



**The Buck Stops with the Minister
18 December 2008**

Member for Flinders Liz Penfold has called for the resignation of the former Minister for Emergency Services, Mr Pat Conlon.

Mrs Penfold's call is in response to the Coroner's report and recommendations on the 2005 Lower Eyre Peninsula Wangary bushfire released today.

Mrs. Penfold said the Minister failed, in the 4 years that he was Minister, to ensure all the recommendations resulting from the four reports into the 2001 Tulka bushfire were implemented particularly those relating to communication, water bombers, native vegetation and matters relating to adequate funding to provide education and equipment for CFS volunteers.

While praising the efforts of CFS personnel and other volunteers, Mrs Penfold said they do not make the crucial policy decisions and they have to operate within their organisation's rules, their own training and experience.

"Mr Conlon, the Minister at the time of the Wangary fire, must take responsibility for the fact that recommendations from the 2001 Tulka fire were not acted upon expeditiously and some had even been set aside. These were outlined in Appendix 2 of Mr Bob Smith's report on the Wangary bushfire."

"Minister Conlon's inaction on the recommendations out of the four Tulka reports affected responses during the tragic Wangary bushfire on 10th and 11th January 2005," Mrs Penfold said.

"I remember saying at a function at Port Lincoln's Community House after the Tulka fire, 'we can't expect to be so lucky again'.

"While there was grief and destruction of property during the Tulka fires, no lives were lost more through good luck than good management of the fire. We should have learnt from it, but instead tragically 9 lives and more property were lost in 2005" she said.

"It is one of the greatest injustices possible to blame government personnel and volunteers for the ineptitude of those in authority above them," she said.

"We all said 'we must not let it happen again' following the Tulka debacle but were reassured that most of the recommendations from the Tulka reports were being implemented or had been put in place. However if they had been, then I believe, that the Wangary bushfire, would not have escalated into the disaster it became in January 2005 and the Coroner's 34 recommendations would not have contained such similar ones to the Tulka recommendations as listed in the Smith report."

Mrs Penfold cited in particular:

14 d) Develop protocols relating to minimum requirements in respect of reliability of private firefighting units,

dress for private firefighters, the need for appropriate radio communication, but not limited to those issues.

34 I recommend that the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Local Government cause local council plant and equipment that is suitable for use in bushfire fighting be fitted with radios connected to the Government Radio Network.

30 I recommend that the Minister for Emergency Services give further consideration to acquiring a firefighting helicopter to be permanently or primarily stationed in South Australia.

33 I recommend that the Minister for Emergency Services, the Minister for Environment, the Chief Officer of the CFS and the Native Vegetation Council, together develop a Code of Practice relating to the management of native vegetation as it affects bushfire prevention.

4 I recommend that the Minister for Emergency Services and the Minister for Local Government consider the enactment of legislation that would empower Local Government to require the owners or occupiers of rural land to create fire breaks on the land of a kind that Local Government may determine and/or to require the removal of flammable materials from the land, as measures for preventing the outbreak of a bushfire, or for preventing the spread or extension of a bushfire.

Mrs Penfold said that Mr Conlon, as the Minister for Emergency Services from March 2002 to March 2006, must accept responsibility.

“He can not continue to blame the former Liberal government. He had four years to ensure that the Tulka recommendations were fully implemented, and that any subsidiary concerns that were identified along the way were also dealt with.

“However many of the Dr Smith and Project Phoenix recommendations from the Wangary fire could have applied equally to the Tulka fire. So what happened in between?” she said.

Dr Bob Smith’s report on the Wangary fire was not released until Monday, 19th September 2005 (8 months after the Wangary fire) and in response to a question in parliament on 22nd September from the Honourable Dean Brown, Mr. Conlon responded “...I have not been the Minister for Emergency Services since March.”

However, Mr Brown pointed out that, “...the Minister was the minister at the time and therefore must accept responsibility for it.”

Mrs Penfold said the Labor Government’s reaction after the Wangary fire was exemplary but was much too late for the positive preventative action that should have been taken before the fire and that could have saved lives.

“I believe that the government knew this, reacted swiftly after the fire and then shifted Minister Conlon out of the Emergency Services portfolio as soon as decency permitted.

“This important portfolio was very subtly placed as far away from the limelight as possible in the upper house of parliament with a city based female, Minister Zollo who knew virtually nothing about emergency services.

This was to ensure that the smallest target was provided for any criticism of the former Minister, Mr Conlon” she said.

“Mr. Conlon, the Minister at the time, must resign and not allow his departmental officers and volunteers to shoulder the blame,” she said.

“Although angry about the Wangary fire, I have been silent publicly (except on the issue of the water bombers) and I have urged others to wait until after the Coroner’s full report and recommendations.

“However none of us ever expected that it would take so long for an outcome but now we have it we owe it to all

those who have suffered in both fires to ensure that problems that are identified are corrected so it won't happen again," she said. ENDS

PS The Coroner in his recommendations states in 29.2 that, "The Coronial Inquest is not the only means by which change can be effected." And goes on to quote a COAG Inquiry that also questions it as the best option, "for investigating operational issues not directly related to bushfire deaths....."

I commend the coroner for a job well done but we must not just leave it there.

