

## Update on the Bushfire Management Plan

NPA ACT made a submission to the ACT Government in December 2004 on a draft of the "Strategic Bushfire Management Plan". In January 2005 the government published Version 1 of this Plan. This version has been released "to set the scene and provide clear objectives, strategies and actions for bushfire management."

Further analysis and investigation will be conducted until 1 July 2005 when Version 2 will be finalised and formalised. Public consultation on this final version is not yet specified but we would expect the public would be able to make comments and submissions prior to its finalisation.

So how does this first draft reflect the concerns put in our submission? A first reading does not reveal a more consistent approach to environmental issues or greater accessibility to specific information. Our major concern has always been the potential for new, significantly widened fire trails to open up Namadgi to weeds, illegal vehicles, arsonists and feral animals without significantly reducing the impact of fires on the Park or on the city. The good news is that Map 9 indicates, at this stage, a less dramatic interference with wilderness areas by fire trails than was first planned. However, the burden of proof for effectiveness of new fire trail regimes seems not to have been addressed, leaving the assumption that "the more fire trails the better" is the standard underpinning the plan.

Further, we are no more the wiser in this plan as to what the standards for fire trail development will be. We are merely informed that "the standards for ground access have been developed and documented by the Department of Urban Services". So, over the next few months we will have to chase information and cobble it together to understand how the different proposals, standards and assessments will impact on the Park.

There are worrying indications that the Strategy is even less sympathetic to environmental considerations than the first draft. It still states that "The majority of fire ignitions are from arson and arson ignitions are correlated to the demographics of the ACT" (page 26) but the Plan appears to have shifted emphasis from such fires to "relatively rare but severe events (which) cause 95% of the damage and loss to people, property and homes" (page 23). There are no figures to back up this assertion.

This shift is demonstrated in Maps 3, 4 and 5 "Risk Assessment –Where Fires Start", "Risk Assessment - How Fires Spread" and "Risk Assessment - Potential Consequences" which draw a picture of Namadgi National Park as a high risk for fire ignition and fire spread but low on the impact and potential consequences scale. Again, there is no data to back up the assertions of risk or discussion of the basis for these assessments. It is hard to make sense of all this until we see the low assessment of the impact of the 2003 fires on Namadgi, as shown in Map 5. We need to understand that this Strategic Plan deals only with commercial values, not environmental values.

Overall the pre-eminence of fire management strategies over environmental concerns is made clear : "Better access to parks and forested areas of the ACT and neighbouring NSW is required. Land managers and owners across all land uses must

develop and maintain appropriate fire access networks to support bushfire management activities.” (Page 43)

Fair enough, but what is equally clear is that the Strategic Plan has no clear guidelines or reporting standards on what are the most effective fire management activities. Perhaps this is because there has not been enough research done in this area, perhaps there is not enough agreement among the experts. A continuing criticism of the Plan is that it is very thin on research into effective fire management and incorporating such research into future plans. However the Council of Australian Government (COAG) report of January 2005 has identified research as one of the community’s highest priorities.

All of which leaves us with a real concern that areas of the Park could be significantly damaged in order to install fire trails which offer no real protection or useful role in fire management but encourage residents in the ACT to assume they are protected from wildfires. The Committee will keep you up to date as we explore these issues further.