

## Agreement in Principle

**Mr PHIL KOPERBERG** (Blue Mountains—Parliamentary Secretary) [7.47 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The amendments outlined in this bill have arisen from the New South Wales response to the recommendations of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. It is incumbent upon us all to learn the lessons of that shocking tragedy. We must never be complacent in searching for innovative means of further enhancing our community's bushfire preparedness and protection. The Rural Fires Amendment Bill 2010 makes changes in three important areas, to the Rural Fires Act 1997, the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 and the Rural Fires Regulation 2008.

The bill will formalise the responsibility of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service to issue public warnings about bushfires, increase the level of representation on the New South Wales Bush Fire Coordinating Committee and grant statutory recognition to neighbourhood safer places. Some of the most significant recommendations of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission's findings relate to the delivery of information during a bushfire. Accurate and timely information can assist people in making informed decisions about the actions they need to take in the face of a bushfire threat. The royal commission's first recommendation in its final report was the enhancement of the role of warnings in advising the community about bushfires. I understand that Victorian legislation has since been amended to vest responsibility for issuing appropriate warnings in the Chief Officer of the Country Fire Authority in the State of Victoria.

Under the New South Wales State Disaster Plan [Displan], it is the responsibility of the lead agency responding to an emergency to issue warnings to the public. In the case of major bushfires, the lead agency is the Rural Fire Service. The proposed amendment outlined in this bill recognises the current practice in which the New South Wales Rural Fire Service Commissioner ensures that appropriate warnings are issued at times when members of the community are potentially at risk from bushfires. This amendment formalises and enhances this existing function for the commissioner, or his delegate, to ensure that warnings are issued regularly and when necessary. The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission made a number of recommendations dealing with measures to mitigate against the risk of fire ignitions caused by electricity infrastructure. The commission identified faulty powerlines as one of the causal factors in a number of the Black Saturday fires.

The bill before the House provides for an increase in the membership of the New South Wales Bush Fire Coordinating Committee—from 13 to 14 members—to include a representative from the Energy Sector, Minerals and Energy Division of the Department of Industry and Investment. The Bush Fire Coordinating Committee provides a forum for a broad cross-section of government and non-government organisations with an interest in the prevention, mitigation and suppression of bushfires. Through the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee, new policies and procedures aimed at ensuring a coordinated, agreed approach to bushfire management are developed. While Industry and Investment is already represented on the committee by its Forests New South Wales division, this additional membership will acknowledge its responsibility for the oversight of energy management and operation in New South Wales. Extending the membership of the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee in this way will serve to highlight, at State coordinating level, the vital need for consideration of the potential bushfire risks specifically arising from electricity infrastructure and its maintenance.

Neighbourhood safer places have also evolved from the royal commission's findings and recommendations. A neighbourhood safer place is a place of last resort for people during a bushfire as part of a contingency plan if the bushfire survival plan has failed or cannot be put into action. A neighbourhood safer place is an identified building or open space that can provide a higher level of protection from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bushfire—such as exposure to radiant heat, smoke and embers. As the royal commission acknowledged, using this type of refuge still entails some risk, both in moving to the neighbourhood safer place and while sheltering there. They are meant as places of last resort in extreme emergencies only, with the primary purpose of protecting human life.

The royal commission articulated the need to have clear responsibilities and arrangements in place for these places. This bill introduces amendments to give statutory recognition of neighbourhood safer places and to assign responsibility to the Rural Fire Service for identifying and designating neighbourhood safer places throughout the State on public and private lands, ensuring every effort is made to consult and reach agreement with the owner or occupier of an area identified as a potential neighbourhood safer place prior to designation. In the case of land that is not privately owned, designation may be made even if consent is not provided, ensuring that the safety of the community is not compromised in these cases.

The Rural Fire Service is also assigned responsibility for undertaking an annual review of designated neighbourhood safer places to ensure they continue to be appropriate as a place of last resort from bushfires,

decommissioning designated neighbourhood safer places where they are no longer considerable suitable, and ensuring that neighbourhood safer places are taken into consideration in bushfire risk management plans, as well as being published on the Rural Fire Service website. After developing guidelines for the identification of these places, the Rural Fire Service initially decided as an interim measure to ask local emergency management committees to assume responsibility for identifying suitable sites. This decision was influenced by the need to ensure the timely rollout of the scheme.

The proposed amendments, while seeking to formalise arrangements, differ from the current practice in several key aspects. Local emergency management committees will no longer be responsible for identifying potential locations or approving neighbourhood safer places. Instead, the Rural Fire Service will assume these responsibilities, recognising that, as the lead agency for bushfire management, it is the best qualified and equipped to do so. To reinforce the bushfire safety of at-risk communities, the Government this month expanded the Neighbourhood Safer Places program with an injection of \$3.4 million per year. This will provide the additional resources required to identify, construct, maintain and ensure signage of new and existing neighbourhood safer places.

The Rural Fire Service will also develop and implement a community protection planning framework to link current bushfire risk management plans to more detailed and tailored community-specific planning. As I have already said, the amendments in this bill arose out of this State's response to the recommendations of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. These are important and sensible amendments that will clarify and articulate responsibilities and procedures. Ultimately, they will benefit the people of New South Wales not only by helping to reduce the risk of fire but also by providing prompt warnings and enhanced protection for communities during major bushfire emergencies. I commend the bill to the House.