

Burn-offs halted in wake of heatwave

By ALEXANDRA HUMPHRIES

TASMANIA'S fuel reduction burn program has been halted in the wake of this week's warm, dry and windy spring conditions.

State Fire Management Council chairman Ian Sauer said it was hoped to resume the program within the coming weeks.

"If we get some rain and some very favourable weather conditions during the next week or two, the program will start again," he said.

Mr Sauer said there had been no escaping fires from fuel reduction burns during this week's dangerous weather conditions.

Bureau of Meteorology cli-

matologist Ian Barnes-Keoghan said a dry winter and minimal rain in September meant there was not much moisture around. Strong el nino conditions were suppressing rainfall over south-eastern Australia, he said.

"The outlook going forward the next three months is more likely that it will be a drier season than a wet one.

"Given that it's been dry already, to try and turn that around we really need a wet couple of weeks or months to get moisture back to where is normal for the time of year – and that seems unlikely."

Mr Barnes-Keoghan said the fire conditions that affected the state over the past few days could recur in coming weeks.

"It's certainly possible – the conditions are there, the dryness in the soil and plants and things is already there. Get a couple of hot, windy days again and the fire danger will go back up once more," he said.

Tasmanian Treasurer Peter Gutwein said it was crucial that fuel loads throughout the state were adequately managed to mitigate risks.

"What we want to do is to reduce fuel loads where it is appropriate to do so, but it's quite obvious that there is a lot of fuel on the ground at the moment," he said.

Greens MHA Rosalie Woodruff called for permit periods for burn-offs in Tasmania to be

reconsidered due to changing climatic conditions.

"No permit was needed for private property owners to burn off vegetation last Friday, but the following day was a total fire ban in the southern district," she said.

"Our firefighters do an incredible job protecting our lives and property.

"They should have as much information as possible about where fires have been and will be lit, as well as control over their management."

Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association chief executive Peter Skillern said it was concerning to see such significant climate conditions so early in the season.