



ATTORNEY-GENERAL

HON ROBERT McCLELLAND MP

**REMARKS AT THE
DELIBERATE BUSHFIRE REDUCTION FORUM**

HYATT HOTEL, CANBERRA

WEDNESDAY, 25 MARCH 2009

First, may I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on – and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

It's a pleasure to join you today and to take action on an issue that is a top priority for the Rudd Government.

Last month, Victoria experienced the most devastating bushfires in Australia's history.

Never before have we seen such catastrophic loss of life and extreme property damage caused by a natural disaster. More than 2,000 homes were lost, over 400,000 hectares were burned and Victorian Police confirm that 210 people have died.

This is a country of extreme weather conditions that challenge us all.

And in any fire season we face the threat of devastating fire in almost every state and territory.

But while some fires will be the result of nature's fury, others will be deliberately lit.

Sadly, the vast majority of vegetation fires in Australia are caused by people, either intentionally or accidentally.

Accordingly, the majority of bushfires are preventable.

Today's workshop, the first of its kind, is bringing you, a range of experts, together in a national effort to reduce the number of deliberately lit bushfires.

Our aim is to look at examples of bushfire arson prevention and education initiatives from around the country, and identify national priorities for action.

Australian Government Measures

As the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) suggests, greater cooperation between fire agencies, police, social services, the criminal justice system, and all levels of government, will be required to effectively address bushfire arson.

The AIC also outlines a range of preventative measures that the Rudd Government is closely considering.

These include Reduced Fire Risk Cigarettes – an area that has been progressed on the national emergency management agenda.

The new standards require all cigarettes manufactured or imported after March 2010 to comply with stringent new regulations that will reduce the likelihood of fires being started from smouldering cigarettes.

Of course, the Rudd Government also continues to work closely with local communities and emergency management agencies to mitigate the effects of bushfires.

This includes the Bushfire Mitigation Program and the Natural Disaster Mitigation Program that are administered by my Department.

Arson Offences

It's estimated that arson in all its forms costs the Australian community \$1.6 billion each year.

As the AIC points out, around half of all vegetation fires - some 20,000 to 30,000 each year - are deliberately lit.

Only around six percent of bushfires are known to be started by natural causes.

To put it simply – arson is a crime – and it must be dealt with accordingly.

In 2001, the Model Criminal Law Officers' Committee released model arson and bush fire offences.

I note that a number of jurisdictions have implemented these provisions.

It is timely to examine whether the model provisions are adequate and renew efforts to achieve strong, harmonised criminal provisions across Australia.

One thing is certainly clear – arsonists deserve to face the full force of the law.

Recommendations of the Australian Institute of Criminology

As I'm sure you will appreciate, prosecuting bushfire arson offences is an incredibly challenging task.

It can be difficult to determine whether a fire has been deliberately lit.

And even if a suspect is identified, investigating and collecting enough evidence to secure a conviction is not a simple exercise.

That's why we need to take a more preventative approach to bushfire arson.

As the AIC rightly points out, fire agencies need to consider integrating crime prevention techniques into their existing programs. For example, further research into the nature of bushfire arson may help to identify arson 'hot spots' and better direct intervention strategies to priority areas.

We also need to make sure that advances in investigative techniques are shared.

Successful Prevention Programs

There are already successful programs around the country that we can learn from.

This includes targeted prevention campaigns that have significantly reduced the incidence of bushfire arson.

One such example is the community-centred approach implemented by the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia.

Another excellent example is Operation NOMAD in South Australia. Led by South Australian police, Operation NOMAD involves police patrols visiting convicted and suspected arsonists on days of high fire danger, as well as regular patrols through high risk areas.

Conclusion

Throughout today's proceedings, I look forward to hearing more examples of prevention strategies and education initiatives that can be used as best practice around the country.

I am keen for this group to produce immediate work that can be actioned, as well as address broader issues that can be considered as a matter of priority.

Thank you all for your participation today.