The Government will be making amendments to the Bushfires Act, ensuring tough new penalties for those found responsible for lighting fires across the Territory.

The Minister for Parks and Wildlife, Kon Vatskalis, said the new laws will bring the Territory into line with penalties imposed under interstate bushfire legislation.

"The Bushfires Act commenced in 1980, and while there have been several amendments over the years, the penalties have never been reviewed," Mr Vatskalis said.

"We live in an environment prone to fires. Last year, just over 37 million hectares of the Northern Territory was burnt out.

"While some of the fires were due to land management practices and lightning strikes, satellite monitoring shows a significant number of those fires were started from roadsides and other unmanaged sources.

"Currently, the penalty for setting fire to the bush is $1,000 or six months jail. We want to substantially increase that in line with southern states, and will propose a maximum penalty of $25,000 or five years jail, which includes tough penalties for those fires causing property damage or injury.

"We will also be reviewing the penalty for similar offences in urban centres. The NT Fire and Emergency Act currently imposes penalties at a maximum of a $10,000 fine or two years imprisonment."

Under the proposed amendments, the Minister said a provision would also be made to recover expenses incurred while controlling a prohibited bushfire, similar to that of the NT Fire and Rescue Service.

"Fighting bushfires – especially in remote areas - is a costly exercise, often involving the use of heavy equipment and aircraft hire, with the bill picked up by the Government" he said.

"Currently, there is no avenue to recoup those costs when a fire is found to have been illegally ignited."

Infringement notices are also under consideration to assist Fire Control Officers in their duty.

"The introduction of infringement notices would not only streamline the prosecution process, but also allow for an immediate impact on landowners found to have committed an offence under the Act," Mr Vatskalis said.

"Infringement notices would also reduce the massive workload of Fire Control Officers during the annual firebreak inspection period."

The proposed changes would also enable Fire Control Officers immediate access to a property, in order to conduct fire investigations or undertake preventative inspections.

The Minister said the Government will be making the amendments following the recent declaration of the Fire Danger period for the south of Territory this year.

"The declaration of the fire danger period and fire danger area this year"
started on the 31 July and will run through until the 1 December 2003," he said.

"This will take in the total Territory area approximately 50 kilometres south of the Devil’s Marbles in Central Australia.

"During the fire danger period, restrictions apply to all lands within the declared area, with permits now required for all fires, except camping and cooking."

The amendments will be introduced in the October parliamentary sittings.