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**For immediate release**

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## **Government review of its own handling of wildfire crisis not good enough**

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The government-led review of its own handling of the wildfire crisis of 2015 is not going to provide an objective assessment of what went wrong, according to SGEU.

The union has called for an independent, public inquiry into the mishandling of the 2015 wildfire crisis, and sent a leaflet to northerners identifying government mistakes, including cutting firefighters, tower observers, and budgets for equipment and resources.

In a recent media interview with MBC Radio, Environment Minister Herb Cox is reported as saying that government could not have foreseen or planned for the crisis.

“Government is apparently not willing to take responsibility for its actions,” says SGEU President Bob Bymoan. “It is refusing to acknowledge the fact that deep staff and budget cuts were a big part of the problem. It is the job of government to maintain emergency management services to ensure a full and speedy response in a crisis, not cut jobs and resources to produce a more palatable balance sheet.”

There were 174 fewer full-time equivalent positions in the Ministry of the Environment this year than in 2009-10. The Forest Fire Operations budget was cut by \$1 million in 2015-16. Forty fire tower observers were cut, and replaced with cameras. Each initial Attack Firefighting team was cut from five to four members. Overall, there was a 45 per cent cut in the provincial wildfire budget over the past six years.

“Government was clearly negligent in its duty to protect and preserve northern citizens, communities and natural resources,” Bymoan adds.

The current government review of the wildfires has not given all northerners the opportunity to voice their concerns. The consultation meetings are by invitation only, limiting the ability of all northerners to fully participate.

Minister Cox is also quoted as saying that some people have questioned some of the information in the SGEU leaflet. “We stand by our statements,” says Bymoan. “We ask anyone who has questions or criticism of what we are saying to let us know exactly what they believe is inaccurate.”

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Page 2 of 2

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“It is up to government to show some leadership on behalf of northern citizens. It needs to commission an objective review and evaluation of the management of the 2015 wildfire season. It is not merely a question of truth-telling, but also of knowing what needs to be done to ensure that we are never this unprepared again,” adds Bymoan.

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