CONLON MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY 11 October 2005

Rann Government Minister Patrick Conlon should reclaim the Emergency Services portfolio and finish the job of implementing the recommendations coming out of the tragic Eyre Peninsula bushfires, according to Member for Flinders Liz Penfold.

"It is just too convenient for the Minister to have dropped this portfolio after presiding over the period when the Tulka recommendations should have been implemented but he did not do enough.

"There is a pervading feeling over here that what happened during the Wangary fires, '*was just like last time*' *that nothing is changing*' and that '*it will happen again*,'" she said.

Mrs Penfold said Mr Conlon had a responsibility, considering he was Minister at the time.

"The hot weather is beginning, and after a late start to the season we've had an excellent finish with massive plant growth right across the southern Eyre Peninsula.

"This will cause a huge risk of fire, particularly in the January-February high fire ban periods and we still do not have a suitable contract to cover the Warrens' aeroplanes, an understandable warning system, or even fire prevention training to make our communities 'bushfire ready'.

"These points are all covered in the Bob Smith Wangary fire recommendations," she said.

Mrs Penfold said she understands that the contract being offered to the Warrens would actually prevent them from self-responding in the future and they are unlikely to sign it for this and other reasons.

"The aerial water bombers to be provided to Eyre Peninsula, under the existing statewide contract, were supposed to support us during both Tulka and Wangary fires. But they were not here on the day the fires started on either occasion – only the Warrens' aeroplanes were.

"The Tulka Fire Incident Management Analysis states: '*These private bombers were utilised throughout the incident, despite directions to the contrary*'.

"This sounds exactly like what has just happened again at Wangary and people expect will happen again next time.

"It is not surprising that this report was buried by the Minister and only became available through Bob Smith."

Mrs Penfold said community trust in the government, and in the CFS management, has been lost. "I call on Minister Conlon to take back responsibility and take action.

"It is not good enough for him to conveniently hand-ball the difficult responsibilities and decisions to Minister Carmel Zollo while basking in the goodwill of the recovery effort. He has a responsibility to do now what he did

not do in the three years he was Minister for Emergency Services.

“This is yet another example of a half done job, from a half baked government,” she said.

TULKA FIRE RECOMMENDATIONS NOT ACTED UPON 22 September 2005

Member for Flinders Liz Penfold said one of the tragedies of Black Tuesday is that it appears that recommendations from the report on the Tulka fire in 2001 were not acted upon.

The recommendations referred to the use of plant other than that owned by the CFS, communications and aircraft.

She asked state Labor Minister Pat Conlon why, in his former role as Minister for Emergency Services, he had not ensured that these recommendations were put in place.

“There appears to have been no agreements in place for the use of any private equipment, council equipment or even the Metropolitan Fire Service let alone the aerial crop spraying planes offered by Kevin Warren.

“Certainly Mr Warren was not supplied with radios for his planes,” she said.

Recommendation 4.4 of the Tulka Report stated that ‘Procedures for the use of plant need to be formalised, including protection requirements’ and ‘Spare mobile radio kits be made available for private vehicles, plant etc.’.

It was stated under an “Action taken” report that the procedures were “partially complete – CFS use the Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH) arrangements for the calling of expressions of interest for inclusion on a ‘call when needed’ list of plant including hire rates.”

The action on radios was marked as “complete” with six spare portable radios for private and council plant at group or regional level.

Mrs Penfold called on the government to immediately implement recommendations in the Bob Smith Report on the January fire referring to the use of regionally based aerial services in water bombing, surveillance and intelligence gathering.

Urgent need to enact bushfire recommendations 19 September 2005

The recommendations of the Bob Smith inquiry into the January bushfires on Lower Eyre Peninsula released today and the CFS’s own report, called Project Phoenix, must be put into practice as a matter of urgency before the next bushfire season starts, says Member for Flinders Mrs Liz Penfold.

The Bob Smith report makes numerous recommendations for changes to the way the CFS operates, covering areas such as use of aerial firebombing, communication between various levels of command, decision making, use of privately owned farm fire units and training of CFS volunteers.

“The report was supposed to have been completed at the end of July so the delay means there is even less time for the State Government to make the changes needed before the new bushfire season starts,” Mrs Penfold said.

“I want to see its recommendations treated with urgency, particularly in relation to issues such as the communication with farmers and the public during a bushfire. The CFS also needs to take account into account the intimate knowledge that local people have of vital factors such as terrain, vegetation and wind conditions when decision are being made during a bushfire.

“The State Government must permanently station a firebombing aircraft on Eyre Peninsula throughout the fire danger season.

“And we need the CFS to make a formal arrangement with local aerial spraying contractor Kevin Warren. Kevin and two of his pilots did invaluable work in fighting the fires in January purely on their own initiative. I understand he has had talks with the government for months now about formalising the arrangement, but still nothing has been finalised.”

Mrs Penfold said the protection of native vegetation had become a major stumbling block in preventing local councils and landholders from creating firebreaks and clearing dangerous fuel loads on areas such as roadsides. “The CFS also needs to take up offers by local councils and others for use of their equipment, such as earthmovers, during a bushfire,” she said.

Mrs Penfold said CFS volunteers needed more training in fighting real fires, possibly through participating in controlled burn-offs in national parks. “The changes in farming practices mean that many CFS volunteers no longer have the experience working with fires that the older generation of farmers gained by burning off their stubbles each year,” she said.

ENDS