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No surprises in internal report says union

The findings of an internal report into the Department of Environment and Conservation confirms what the Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association has been saying for some time.

Branch Secretary Toni Walkington said it was more confirmation the agency was understaffed and lacked resources, forcing staff to work most weekends at the height of the fire season.

“We hope the Barnett Government releases this latest internal report so the public of Western Australia can see just how much strain the DEC staff are under because of funding and resource shortfalls,” Ms Walkington said.

“Over summer there are people within the department who are constantly at a fire and working in incredible conditions.

“They want a limit on how many consecutive days they work with some working more than 28 days in a row when fires break out – it happens regularly but wouldn’t be accepted at other government agencies.

“Often they do not have 10 hours in between shifts and some are called back in after a break as little as four hours.”

Ms Walkington said these conditions made it incredibly difficult to find people to be part of the fire fighting teams.

She said a lot of the experienced Baby Boomer staff would not be around forever and unless incentives were in place to lure young people, the department was going to lose a lot of fire fighting knowledge in the future.

In February Premier Colin Barnett said the government would adopt all the recommendations from the Keelty report after the November 2011 fires in Margaret River, including making succession planning a priority and looking at options to attract and retain staff.

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The internal report is the latest one that sends a clear signal to the Barnett Government to share the benefits of the mining boom by investing in much-needed public services.

The Keelty report highlighted insufficient progress towards implementing reviews tabled in the Ferguson report after the Boorabbin fire in 2009, with DEC only able to implement some recommendations within its limited funding capacity.

The union said it was important the government recognised the fire fighting role played by DEC right across Western Australia and addressed the constant concern about salary levels.

“There are examples of employees on low-level pay in the department who are called upon to supervise those on higher pay levels and making life-and-death decisions when a major fire breaks out.

“The attraction and retention of staff goes to the heart of the problem.”

FOR COMMENT:

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