

Future burning: Meeting the challenge of bushfire management

Finding common ground for ACT and regional fire management: A case study from 2007

In September 2007, 28 fire management practitioners and policy makers gathered over two days to discuss and explore common ground on ACT and regional fire management.

The objective of the workshop '*Future Burning: Meeting the Challenge of Bushfire Management*' was to build constructive dialogue between key stakeholders with a role or interest in fire management so as to increase future collaboration particularly within the context of an uncertain fire future, such as under a climatic changing world.

The workshop was timely taking place immediately prior to the official start of the 2007-08 bushfire season and in time to contribute to the review the ACT Strategic Bushfire Management Plan.

Jointly initiated by the Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra and the Emergency Services Agency, the workshop aimed to discuss fire management away from the previous forms of consultation around specific fire management proposals, plans or a fire event. It was understood by participants that it was not a decision-making forum, the views of all stakeholders were not necessarily represented and has to be viewed in the wider context of a number of other processes relating to fire planning and ongoing land management.

Workshop participants included government officials with responsibility for fire management, conservationists, scientists, volunteer fire fighters, professional fire-fighters, land managers, rural landholders and community groups.

Participants identified a number of common values, a series of challenges facing various stakeholders and suggested some ways forward. The most notable shared view was the importance of bipartisan support and continuity in government policy, structure, strategies and budget for fire management in the ACT. Participants noted one step towards developing this would be a transparent and inclusive process in the current review of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan framework and the forthcoming sub-regional planning processes.

Participants acknowledged the need to protect life and property as well as the importance of protecting our environmental assets.

A prominent recurring challenge identified was finding the balance between fuel management practices which conflict with other land management objectives, particularly environmental and catchment protection. A second recurring challenge was the use of science in fire management, particularly 'conflicting' scientific advice and translating research and scientific information into operational practise.

A key theme was the importance of working in partner-



ship, particularly planning with the community in order to build an understanding and acceptance of shared and personal responsibility in regard to fire management.

Overall participants welcomed the opportunity to talk in an 'unpressured' environment, and supported ongoing dialogue.

Common values

The workshop participants agreed on the following common values:

- we must aim to protect life and property
- we value our environmental assets and therefore we must aim to protect biodiversity and conservation values to the extent that we can
- we need to take into account and balance a broad range of values – production, heritage, cultural, indigenous, environment/conservation, infrastructure, human life, etc
- community education is a key part of fire management and we need to actively work with the community – to move toward shared and personal responsibility
- there is no one fix all solution to fire management – we need to use the complete toolbox
- fire management requires flexibility in terms of approaches used
- planning is a key part of the fire management toolbox
- cultural change is needed.

Future trends

The workshop participants agreed that the following future trends will impact on fire management policy and practice:

- increased land-use planning including building design
- increasing knowledge of some sectors of environmental assets and biodiversity values
- increasing recognition of climate change impacts
- increasing litigious environment
- changes in land use
- increased population and increasing urban interface
- better integration of fire management planning within ACT and at the border
- better community education and engagement but also potential increased expectation of technological fixes
- better technology and planning within some well established basic fire operation approaches
- increase in arson-lit fires

- decreasing volunteerism
- greater attention to management of water catchment areas in a drier environment

Certainty – what will not change

The workshop participants agreed there are certain aspects of fire that cannot be changed including:

- our ability to control extreme fire events
- on-the-ground fire practitioners will still continue to make difficult decisions under pressure, although with better information
- fire is inevitable and natural in the ACT

Challenges

The workshop participants acknowledged the following challenges in fire management policy and practice:

- understanding each others' different perceptions
- defining what is the 'community'
- use of science in fire management
- how best to integrate science into hazard reduction policy and operations
- how to balance competing objectives and values
- does the level of risk mitigation justify the ecological impacts?
- how to access information in a form that is useable
- how to bring research down to an operational level
- how to ensure clarity and consistency of terminology and concepts, for example definition of 'protection'
- protecting the 'asset' at the 'asset' – is it culturally, socially, operationally, ecological feasible?
- divergence in views on importance of climate change and what that actually means on the ground
- historical misperceptions which colour interpretations of current fire management policy and planning
- political influence on the fire management context is likely to continue
- without community education and engagement community expectation will remain as 'protection' although climate change awareness may change this.

Some suggested solutions to these challenges were decision making and communications which:

- make the best use of available information even if it isn't all there – recognise what is missing
- plan at the landscape/temporal level, which can provide a balanced solution
- are transparent of the process
- use adaptive policy – understand what you are doing, monitor the impacts of what you do, continual assessment and modify accordingly.

Ways forward

Three key ways forward were identified by workshop participants including:

- bi-partisan support of fire management approach – with continuity in government policy, structure, strategies and budget
- post fire investigations focus on technical issues not blame or litigation
- increased community and individual responsibility and awareness of their role in fire management

To achieve this, participants thought a transparent and inclusive process in the current review of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan framework and the forthcoming sub-regional planning process was required. In turn, for this to be effective it was felt it needs time, resourcing and commitment from all parties to continue dialogue and to build consensus.

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She has been a member of the ACT Bushfire Council since 2008 and was a member of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan Advisory Committee.

Prior to retirement she was a senior policy adviser in various Federal departments and before that taught in both NSW and ACT high schools for fifteen years.

Apart from environmental issues, her particular passions are bushwalking and writing.