

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

WRITTEN QUESTION

Ms Purick, Member for Goyder to Minister for Primary Industry, Fisheries and Resources

PASTORAL PROPERTIES DAMAGED BY FIRE**PREAMBLE**

Bushfires have been burning at various locations throughout Central Australia during the past three months. Although fire is accepted as a seasonal event in Central Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, the situation has been exacerbated by the high fuel loads that have resulted from the record summer rains in 2010-11.

Bushfire management falls within the portfolio of responsibilities of my colleague, the Hon Karl Hampton MLA, Minister for Natural Resources, Environment and Heritage. I will talk about my Department of Resources (DoR) role in assisting response agencies.

- 1. How many pastoral properties suffered damage as a result of the recent bush and wild fires in the Tennant Creek and Central Australian regions?**

ANSWER

DoR conducted a telephone survey during the second half of October 2011. Of the 18 properties that had a significant proportion of the total grazing land area affected by fire, all of the respondents indicated fire damage.

Based on these responses and information from the North Australian Fire Information (NAFI) website (which is publicly available), DoR estimates that 51 properties in the Barkly and 66 properties in Central Australia have been affected as a result of the recent bush fires.

- 2. What is the percentage loss of pastures for the total properties affected?**

ANSWER

Approximately 40% of land under pastoral lease in the Alice Springs region and approximately 20% of land under pastoral lease in the Barkly region were affected by fire this season at 1 December 2011.

- 3. What has been the value of the total loss of pastures?**

ANSWER

The period 2010–2011 was exceptional in terms of rainfall and pasture growth with the result that more grass was produced than could be effectively utilised with existing cattle numbers.

Healthy grass root reserves, above normal soil moisture and rain after fire, has seen rapid pasture recovery in many affected areas with moribund grass being replaced with high quality regrowth.

In many of the affected areas, conditions conducive to pasture recovery prevailed and sufficient pasture was available on burnt areas within 6 weeks.

Pastoralists generally had sufficient unburnt pastures on their properties that stock could be moved on to over the period required for regrowth.

It is not possible with pasture modelling to value pasture loss due to the high volumes of pasture as well as the quick replacement of average quality pasture with high nutritional regrowth, therefore an objective and realistic figure cannot be arrived at.

4. How many cattle were killed as a result of the fires?

ANSWER

In the telephone survey of October 2011, advice was received that at least 70 cattle were confirmed dead. Most of the reported cases were in close proximity to bores, thus making detection easier.

More accurate figures will only be available after the next round of mustering has been completed.

5. What was the total value of loss and damage to equipment and infrastructure including fences, bores, tanks, roads and vehicles?

ANSWER

Preliminary estimates (capital costs) for loss and damage on the 18 stations contacted are provided below.

Fencing (km)	Pipeline (km)	Poly tanks	Sheds	Vehicles	Bore infrastructure
1550	46	18	1	6 damaged and 1 lost	10
\$2.0 M	\$92 000	\$90 000	\$70 000	1 grader engine blown	

6. What was the number of cattle transferred from burnt properties and agisted elsewhere in the NT?

ANSWER

A review of cattle transferred from properties affected by fire through the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) database for the period 1 September 2011 through until the 30 November 2011 shows that a total of 28 431 head were transferred off property compared with 20 958 head for the same period in 2010. This is an increase of approximately 26% on the number of animals moved from within the same area compared with 2010; of these, 1010 head were sent to other properties within the NT.

7. What was the number of cattle transferred to non burnt NT properties and how many cattle have been transferred to interstate properties?

ANSWER

The NLIS database does not specifically provide the reasons for transfer. However, a detailed search can provide animal destinations for turnoff. The major movements were to interstate properties (14 332 head); to interstate abattoirs (10 501 head); and the remainder went to feedlots or saleyards interstate.

DoR officers based in Alice Springs have contacted a number of properties to discuss the situation and the need to move cattle due to the impacts of fire. Five properties have advised that they moved cattle or sold them earlier than planned due to the impacts of fire.

8. What is the value of extra feed required to feed existing stock on the affected properties?

ANSWER

No indication was given by the stations contacted that this practice is taking place on a larger than usual scale.

9. What percentage of the fires were deliberately lit and those that were started by natural causes (lightning).

ANSWER

It is not possible to accurately determine the cause or number of fires in such a large landscape, especially with so many ignitions where the resulting fires have joined together before there has been an opportunity to map the extent of the burnt area.

One of the major causes of bushfire is lightning; the first lightning strikes that started fires in Central Australia were in January 2011. Lightning again caused fire ignitions in early September. There were several episodes of lightning through September to November that started fires in patches right through from the Northern Territory/South Australia border all the way north to the Tennant Creek/Barkly region. It is important to note that there is a significantly higher risk of lightning starting fires throughout

Central Australia during years such as 2011 when fuel loads are high and continuous across the landscape with very few areas of bare ground.

Bushfires NT intends undertaking a more detailed analysis of the 2011 fire season, which may assist in addressing the issue of determining the sources of ignition.

10. What work has the department undertaken to assess the losses, what reports have been prepared, will these become public documents.

ANSWER

Regular updates have been provided by DoR to the agencies involved in the response to the Central Australian fires.

Information provided has been based on spatial data from the NAFI website to estimate the extent to which pastoral properties have been affected by the fires and a telephone survey, involving the 18 properties most affected by fire at the time, to gain an appreciation of the extent of the fire damage.

As stated above Bushfires NT intends undertaking a more detailed analysis of the 2011 fire season.

However, I understand that Mr Grant Allen of Bushfires NT presented a public seminar titled '*Seeing through the Smoke: The Challenge of Fire Management in Central Australia*' on 22 November 2011 at the Desert Knowledge Precinct.