



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

---

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY  
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Mr Ed Cocks MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the ACT environment's Bushfire preparedness

**Submission Number: 7.1**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 5 March 2024**

## Five minute talk

**Clarification: In no way do I question the exceptionally high level of skill, dedication and commitment shown by the 150 ACTPCS fire fighters who I will always have the utmost admiration for. Over 30 years of forest fire experience I have been deployed to wildfires across 4 separate countries, and I can assure you that I have worked with none better than the PCS crews.**

---

**As I am sure you are aware, The Territory Wide Risk Assessment identifies the highest risk facing the ACT is BUSHFIRE. EPSDD is the Directorate responsible for nearly 80% of the ACT covering he Parks, reserves and wilderness areas – the exact place where major bushfires will come from and burn through.**

Managing for fire must be the core and essential function of land management and PCS and must never be considered otherwise. This must be stated in all strategic documentation within the department at both the Directorate and Agency level. **Currently this is not the case!**

### **Key Message**

**“If you don’t manage the landscape for fire, then managing for all other values is pointless.”**

To manage fire, you need capacity and capability – unfortunately I believe that the current PCS fire management capacity and capability is at an all-time low. Managing a major level 3 fire in the forested areas of Canberra requires people with experience, skill and knowledge in forest fire fighting – ACT PCS do not currently have anyone able to fill the essential role of Level 3 IC or Level 3 Operations. It is crucial to have experienced forest fire managers in these roles when large fires occur in the parks and reserves - it is the land managers (not emergency service managers) who have the skill and knowledge to manage a forest fire in a manner that places an equally high priority on the ecological and environmental impacts of suppression actions. There appears to be no focus on how we can attract appropriate qualified and fire skilled people to the higher roles within the Fire Management Unit. I have no doubt that the **lack of Level 3 IC and Ops within PCS will be absolutely detrimental to the long-term ecological values of the ACT.**

To deliver fire management across the landscape over the 365 days of the year is hard – very hard and it is often personally challenging and unrewarding. ACTPCS has some of the most talented, devoted and highly skilled fire practitioners in the ACT however they need, and must have support. Budgetary support that increases over time is an imperative (not currently the case) however this support must also come in the form of;

1. **Political licence** – outspoken, explicit, and proactive support from Government Ministers about the fire management programme – need to show those who are delivering the often-contentious program that they are valued and supported - Not currently evident.
2. **Corporate licence** – high level, enabling, directorate support that cuts through bureaucratic red tape around archaic and often frivolous approval processes to deliver the crucial fire management programme – Not currently evident.

3. **Cultural licence** – a positive internal fire culture within the Parks agency where all staff support and assist in the timely delivery of fuel management related programmes and there aren't individuals running their own blocking agendas with their own personal views. There are too many "conscientious objectors" who focus more on "white-anting" the fire programme than being positively involved in its delivery – still doesn't appear exist now. You might ask why there is a move to remove fire operations from a number of Position Descriptions as opposed to making fire and essential component of all PCS staff.
4. **Social licence** – community acceptance driven by political support and proactive engagement.

I believe that the past few years has seen a dangerous situation develop – a situation that is rapidly escalating under climate change and associated weather extremes. We have had 4 very benign fire years. Those past 4 years have seen a rapid accumulation of vegetation (fuel) which has unfortunately coincided with a significant and substantial drop in delivery of the PCS fuel management programme – just at a time when we should be rapidly increasing the preparation work.

It is always easy to make excuses for non-delivery of essential fire management works such as prescribed burning and road maintenance - I was frustrated by this pre-2003 and it seems to again have crept in – too wet, too dry, too windy, too cold, too hot, Covid, etc. – a recent letter from PCS to the All Hazards Council epitomised this when queried about a critical road that could not be accessed – the answer was that we will do it if we have fire!!! I spent weeks trying to drag fire in front of the main fire in 2003 held up by impassable roads where we had graders and dozers clearing the way for us to progress – hopeless situation and one where we were never going to succeed!

**Has anyone at any level in Government (or EPSDD) quizzed PCS why there wasn't smoke in the air at any stage over the last couple of weeks?** (apart from a very small burn in grassland that coincidentally occurred two days before this hearing) **Has repair work yet commenced on the critical Cotter Hut fire trail that runs along our western border that is now impassable to rigid float?** Why am I asking these questions and not the EPSD Directorate? Is it time to move an operational/output focussed driven PCS out of what is predominantly a planning/process driven directorate and into their own environment portfolio where the focus (and budget allocation) can be on fire and the natural environment and not focussed predominantly on the planning/procedural issues surrounding an ever-increasing Canberra?

Every day must be seen as a burn day/road maintenance day until proven otherwise – requires detailed and recorded analysis of the day in relation to capacity, ability to deliver, current and forecast conditions etc. I used to meet with my Operations, FBan and Business manager at least twice a day to discuss these exact issues and to actively seek a way to deliver the programmes – I believe the lack of experience and awareness has resulted in this no longer happening. There is always somewhere across the 80,000 ha that can be treated in some way or fashion.

A decision to do nothing is the easy option and a cop out!! However, it is still a decision (and rarely a good one) and it has to be fully documented along with all the associated impacts. Options need to be looked at reflecting the importance and urgency of delivery – maybe slash a paddock that was planned for burning, burn the road perimeter in preparation ETC.

This is the whole directorates/agencies responsibility - not just the fire unit.

The fact remains that the ACT Parks estate and importantly the ACT environment is significantly behind where it needs to be to be able to withstand the next inevitable bad fire season and there is **significant and major work required** to catch up on lost time. PCS have been exceptionally lucky and one may use the term “been hit in the bottom by a rainbow” but this honeymoon period will end sadly! I am not a doomsdayer or a fortune teller, but it doesn’t take a degree in rocket science to guarantee you that a very bad fire season is coming, and each year is one year closer to that happening. **Are PCS prepared and capable – I do not believe so.** Has anyone asked what is required to keep fuels under age 10 across 110,000 ha – around 11, 000 ha per year every year (and everything not done in one year adds onto the next)! It requires whole of government commitment, skill, planning, experience, and a significant budget.

**It appears to me that the importance, and urgency, around fire management and preparedness across PCS managed land is not currently front and centre in the minds of the higher management levels within ACTPCS and EPSDD**

**I personally believe that there is;**

**a lack of knowledge,**

**a lack of experience,**

**a lack of awareness of the implications,**

**a lack of urgency,**

**They simply don’t know what they don’t know!**

## SUMMARY

1. **I worry about** the ability of the ACT environment to withstand the next large fire event in the face of diminishing PCS fire management capacity and diminished fire management capability.
2. **I worry about** the safety of the land management fire crews tasked with attempting to manage fire in a landscape of increased fuel, diminished access and under extreme climate conditions.