



NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard

Fire Brigades Amendment (Community Fire Units) Bill

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Tuesday 24 May 2005.

Second Reading

Mr DAVID CAMPBELL (Keira—Minister for Regional Development, Minister for the Illawarra, and Minister for Small Business) [9.12. p.m.], on behalf of Mr Carl Scully: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

One of the most successful and growing bushfire protection initiatives over the past four to five years has been the Community Fire Unit [CFU] Program. Under this program, groups of residents living close to the urban-bushland interface are trained and equipped by the NSW Fire Brigades to assist with the defensive protection of their homes from bushfire. The CFU Program was first established after the disastrous 1994 Sydney bushfires. At that time community feedback to the Fire Brigades included comments that people felt helpless when firefighting resources were not immediately available in a bushfire emergency. They wanted to help protect their homes but lacked the necessary knowledge and equipment. The real growth in CFUs occurred in the aftermath of the severe bushfires this State experienced over the Christmas-New Year periods in 2000 and 2001, particularly in and around Sydney.

Today we have 280 CFUs in various locations, made up of 4,700 volunteer members, including 1,640 women. By October this year the Fire Brigades anticipates that another 32 units will be established, taking the number of units around the State to 300, with a total of more than 5,000 members. New units are to be established around the Sydney Basin and in regional areas, including Albury, Singleton, Goulburn, Nowra and Tweed Heads. The units are trained by the Fire Brigades and receive a CFU trailer or box which is equipped with basic firefighting equipment including a pump, hoses and protective clothing such as overalls, helmets, boots and gloves for each member, at a cost of \$15,000 to \$20,000 per unit. Typically, a Community Fire Unit will comprise residents who live in a street adjacent to bushland or national parks and other reserves who want to help the fire services to protect their homes and those of their neighbours from bushfires.

They do this by undertaking fire prevention work, particularly the preparation of properties in the lead-up to the bushfire season and assisting with hazard reduction work; assisting firefighters during a bushfire with the defensive protection of homes from spot fires and ember attacks; assisting with recovery operations after a bushfire, such as bushland regeneration; and educating members of the community in relation to fire safety and the prevention of fires. It is important to emphasise that the role of members of CFUs is to help and support the fire services. They are not intended to replace the specialised, highly trained and equipped firefighters from the Fire Brigades and the Rural Fire Service. The Government is committed to supporting the CFU Program.

Some \$1.2 million is being provided to the Fire Brigades over the four years of this Government's term to establish further CFUs. This funding has been supplemented over two years by \$580,000 from the Natural Disaster Mitigation Program, which is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and State governments. Members of CFUs are also covered for workers compensation in case they are injured and for public liability by the Treasury Managed Fund. It is the view of the Government that the number of CFUs and the growing community involvement has now reached a level that warrants formal recognition of a unit's role and a legislative framework for their establishment, training and operation. The amendments to the Fire Brigades Act 1989 proposed in the Fire Brigades Amendment (Community Fire Units) Bill fulfil these objectives.

Among other things, the bill creates a new division within the Fire Brigades Act referring specifically to Community Fire Units. The Commissioner of the NSW Fire Brigades will be authorised to establish CFUs within a fire district and to determine their areas of operation. Clearly, the establishment of a CFU will be dependent upon the level of interest by local residents and an assessment of the bushfire risks, which would be conducted by the Fire Brigades. A new provision, section 74C, clearly sets out the objects and functions of CFUs, to which I have already referred. The commissioner will be authorised to appoint persons as members of a CFU. A new section 74E will also require the commissioner to provide the necessary training and equipment to CFUs.

A number of other existing provisions of the Fire Brigades Act will be amended to confirm, first, that any damage caused by a CFU member in the exercise of the unit's function to assist firefighters during a bushfire or undertake fire prevention work is to be considered as damaged by fire for the purpose of any insurance policy against fire damage, section 38, and secondly, that members of CFUs will be protected from liability when they have performed their functions in good faith, section 78. Finally, the bill contains savings and transitional provisions to effectively acknowledge the existence of the 280 CFUs already established and their members. The Community Fire Unit Program has, by any measure, been an outstanding success, and it is a credit to the New South Wales Fire Brigades. Word is spreading fast about the program—so much so that the Fire Brigades

have received 160 applications to establish new units. The Government is committed to providing the necessary resources for CFUs to flourish; but more than that, it wants their role and functions formally recognised in legislation. I commend the bill to the House.