

### Agreement in Principle

**Mr STEVE WHAN** (Monaro—Minister for Primary Industries, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Rural Affairs) [10.44 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

I am pleased to introduce the State Emergency Service (Volunteer Consultative Council) Amendment Bill 2010. The purpose of the bill is to amend the State Emergency Service Act 1989 to establish the State Emergency Service Volunteer Joint Consultative Council. The consultative council will advise and report to the Commissioner of the State Emergency Service on matters relevant to State Emergency Service volunteers. The bill also makes provision in relation to the membership and procedure of the consultative council. The bill recognises the importance of our State Emergency Service volunteers as the backbone of the service. The Government believes that their opinions and experiences are vital to the evolution and development of the State Emergency Service into the future.

That is why the Government sat down with the peak body representing State Emergency Service volunteers—the State Emergency Service Volunteers Association—and worked on developing a solution to ensure that volunteers' voices could be heard in a formal consultative environment. This new consultative body will give frontline State Emergency Service volunteers a formal role in helping guide the service into the future. Schedule 1 to the bill provides for the establishment of the consultative council. It proposes that the consultative council is to consist of seven members, being the commissioner, three persons appointed on the recommendation of the commissioner, the President of the NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association Incorporated, and two persons appointed on the recommendation of that association, with one of those persons being a deputy regional, local or unit controller of a State Emergency Service unit.

The schedule also provides that the consultative council has the official function of advising and reporting to the commissioner on any matter relevant to volunteer officers and volunteer members of the State Emergency Service. Further, the principal Act is amended to ensure that certain membership information of the consultative council is to be included in the annual report of the State Emergency Service. This ensures that the volunteers involved in the consultative council are recognised for their efforts throughout the duration of their appointment.

The bill makes provision in relation to the terms of office of the members of the consultative council once they are appointed by the Minister. To ensure flexibility and participation the bill also allows for the appointment of deputies of members, in case, for example, a volunteer is unable to participate in a particular meeting of the consultative council. The proceedings of this new formal consultative body will be formal, in addition to the many informal opportunities for volunteer consultation that the State Emergency Service undertakes. Matters relating to the chair of the consultative council and other matters relating to the constitution of the consultative council—including the procedures of the consultative council, such as requirements for a quorum, voting, subcommittees and the minutes of meetings—are also detailed in the bill.

It is critical that any volunteers are protected from any potential liability resulting from their participation in consultative council matters. Schedule 1 to the bill provides for protection from personal liability for members of the consultative council in relation to the exercise of the functions of the consultative council, provided that the matter or thing in question was done in good faith. The Government has always placed the highest priority on listening to the opinions and needs of our volunteers. Indeed, we are happy to have been able to work with the NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association on creating the concept of this consultative council.

The experience and feedback of the volunteers on the ground is integral to the success of the service's work and has led directly to increased funding for unit headquarters, emergency vehicles, training and improved information technology in recent years. This new council will provide a formal forum for the volunteers to be consulted and their views incorporated into the service's decision-making and management as it continues to develop and expand to meet the challenges of the future.

I thank the NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association for working with the Government in preparing the concept of the bill, in particular Mr Charlie Moir, the President of the NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association. Other members of the executive have made extensive efforts to ensure that the voices of State Emergency Service volunteers around New South Wales are heard. Once again, I would like to offer this Government's thanks to the volunteers of the State Emergency Service for their tireless and selfless work in assisting the New South Wales community during times of need. This bill recognises their efforts and ensures they are given a voice in the management of the organisation for which they volunteer. I commend the bill to the House.