department, I recommend the Honourable Minister for Environment support an increase of funding for the Department to allow this recommendation to be fulfilled.

Not Supported

DBCA has adequate access to heavy plant machinery and operators available from within its existing resource base across the south west and from local contractors. These resources assist DBCA to meet its obligations for bushfire mitigation and response on lands for which it has legislated management responsibility, and to meet its bushfire mitigation responsibilities on unallocated Crown land (UCL) and unmanaged reserves (UMR) outside town sites as required by a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage (DPLH).

Local government and DFES are responsible for developing and implementing rapid, effective, and complementary fire response arrangements for UCL and UMR. DBCA's existing arrangements to utilise contract machinery for bushfire response on lands for which it has legislated management responsibility for provides a more flexible response capacity than acquiring one additional item of earthmoving equipment.

Recommendation 7:

The South-East Fire Working Group's final plan for a long-term fire mitigation strategy be fully supported and funded by DFES and the State Government. I suggest that at a minimum, the funding should cover a period of ten years to allow for the creation of firebreaks and strategic fire exit tracks on the vast area of UCL in the Esperance region, with a view to then formalising ongoing funding for maintenance after that time on a long-term basis.

Supported

The State Government supports long-term bushfire risk mitigation planning.

The State Government supports the South-East Fire Working Group to facilitate the sharing of resources amongst stakeholders.

More than \$1 million in grants and funding allocation for bushfire risk mitigation has been invested in Esperance in the last three years, with a further \$355,000 allocated for 2020/2021.

DFES manages Emergency Service Levy funding for bushfire risk assessments, prescribed burning, firebreaks and other works in cooperation with local governments, DPLH and DBCA.

Recommendation 8:

Consideration be given to reviewing the Memorandum of Understanding between DPaW and the Shire and, as part of that process, the MOU should include a more streamlined procedure to ensure that the best balance can be met between ensuring that cognisance is taken of rare flora and fauna and areas of cultural significance on the interface with farms and UCL, but which permits farmers to undertake mitigation works expeditiously to ensure fire risk is reduced on the borders.

Supported

The State Government supports the development of an appropriate agreement between DPLH and managers of land next to UCL to facilitate and expedite bushfire risk mitigation works. DFES manages mitigation funding for government land, including on UCL.

DBCA is developing administrative processes that reflect the State's responsibility to adequately protect rare flora and fauna and areas of cultural significance as outlined in the relevant legislation. The intent is for these provisions to align with agency processes and ensure a balanced solution for bushfire risk mitigation on UCL and for the protection of biodiversity conservation values.

Recommendation 9:

The WA Government, via DFES or whatever is the relevant agency, undertake an assessment of established airstrips in the north-western quadrant of the Esperance Shire, with a view to identifying airstrips that can be enhanced to permit operation by water bombers. Once a suitable site has been identified, priority should then be given to funding the necessary upgrades to make the airstrip(s) suitable for that purpose.

Supported in Principle

The State Government supports an assessment of airstrips in the Shire of Esperance.

DBCA has the operational capacity to assist DFES and local government with the identification and assessment of existing airstrips to determine suitability for aerial suppression operations.

DBCA manages the fixed wing fire-bombing operations and, as such is the relevant agency to conduct an assessment of airstrips for their suitability for water bombing operations. DFES will provide assistance to DBCA are required.

Recommendation 10:

The Honourable Minister for Emergency Services and/or the Honourable Minister for Environment, depending upon whose portfolio water bombers actually falls, give priority to funding (at an estimated cost of approximately \$800,000) a Wheatbelt based aerial fire suppression response for the full fire season commencing in the Wheatbelt and concluding in Esperance.

Supported in Principle

The State Government supports in principle availability of additional fire suppression aircraft for the Wheatbelt to Esperance area.

Fixed wing aerial suppression assets are managed by DBCA with funding provided by DFES for maintenance support. These assets are routinely deployed to stand by at regional Forward Operating Bases on assessed risk.

DBCA and DFES support undertaking a risk to capability assessment that would assist in identifying the appropriate level of aerial suppression resource allocation to address the predicted bushfire risk on any given day.

Recommendation 11:

DFES consider updating the official bushfire season in the Esperance region to reflect the reality of the impact of climate change and other factors that have altered the start and duration of the fire season.

Supported

The State Government recognises the lengthening of 'bushfire seasons' across the State.

The State Government will seek to undertake a review of the impacts of seasonal changes, including the drying climate focusing on fire regimes within the SWLD. DFES Operations will liaise with the Shire of Esperance to extend the Restricted and Prohibited burning times based on risk and forecast weather conditions.

In the interim, Fire Service procedures allow for the high threat period to be altered (as required) based on weekly risk assessments.

Recommendation 12:

The State Government fund the installation of at least one new repeater tower in the north-western sector of the Esperance region to enhance communications during an emergency.

Supported

The State Government has supported the expansion of radio communications capability in the Esperance region through the installation of new radio repeaters at Peak Charles.

The new tower and repeaters are located approximately 130 kilometres north-north west of Esperance and services an area of approximately 15,000 square kilometres. This facility was partly funded through DPLH's Mitigation Activity Fund. An additional (linked) repeater location with an adjoining footprint is being investigated to further improve radio communications in the north-west sector of Esperance.

The State Government recognises that current technology is limited in its capacity to service growing demand and will seek to undertake a review of communications capabilities in the Esperance region and investigate flexible and mobile solutions that provide digital radio communications and enhanced Wi-Fi and phone coverage.