

## Second Reading

**The Hon. MICHAEL VEITCH** (Parliamentary Secretary) [5.02 p.m.], on behalf of the Hon. Tony Kelly: I move:  
That this bill be no read a second time.

The Keneally Government is committed to ensuring that the people of New South Wales are protected from the risks of bushfires. The 2009 Victorian bushfires were a terrible tragedy, and many will never fully recover from the devastating loss of life and damage to communities that the fires caused. The recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission underlined the importance of introducing measures that would help avoid a disaster of similar proportions occurring again. The bill proposes amendments to the Rural Fires Act 1997, the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989 and the Rural Fires Regulation 2008 that seek to address three important themes that were raised in the findings of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. If introduced, the bill will vest the Rural Fire Service with the responsibility to issue public warnings about bushfires, broaden the level of representation on the New South Wales Bush Fire Coordinating Committee, and grant statutory recognition to neighbourhood safer places. I seek leave to incorporate the remainder of my second reading speech in *Hansard*.

### Leave granted.

The RFS Commissioner regularly issues public warnings where a community or communities are at risk from bush fires.

The NSW RFS' delivery of public warnings flows from the NSW State Disaster Plan. The State Disaster Plan provides that the responsibility to issue warnings to the public in times of emergency rests with the lead agency: In the case of major bush fires, the lead agency is the RFS.

Public warnings provide accurate and timely information, and are broadly disseminated by the RFS. Their objective is to help people to make informed decisions about the steps they need to take where they are faced with the threat of a bush fire.

The amendments proposed in this bill will formalise and enhance this existing practice, so that the commissioner, or his delegate, will ensure that public warnings are issued regularly and when necessary.

The changes proposed in the bill currently before the House will also address the first recommendation of the royal commission's final report, which raised the need to increase the role of public warnings in advising the community about bushfires.

I understand that Victorian legislation has since been amended to vest the Chief Officer of the Country Fire Authority with responsibility for issuing appropriate warnings, and this bill proposes equivalent amendments to New South Wales' legislation.

The next key change that the bill seeks to introduce is to broaden the membership of the NSW Bush Fire Coordinating Committee from 13 to 14 members. The additional member will be another representative from the Department of Industry and Investment, representing the Energy Sector, Minerals and Energy Division.

The Bush Fire Coordinating Committee provides a forum for representatives from a range of government and non-government organisations with an interest in the prevention, mitigation and suppression of bush fires.

While the Department of Industry and Investment is already represented on the committee by a member of its Forests NSW division, the additional member proposed by this bill will take into account its responsibility for the oversight of energy management and operation in NSW.

Representation on the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee from the Energy Sector, Minerals and Energy Division of the Department of Industry and Investment will ensure that potential bush fire risks and issues arising from electricity infrastructure and its maintenance are considered at a State level.

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission identified faulty power lines as one of the causal factors in a number of the Black Saturday fires.

Extending the membership of the NSW Bush Fire Coordinating Committee in the manner proposed addresses the recommendations of the Commission concerning measures to mitigate the risk of fire ignitions from electrical infrastructure.

For some time the RFS has had a practice of designating "neighbourhood safer places".

A neighbourhood safer place is an identified building or open space which can provide a higher level of protection from the immediate life-threatening effects of a bush fire. These places are meant to be used by people during a bushfire as a contingency plan, in the event of their bush fire survival plan having failed or being impossible to put into action. The use of a neighbourhood safer place as a refuge from bush fire still involves some risk, which is why they are meant as places of last resort in times of emergency only.

The findings and recommendations of the Victorian Royal Bushfires Commission proposed that the arrangements for and the role of neighbourhood safer places be formalised and clarified.

The bill currently before the House introduces amendments to give statutory recognition of neighbourhood safer places. The bill assigns the Rural Fire Service with the responsibility to:

- identify and designate neighbourhood safer places throughout the State, on public and private lands;
- ensure 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 bill also provides that the RFS must:

- undertake an annual review of designated neighbourhood safer places;
- decommission designated neighbourhood safer places that are no longer suitable; and
- ensure that neighbourhood safer places are taken into consideration in bush fire risk management plans.

The proposed amendments, while seeking in most respects to formalise existing arrangements, also introduce measures that will change current practice in several ways.

It may be noted that while the introduction of this bill will result in the RFS assuming responsibility to identify and approve neighbourhood safer places, this task has historically been undertaken by local emergency management committees.

The decision, however, to make local emergency management committees responsible for identifying and approving neighbourhood safer places was an interim measure only, and was made in the interests of ensuring that the scheme was implemented in a timely manner.

It is appropriate that the, as the lead agency for bush fire management, now formally assume these responsibilities.

To reinforce the bush fire safety of at-risk communities, the Keneally Government this month <November 14> announced further funding of \$106.9 million for bush fire protection, which includes \$3.4 million a year for the neighbourhood safer places program.

This extra funding will provide the RFS with the additional resources required to further identify, construct, maintain and ensure signage of new and existing Neighbourhood Safer Places.

The amendments proposed in this bill will clarify some of the RFS' existing roles and responsibilities.

The bill, if introduced, will also enhance those functions, to reflect some of the key recommendations of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, with the ultimate aim of benefiting the people of New South Wales by reducing the risk of fire, providing prompt warnings and enhancing community protection from major bushfires.

The \$106.9 million in funding for bushfire protection is to be used for a package of measures, including increased rapid aerial attack resources, upgrades to fire-fighter pagers and radios, and includes \$84 million earmarked for the purpose of hazard reduction works.

This bill is, then, only one of a range of measures that this Government is introducing to improve bushfire management and mitigation in New South Wales.

Ultimately this bill, in conjunction with the raft of enhanced and additional bush fire management and mitigation strategies being introduced by this Government, will benefit the people of New South Wales.

Its introduction will not only help to reduce the risk of fire, but will also ensure that communities are promptly warned and are provided with greater protection during major bush fire emergencies.

I commend the bill to the House.