Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Answers to questions on notice Environment portfolio

Question No: 118

Hearing: Supplementary Budget Estimates

Outcome: Agency

Programme: Bureau of Meteorology

Topic: Bushfire Fuel Loads Correlation to Rainfall

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Question Date: 18 November 2013

Question Type: Spoken

Senator Pratt asked:

Senator PRATT: And the fuel loads were up from the rainfall from the season before—is that correct?

Dr Vertessy: I would be guessing so. I will look to Dr Canterford here.

Dr Canterford: Yes, they would have been from the season before. But we do measure the— Senator PRATT: And that was a higher level of rainfall in that season?

Dr Canterford: Sorry? Senator PRATT: That correlated with a higher level of rainfall then, or not necessarily?

Dr Canterford: We would have to take that on notice.

Dr Vertessy: I need to check on that. It is fair to say, though, that we have come off the two wettest years on record, of the two La Ninas, and then gone into a dry period. There is a good chance, I think, that that was a good set-up for fire activity.

Answer:

The Bureau of Meteorology and the Bushfire Co-Operative Research Centre (CRC) work closely with State Fire Agencies to produce the southern Australian bushfire outlook. This is released as a Bushfire CRC firenote. The 2013-14 outlook is Fire Note 116.

Fire Note 116 notes that for NSW "Over much of the forested areas of NSW, below average rainfall since July has resulted in a drying trend in forest fuels. If this trend continues, above normal fire activity conditions are expected for the forested areas of central and southern NSW coast and ranges."

Subsequently, rainfall for the July to September 2013 period for the greater Sydney region was well below average and among the 10 driest years since 1900.

The greatest influence on fuel loads in forested areas (as opposed to grasslands) is the fire history, particularly the time since the last fire as this governs the fuel loads and the rate of fuel accumulation. The very wet conditions of the previous two years would have played a minor role in the longer-term process of fuel accumulation and thus fuel loads in the forested areas around the greater Sydney region. Questions relating to fire history should be directed to the NSW Rural Fire Service.

In terms of grasslands and inland areas, Fire Note 116 notes that "The above normal forecast is due to abundant grass growth across inland Australia, due to above average rainfall since May 2013. These conditions, coupled with above average temperatures across the country since January 2013, have resulted in a build up of fuel in grasslands. These higher temperatures have also seen forests begin to dry out."