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Victorian Bushfires

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Senator FIELDING (Victoria—Leader and Whip of the Family First Party) (19:46): I stand here tonight to raise a matter of public importance about the events that led to a very dark day known as Black Saturday. It is still not easy to talk about the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. Black Saturday was a day where Victoria experienced a number of extreme bushfires that raged and killed 173 men, women and children, traumatised thousands of people and caused massive environmental damage and property loss. Within days, a royal commission was established, which encouraged many people to put off discussion about the events that led to Black Saturday. Now the royal commission dust has settled, I believe it is appropriate to be part of the ongoing discussion.

As part of that discussion, I have seen evidence that there were advance warnings by two top bushfire experts way back in 2003. They warned that there was a real threat of Victoria experiencing raging, extreme bushfires like we saw in 2009 on Black Saturday. So, six years before Black Saturday, the CFA were forewarned of the real threat of extreme bushfires. They were aware of two expert bushfire reports, known as the Packham report, entitled *Bushfire threat to Nillumbik Shire*, and the Incoll report, entitled *Bushfire planning issues in the Shire of Nillumbik*. These two reports predicted that raging, extreme bushfires would engulf Victoria. Indeed, both reports were proven to be accurate some six years later, when Black Saturday occurred in 2009.

The Packham report was written by bushfire expert David Packham. Mr Packham is one of the few people in Australia that the BBC in England rings for informed comment on bushfires. The Incoll report was written by Victoria's former Chief Environmental Fire Officer, Rod Incoll, as an independent second opinion to the Packham report. In 2003 the Packham and Incoll reports outlined that if action was not taken to undertake fuel reduction programs, then the resulting fuel loads would lead to extreme bushfires engulfing Victoria, which is what actually occurred on Black Saturday in 2009.

The Packham report predicted the fire's intensity, with a front cover photograph showing a 130-metre-high wall of flame at Wandong, just next to Kilmore East, where the bushfire that killed and traumatised so many on Black Saturday actually started. The location, the intensity and the full horror of Black Saturday was predicted by two highly reputable and independent bushfire experts six years earlier. Indeed, what was predicted in the Packham and Incoll reports that were written in 2003 was played out on Black Saturday, showing there was clearly a failure to act appropriately on this expert advice.

To help demonstrate how accurate the 2003 Packham report was, about a month after Black Saturday a Victorian CFA member from Nillumbik, who had been through the hell of that horrific day, was given a copy of the report. After reading it, I am told he said: 'So what? We all know what happened on Black Saturday. The media has been full of it ever since.' He was then told that the report he was reading, the Packham bushfire report, was not written after Black Saturday but before it—in fact, in 2003, six years before Black Saturday. Apparently he was left speechless and in shock. Then he slowly became angry, with the realisation that no-one had acted on the reports. For him, this was not only a public scandal, it was also personal.

When the Black Saturday royal commission was announced, there was hope that finally the public would know that there were two expert reports that predicted, six years earlier, that there was a real risk of bushfires engulfing not only Nillumbik, but also the wider Victorian landscape. Finally, questions could be asked as to why no action was taken to avert the horrific loss of life resulting from Black Saturday. Given the royal commission had very broad terms of reference, there was a high expectation that there would be transparency and therefore accountability on all the issues; that everything and anything would be laid on the table in order to get to the bottom of Black Saturday and how such a terrible tragedy could happen on such a large scale, despite appropriate and timely warning; and, importantly, that the public would realise that Black Saturday would never have happened if the Packham and Incoll reports were properly actioned.

Some members of the community have come to me questioning why the royal commission did not explore the 2003 Packham and Incoll reports. They are also

annoyed that no action was taken on the report's recommendations, even when Mr Packham had been the first person to raise the alarm bells. David Packham sent an email to several people including a former CFA captain, Ralph Barraclough, at 4.46 am on Thursday, 5 February 2009. Mr Barraclough then widely circulated this email to hundreds of people, including others in high levels of authority dealing with this issue. This was more than 2½ days before Kinglake was burnt to the ground. Mr Packham wrote in his email that next Saturday would be 'the worst that he had ever seen'. His email detailed the size of the devastation that was about to occur two days later on Black Saturday.

Some of those who attended the royal commission have come to me and told me of their dismay that more questions were not asked of the Packham and Incoll reports during the royal commission's hearings and that these reports' recommendations were not implemented, especially given the accuracy of their predictions six years prior to Black Saturday. If the recommendations within the Packham and Incoll reports to reduce the fuel loads in the Nillumbik landscape were acted upon, who knows how many people would still be alive today and how many houses would still be standing.

Councillor Belinda Clarkson, from the Victorian Shire of Nillumbik, has shown great courage in seeking answers to why the 2003 Packham and Incoll reports were not acted upon to prevent Black Saturday. Councillor Clarkson has stood up for her community to endeavour to make sure it is protected from future horrific bushfires. She has been fighting to get answers at some personal cost. If it had not been for the support of the Nillumbik Ratepayers Association and the pro bono support of the Melbourne law firm Piper Alderman, Councillor Clarkson's reputation would have been destroyed. It was Councillor Clarkson and her support group, the Nillumbik Ratepayers Association, who commissioned the independent Packham and Incoll bushfire reports back in 2003.

Turning to the recommendations of the royal commission, there is real concern that the prescribed burning recommendation does not go far enough. The royal commission's principle bushfire prevention recommendation, No. 56, falls well short of what is required for prescribed burning as it only recommends burns of five per cent plus. This is not enough. Richard Sneeuwjagt, Manager of the Fire Management Services Branch in the Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation, stated during the royal commission hearings that eight per cent prescribed burning was a much safer figure.

Extreme bushfires are not just a rural problem; towns and cities are vulnerable too. Bushfires extending into Hobart in 1967, Canberra in 2003 and Bendigo

in 2009 all clearly demonstrated that towns and cities are vulnerable as well. Victoria must learn from the Western Australian experience on bushfire management, because of its broad depth of research, practical knowledge, operational procedures and nil death toll for over 40 years. If the state government of Victoria fails to increase its prescribed burning, then, as the Packham report says, we are 'living on borrowed time'—and sadly it will be only a matter of time before we have another Black Saturday.

Senate adjourned at 19:55