



Emergency Services Targeting Bushfire Arson

Thursday 24th September 2009

Minister for Police Michael Daley and Minister for Emergency Services Steve Whan today announced that the NSW Police Force and the NSW Rural Fire Service would once again work together to provide protection for residents of NSW during the bushfire season – which begins next month.

Mr Whan said fire investigators nominated by the RFS Commissioner would get sweeping new powers to investigate fire scenes in the immediate aftermath of bushfires under new laws to be introduced into Parliament today.

“The laws are designed to give fire investigators the best chance of identifying arsonists and locating the source of a fire in the immediate aftermath of a bushfire,” he said.

Under proposed amendments to the Rural Fires Act 1997, designated officers will have the power to:

- Remove people, vehicles and objects from fire scenes
- Enter land (except homes) to investigate a fire up to 24 hours after a fire has been declared out
- Apply for a search warrant to enter land (except homes) to investigate the cause or origin of a fire after the initial 24 hour period.

“The power to remove people from a fire scene in the aftermath of a fire will assist the RFS in ensuring the safety of bushfire affected individuals and also removes the opportunity for an arsonist to destroy evidence.

“These changes implement the key recommendations of the Review of Arson Laws ordered by Premier Rees in January in the aftermath of Victoria’s ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires,” Mr Whan said.

Mr Daley said that in addition to these changes, the NSW Police Force would target known bushfire arsonists *before* they had a chance to start a fire.

“The NSW Police Force Arson Unit employs a range of strategies to track and keep watch on suspected arsonists such as doorknocking and monitoring,” he said.

“This expert surveillance taskforce will catch people before they get to the matchbox, saving our bush, properties and potentially lives.

“Over the 2007-08 bushfire danger period there was a 60 per cent drop in the total number of bushfires deliberately lit, and the number dropped even further over the 2008-09 danger period,” he said.

“There’s no doubt the NSW Police Force’s proactive targeting of bushfire arsonists played a significant part in the substantial drop in the number of fires being lit over the hot, summer months.

“The Arson Unit and Strike Force Tronto is an example of this modern intelligence-based policing, and continues the long association between the NSW Police Force and the NSW Rural Fire Service,” Mr Daley said.

The Review of Arson Laws also found that existing laws for serious arson offences were strong. These currently include:

- Starting a bushfire and being reckless as to its spread – maximum 14 years' imprisonment;
- Damaging property with the intention of endangering life – maximum 25 years' imprisonment; and
- Manslaughter – maximum 25 years' imprisonment.

The review recommended increases in penalties for some minor offences. These amendments to the *Rural Fires Act* will also double on-the-spot fines to \$1,100 for minor bushfire offences including:

- Lighting a fire when a total fire ban is in place;
- Not putting out a fire that you have lit; and
- Failing to comply with a bush fire hazard reduction notice.