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Premier of NSW

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Minister for Police and Emergency Services

MEDIA RELEASE

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STRONGER SENTENCES FOR STARTING A BUSHFIRE

Starting a bushfire this summer could land offenders in prison for more than two decades, with the NSW Government to introduce a significantly tougher maximum sentence for the crime.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Attorney General Mark Speakman and Minister for Police and Emergency Services Troy Grant today announced the Government will seek to increase the maximum jail sentence for NSW's targeted bushfire offence from 14 years to 21 years.

"Deliberately starting a bushfire is a selfish and senseless act that can have catastrophic consequences, potentially wiping out land and homes, and causing injury or death to residents and livestock," said Ms Berejiklian.

The tougher penalty to be introduced into Parliament in November will apply to the specific bushfire offence under section 203E of the Crimes Act of intentionally causing a fire and being reckless about it spreading on public land or someone else's property.

"Such thoughtless acts place lives, homes, businesses, and entire communities a risk. These new penalties will give courts the power to impose tough sentences in line with community expectations," Mr Speakman said.

The Attorney General will also ask the Sentencing Council of NSW to:

- Consider if the five-year standard non-parole period for the bushfire offence should be increased; and
- Review the maximum penalties for a range of arson offences, including destroying or damaging properties by means of fire.

"The reforms will provide a strong deterrent to would-be arsonists while more than 99 per cent of the State is gripped by drought. With low rainfall predicted in coming months and large swathes of bushland looking like a tinderbox, we must do all we can to protect the State from another disaster," Mr Grant said.

NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons welcomed the Government's reforms and called on the community to be vigilant and report suspicious behaviour to Crime Stoppers.

"Starting bushfires is not only a criminal offence but also has the potential to damage properties and put lives at risk," Commissioner Fitzsimmons said.

Member for South Coast Shelley Hancock, Member for Kiama Gareth Ward and Member for Bega Andrew Constance welcomed the stronger penalty, which will make would-be firebugs think twice before starting a blaze.

“The South Coast faces devastating bushfires each year. These stronger sentences are in line with how my community expects bushfire bugs to be punished,” Mrs Hancock said.

“The increased sentence better reflects the devastation caused by bushfires,” Mr Ward said.

“Locally we have all seen the devastating effect of bushfires. These stronger laws will punish those selfish individuals who choose to do this, and act as a deterrent for those contemplating it,” Mr Constance said.

To ensure the proposed new sentence comes into effect as soon as possible, the amending legislation will be declared urgent upon introduction into the NSW Parliament on the first sitting day in November.