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MEDIA STATEMENT FROM SPECIAL INQUIRER EUAN FERGUSON AFSM

Reframing Rural Fire Management: Report of the Special Inquiry into the January 2016 Waroona Fire

I note the tabling by Premier Colin Barnett today of my report *Reframing Rural Fire Management: Report of the Special Inquiry into the January 2016 Waroona Fire*. I am pleased the report and recommendations are in the public domain. I welcome and encourage robust discussion - particularly on a number of the more contentious recommendations. In formulating its response to my report, I ask Government to carefully consider the intent of each recommendation.

In recent years there has been considerable change in the delivery of fire and emergency services and emergency management in Western Australia. A lot has been achieved and there are many positives including:

- The creation of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) and the appointment of a Commissioner for Fire and Emergency Services with appropriate powers;
- Significant improvements in the relationships between DFES and Parks and Wildlife (P&W);
- Establishment of the Community Liaison Unit and the Bushfire Ready program;
- Establishing the Office of Bushfire Risk Management (OBRM) and improvements to hazard reduction burning planning;
- Enhanced service delivery in the Capes area; and
- Improvements to the State Emergency Management Committee.

Under the leadership of DFES Commissioner Wayne Gregson and P&W Director-General Jim Sharp, much positive change has been achieved. I also note numerous projects that are still in progress.

Notwithstanding this, the Waroona fire had significant consequences. The impact of this fire extends to a number of towns and communities, including the town of Yarloop, where two elderly gentlemen lost their lives and 166 homes were destroyed. The fire needs to be a catalyst for searching for improvements to strengthen community safety and fire agency capability into the future.

The Special Inquiry started in early February and evoked a significant response. It ran for 13 weeks and held formal hearings on 22 days involving 100 people. The Special Inquiry received more than 160 written submissions and I met with 42 organisations and interest groups. My gratitude goes to all those who contributed their wisdom, knowledge and experience. I particularly acknowledge those who have been directly affected by the fire, and who, in a time of turmoil, gave of their time to tell their story.

It has been the objective of this Special Inquiry to seek to identify improvements to the systems of community safety and bushfire risk management in Western Australia. I did not seek to find fault or allocate blame. Wherever possible it has been the intent of this Special Inquiry to regard any shortcomings firstly as shortcomings in the systems of work for bushfire management. If I had found evidence that

individuals were negligent or did not act in good faith, then I would have reported this. I did not find any such instances.

I need to reinforce the difficulty and enormity of the task facing fire managers - especially Incident Controllers and Incident Management Team members. This was a very complex fire - indeed probably the most complex fire I have seen in my 39 years of rural firefighting. Fire controllers were at the mercy of severe weather and fuel conditions. There were a number of factors, outside the control of the Incident Management Team, that limited their options and made their job extremely difficult. Some oversights have been identified. This is to be expected when working under extreme pressure in a dynamic and volatile emergency situation. It is my view that the Incident Management Team members, firefighters and support staff always acted in good faith, and to the best of their ability. These are good, experienced and capable people who did their best in extraordinary conditions. I have confidence in their abilities into the future.

At the outset, I identified a number of compelling questions regarding the fire, for which the community would rightfully seek answers. The report makes specific findings in relation to these issues, ranging from the cause of the fire; why the water failed in Yarloop; why specific warnings were not issued; and why additional resources were not sent to Yarloop.

In the report I have made 17 recommendations for strategic change, and 23 agency opportunities for improvement.

It is my belief that, when actioned, these recommendations and agency opportunities will reframe rural fire management in Western Australia for the benefit of the community and for Bush Fire Brigade volunteers. Some recommendations for strategic change will take time, possibly years, to establish and to reap the benefits.

As flagged above, I note improvements in the systems of bushfire management in Western Australia over recent years. Despite these, it is my view that there exists a need to effect fundamental changes to the system of rural fire management in Western Australia. My conclusion, which has been very carefully considered, is that the current system for managing bushfire in Western Australia is failing citizens and the government. As a result I have recommended that the State Government create a Rural Fire Service to enhance the capability for rural fire management and bushfire risk management at a State, regional and local level.

I recognise that this conclusion will be contentious. But it is supported by many submissions and the repeated observations that point to the need for systemic change. Perhaps the most compelling support for fundamental change is the dramatic increase in the number and impact of damaging and costly bushfires over the last six years in Western Australia.

There is a strong argument that the State needs to readjust expenditure away from fire response and recovery, towards a greater investment in prevention and fuel hazard management. This includes investing more in the education, resilience and readiness of local communities and individual citizens. Many of the recommendations of this Special Inquiry will enable this shift in focus, and the

creation of a rural fire service in particular, is vital to doing so. The momentum must be maintained into the future. If such change does not occur, then the prospect of a future catastrophic bushfire event is increasingly likely.

I thank the Western Australian Government for the opportunity to contribute to the vision of a safer Western Australian community and ask that you carefully consider my recommendations.

MEDIA CONTACT: Jean Perkins - 0429 122 789