

BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

Fire review will stop real work from being done

OPINION
ANDREW FAULKNER

THE State Government's inquiry into this summer's bushfires will be the sixth such review in the past 15 years. Wangary 2005, Kangaroo Island 2007, Cherryville 2013, Sampson Flat 2015 and Pinery 2015 - the cold embers of each blaze were raked over, pored through, and filed under lessons to learn for next time. At what point do we stop reviewing, and start doing? Apparently the latest edition of Rogee's Thesaurus lists inquiry, review, summit, report and royal commission as acceptable synonyms for leader-

ship. Premier Steven Marshall being widely praised for announcing the latest inquiry sums up how the fire debate is being conducted in bizarro world. But by the time the SA inquiry hands down its findings, it'll be too late to ramp up a winter burning program. There are other examples of us still not understanding fire. How to use it, fight it and escape it. An eastern states fire brigade's footage of their truck being swamped by flame went viral last month. Can fire really move that fast? No, it moves much, much faster than that. Reliable eyewitness accounts of Black Sun-

day describe 500m hillsides being razed in seconds. The fire was like a lightning bolt, an Adelaide Hills old-timer said. Here's an uncomfortable and inconvenient truth: As bad and as tragic and as terrible as the Cudlee Creek fire was, if it had started a few hours earlier, when the wind was from the north-east rather than the north-west, it may well have swept across the heavily-timbered - and more populated - main range to the vicinity of Stirling. As former Environment Department boss Allan Holmes told the ABC if that happened, many hundreds of

houses would have been lost, not 70. What about the Greens not letting us clear breaks? Well does anyone who's seen any fire footage this summer still believe extending a 10m firebreak to 20m will hold back the rivers of embers? Calls for armadas of water bombers are well-meaning but misplaced - two of the "Elvis" choppers were grounded by the winds that propelled the Cudlee Creek blaze. Mother Nature laughs at our technological "solutions". What's needed is a suite of methods to fight fire, all underpinned by a cold hard fact - we can never win. We can only limit the damage. And so we start another review. One that will tell us much that we already know. Yes, good lessons have come from past post-mortems. The Wangary coronial inquiry, for example, was in part responsible for the better warning system we now take for granted. But you'd think five inquiries - plus the Black Saturday Royal Commission - in 15 years might have spawned enough good ideas for the Government to go on with for a decade or three. More cool-burning is a pretty standard finding for a review. And Mr Marshall has been praised for asking the review to consider fuel reduction. "We must seriously look at the issue of fuel in and around our parks before we reach the next bushfire season," the Premier said. Premier Rann, that is. Yes, Mike Rann said it 17 years ago, during a "bushfire summit" following the Canberra bushfires. "We can't just let it sit there for another season and hope it doesn't catch fire - I'm not prepared to let that happen," Mr Rann said at the time. Yet here we are again, talking about fire fuel. And launching another review. Here's some more sentences that might sound familiar. "The big danger for SA reserves is that they could all be burnt at one time; that has the potential to absolutely wipe out whole animal populations," CSIRO scientist Phil Cheney said 17 years ago. An inquiry into the 2003 Canberra fires found: "Controlled burning is the only broad-scale practicable means



WE MUST LEARN: Our long history of fires and lack of

of reducing the build-up of fuel loads in the extensive parks and forests in the ACT. "The practice provides no guarantee that bushfires will be prevented, but when they do occur their intensity will not be so fierce, and they will be more amenable to early containment or extinguishment." Almost 15 years ago Professor Mark Adams from the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) said: "There is more than enough science to back up the need for regular prescribed burning." According to the (now defunct and defunct) CRC "fuel reduction burning is the only practical method of reducing fire fuel over large areas". Ten years ago the Australian Fire Authorities Council stated: "The best way to protect life and property from bushfires is to maintain fire in the environment."

do so, not suffocate landowners with reams of red tape. When Mr Marshall says we're meeting our burnoff targets, he's talking about burning in our parks and forests. But cool-burning on private land has been almost snuffed out by government over-regulation. In announcing his inquiry, Mr Marshall said it was "important to start looking into how the state can adapt and learn from recent events". Adapt and learn? There hasn't been a whole lot of adapting and learning from the Liberals. The most practical difference you can make, Mr Premier, is persuading your party to get out of the Stone Age and start believing the science. And you can stop your chortling from the corner, Mr Malinauskas. You weren't in Parliament at the time, but the way Labor delayed, obfuscated and denied the legitimate grievances of volunteer firefighters and fire victims after the Sampson Flat fire was a disgrace. Not to mention Labor's imbecilic ban on burning piles of prunings in Hills townships. In dark times such as these we look to our leaders. On that score, Mr Marshall is way out in front of his hombra, the Prime Minister. When it comes to leadership, our premier is Churchill to Mr Morrison's Chamberlain on a bad day. Mr Marshall's inquiry is born of good intentions. But we need action, not thoughts, prayers and a never ending procession of reviews. **ANDREW FAULKNER IS A JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR. HIS FAMILY HAS CONDUCTED COOL BURNS ON THEIR ADELAIDE HILLS PROPERTIES SINCE THE 1840S.**

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