

## Community involvement in the SBMP planning process

*(The Strategic Bushfire management Plan or SBMP is a mouthful and for the purposes of this opinion piece I will refer to it in its various forms as ‘the Plan’.)*

In 1952, when fire roared across the Bega valley, my father and his mates closed the shops, jumped onto whatever vehicle was driving past, grabbed wet sacks from the ice factory and went out to fight the fire. The communications network was the telephone exchange ladies in every village. They tracked the fire, kept police up to date and directed volunteer efforts. The men would do what they could to save farmhouses and dairies, then phone the exchange – often from a public phone booth – for directions and race off to help the next property at risk. Many houses and farms were saved but four people died on that ferocious day and there were hundreds of thousands of pounds in stock and asset losses. It occurred to people, and not for the first time, that it was probably better to have a plan.

Planning and communications improved over the following years but the catastrophic damage and loss of life in the 2003 fires spurred a much more systematic approach in Canberra. The Emergency Services ACT was re-drafted to specify that a Strategic Bushfire Management Plan would be a mandatory instrument of bushfire planning in the ACT. In particular it would set out the principles and strategies for managing risks between fire events; for ensuring preparedness for fighting fires; and planning for recovery after fire events. Recognising that managing fire is a whole-of-community responsibility, it specified community consultation as a key part of the process and had to be reviewed every five years.

The first version was written in the old Emergency Services building at Curtin. In December 2004 a draft of the “Strategic Bushfire Management Plan” Version 1 was released “to set the scene and provide clear objectives, strategies and actions for bushfire management.” It was put out for written comment in January 2005 and NPA ACT and the Conservation Council of the ACT had a few things to say about it. The principles were reasonably benign but focussed on people and buildings and ignored environmental values and assets. Namadgi National Park was to get an extensive network of fire trails which would create ongoing ecological problems, not to mention the cost of upkeep over the years. The plan was also very specific in details for example the height to which grasses could grow before they must be subjected to prescribed burns.

Our comments were quite forthright but SBMP V2 was released in July 2005 with very little change. NPA ACT began an intensive public campaign to remove many of the plan’s impractical provisions and improve its focus on environmental values.



Regime change in the Emergency Services sector was a feature of those years. In 2008 the new management decided it might be better to get community voices around the table when developing the 2009 Plan. The Conservation Council was invited to nominate a member of the Strategic Bushfire Management Planning Committee (SBMPC). I have been a member of the review committees ever since.

Some aspects of the new plan were quite exciting. It put the environment right at the front of fire management as ‘protection of life, property and the environment.’ The Plan was to incorporate a systematic fuel management approach which, among other things, recognised environmental constraints such as ecological intervals (the period between destruction by fire and capacity for different species to set seed); using fire to form mosaics of burnt/unburnt country both within the burn and across the wider landscape to allow fauna and flora to recover; adjacent burns in sequential years would be avoided, again to allow species recovery; and recognition that long unburnt country would not be subjected to immediate treatment, subject to more research being carried out.

The vehicle for this new approach was a series of maps setting out rolling five year plans for fuel treatment which would be tenure neutral. Land managers and landholders would be partners in planning for fire treatments. An intensive community consultation process was undertaken because we really needed widespread community support to make the new approach work. There were information sessions for key groups such as NPA ACT and the Conservation Council Biodiversity Working Group and a series of separate consultations jointly run by ESA and TAMS (currently called PCL).

These consultations were carefully structured. Two meetings were held in each area to allow participants to take the information away to consider the detail and discuss with others before an in-depth discussion of the proposals the following week. Participants included landholders, RFS personnel and the general public. The process gave participants time to mull over the information provided, to raise issues and concerns and to contribute ideas and advice. For the first time, environmentalists, landholders and fire managers were in the same room in real time in a supported environment.

Many people made significant sacrifices of time and effort to make the process work but two people deserve special mention: Dylan Kendall of TAM's Fire Unit and Margaret Kitchin of TAM's Research and Planning unit. Their detailed briefings at every session and ready availability to answer questions and explain complex issues contributed significantly to community acceptance of what has become known as the Regional Fire Management Plans.

In 2013 the process began all over again. We had learnt a lot in the interim years and one of the biggest problems was just emerging: weather conditions had prevented many of the planned burns in natural areas, including Canberra Nature Parks. The backlog was creating plans for larger burns across the landscape and there was a sense in some areas that the mosaic approach wasn't hot enough or intense enough to do the work. The tenure neutral approach had not worked well and was being replaced by a requirement for landholders to prepare their own Bushfire Operations Plans in conjunction with the Rural Fire Service.

This time the process was very bureaucratic. A series of committees was established to draw in government departments across the spectrum. This had the advantage of 'no surprises' for some key players but it slowed down the thinking processes and left the community consultation as a last minute add-on. Two major benefits though were important: new developments would not be able to use parks and reserves for their mandatory asset protection zones; and Canberra would have a system of Bushfire Prone Areas declared in the city which would place some responsibility on builders and owners to build or renovate according to the ASA fire safety standards.

These were ground breaking changes and we welcomed them. The trade-off however was worrying. A key safety mechanism protecting natural values on parks and reserves was removed: the Emergency Services Act would take precedence over parks and reserves management plans. It meant, for example, that prescribed burns which were mandated by the Plan would override provisions for protecting environmental values. SBMP V4 was gazetted in 2014.

So here we are in 2017 thinking about where to go to next with our fire planning. Is the idea of smaller mosaic burns really dead or just coming into its own? The Regional Fire Management Plans were a solid idea but, no matter how flexible our fire managers are, can we really plan for fire treatments across a fifteen year period? What is the future role of large prescribed burns? Should we be looking at making our landscapes more fire resilient through careful nurturing of wet areas of vegetation which dampens or slows fire? Or should we be moving towards the Victorian idea that we burn 5% of the entire landscape every year, regardless of weather, terrain and vegetation? (The answer to that is 'no' but the idea still has supporters.)

The next Plan is due in 2019 and work on it will commence in the next few months. Now is the time to find the right questions to ask and ask them. Now is the time to think about what we want our Plan to do for us.

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