



Speech By  
**Dale Last**

**MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN**

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Record of Proceedings, 13 February 2019

**MOTION**

**Bushfire Prevention and Preparedness, Inquiry**

 **Mr LAST** (Burdekin—LNP) (5.39 pm): I rise to support the private member's motion moved by the member for Gregory. I say at the outset that I have the utmost respect for our firefighters, including our rural and auxiliary firefighters, and I want to acknowledge their efforts in responding to the devastating bushfires which impacted our state late last year.

Yesterday I spoke about the natural disasters that have affected north and north-west Queensland in recent weeks. I mentioned that our great state offers generous gifts but is brutal in its cruelty. That cruelty extends to the devastating bushfires which ravaged large parts of our state in November and December last year—bushfires that destroyed life and property, bushfires which brought into question fire prevention and preparedness activities. It is right and proper that the spotlight should fall on these activities and the role of government, not only in fire reduction practices conducted on state owned land and national parks but how the government deals with native vegetation and land management laws and practices in managing fires in the broader Queensland context.

The bushfires late last year burned more than one million hectares, including 800 hectares of sugarcane crops in the Pioneer Valley and Blue Mountain areas near Mackay—1,500 people were displaced and up to 600 homes evacuated. Surely the government's first priority is to ensure the safety of residents and the protection of their property. For that reason, it is imperative that a full and frank inquiry be conducted by a parliamentary committee that examines all aspects of those fires.

I distinctly recall after those fires having a conversation with a well-known grazier at Sarina who made the statement that the worst neighbour that you can have if you are a landholder in Queensland at the moment is the state government. I asked him why and he went on to describe how fire reduction strategies in terms of firebreaks and access roads were non-existent on state owned land, be that state forest, conservation areas or national parks. What that means is that when a bushfire starts on state controlled land there is nothing to stop it from entering neighbouring properties. Landholders have nothing to back-burn to in terms of firebreaks and that makes it extraordinarily difficult to fight fires.

I also had a call from a grazier at Nebo who, whilst fighting the fires on his property with his neighbour, was forced to seek shelter underneath his dozer as the fire went over the top of them. He lost almost 70 kilometres of fencing, livestock and other infrastructure, not to mention thousands of gallons of fuel that he used in his station vehicles fighting those fires.

There is no question that clearing vegetation for the purpose of firebreaks needs to be included in this review. When you have a bushfire coming at you fanned by high winds, you want to be standing on a firebreak at least 100 metres wide and not some skinny, 20-metre strip of land that you were unable to clear appropriately because of bureaucratic red tape and restrictive vegetation management laws. That brings me to my next point, which is hazard reduction burns. We should be talking to and listening

to our landholders. After all, they have in many cases been undertaking hazard reduction burns for generations. The process of obtaining permits needs to be overhauled, along with the process of accessing government staff and equipment.

I recall when I was living in Cape York assisting national park rangers at Lakefield national park to undertake controlled hazard reduction burns involving areas of land up to 250,000 acres. That might sound almost incomprehensible to many members in this place. However, with proper firebreaks, favourable weather conditions, experienced personnel and the proper equipment, this is what you can achieve in a safe and responsible manner. They had a plan: each year they burnt a different section of the national park so that over a period of time they had a mosaic pattern across the park of reduced fuel load.

As a landholder, the state government has a role and, more importantly, a responsibility to manage state controlled land in a manner that does not impose a danger to neighbouring landholders. In fact, I would go so far as to say the state government should be a role model when it comes to bushfire prevention and preparedness. For that reason, it is imperative that this inquiry be undertaken by a parliamentary committee without fear or favour. We owe it to all Queenslanders.