



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

Inquiry into the ACT environment's bushfire preparedness
ANSWER TO QUESTION TAKEN ON NOTICE
02 April 2024

Asked by Mr Ed Cocks MLA on 2 April 2024: Mr Justin Foley took on notice the following question:

In relation to Fuel Load data (Page 17-19 (uncorrected) Proof Transcript):

MR COCKS: Okay. Going to fuel loads. It has been mentioned already today that you monitor fuel loads, is my understanding. Now, what I have been hearing from quite a lot of people across the community is that fuel loads are worse than they have ever seen, not just since the 2003 fires but before that time as well, and that it is impacting everything from potential and capacity for fireys to access the areas, but right down to safety for general public trying to use our parks.

Twofold, is the monitoring and reporting available for us to see exactly what those fuel loads look like and how they have changed over time, and how are we going to catch back up on dealing with fuel loads?

Mr Scott: So we have got identified sites that we monitor regularly coming up to the season and then during the season. They are predominantly grassland sites, and EPSDD manage the forested areas. But collectively, but our fire behaviour analysts look at the current fuel loads, the moisture content, and the prevailing weather conditions to see where the risks are.

But that also then feeds into the regional fire management plan, and then that feeds then into the annual BOPs programs as well. So the monitoring is bigger than just a short-term, it is also that longer term which feeds into those respective plans for the works, and the risk mitigation activities that they do hold.

Again, burning is only one of the tools that they can use to reduce some of those fuels. We have talked about grazing, we have talked about physical removal, chemical treatments and the like. So they are constantly monitored and looking for where that risk will be for the coming season.

Mr Foley: I mean, it is an interesting point just to separate that you get a seasonal response in the grasslands to fuel, and I think a lot of the community concern and a lot of the risk that we have experienced in the last two to three years in particular around bushfire risk but also access has happened in the grassland areas closer to Canberra.

So that comes down to how do you manage your asset protection zones as a practical thing? Like, how do you slash and manage the fuel loads there? In terms of forested areas, and we focus a lot on Namadgi, and to our west. The regional fire management plan, and the modelling tool that we use to identify where the best interventions in the landscape are focuses on fuel load.

So it looks at fuel load, and it looks at the likely fire pathway into urban areas. We use that. It is a reasonably complicated model, and we can talk about it later if you like, or come back with a more detailed submission.

MR COCKS: That would be useful.

Mr Foley: But the Phoenix modelling suite really helps you identify where you are likely to be able to focus your fuel management from a bushfire risk perspective. So that is supported by ongoing monitoring of fuel loads, and this year we are updating the regional fire management plan.

And of course, using updated fuel assessments to really make sure that post-Orroral fire, we are again assessing where the best impact zones are to management bushfire risk, but we are also considering issues like, what do we do in the fire footprint, now that it is still a low fuel but fuels are growing quickly, how do we want to re-engage and manage fuels in there in the context of climate and the context of all the ecological values.

But we are really focusing on life and property, really focusing on how we might actually use fire to manage critical ecological communities and assets like our drinking water catchments, and how might we consider opportunities to use fire in more innovative ways in the context of climate change. So we are really trying to broaden our approach to fuel management.

MR COCKS: So I will repeat part of that question again. Is the monitoring data about fuel loads publicly available, because it is very useful information to be able to inform our consideration, but also the public understanding of what the risks are? Also, this is in the context of thinking forward to the risk of a firestorm, which obviously you cannot just manage on the border, on the edge of the fire front.

The real problems tend to come from ember attack, which can be a long way away. So when we hit a firestorm scenario, we are looking at those large fuel loads that are not just grasslands creating a significant risk for a much wider geographic footprint, as we saw in 2003, then we would see in a normal fire scenario.

Mr Foley: So is the question about fire behaviour and how those fuels behave in the context?

MR COCKS: I am trying to understand that the data says about what our fuel loads are now. Not just grass, but overall.

THE CHAIR: In one minute.

MR COCKS: And is that publicly available?

Mr Foley: We can come back to you on that. We may have the opportunity to deal with that this afternoon. So we can show you.

MR COCKS: If you could take it on notice, that would be wonderful.

Mr Foley: Absolutely.

Mr Scott: Yes. Just from the public facing side.

Ms Vassarotti: What are you asking though? Just let us be clear what we are taking on notice in terms of what information is publicly involved in terms of current fuel loads; is that what you are asking?

MR COCKS: If you can provide data on the fuel loads over the last, say, ten years, that would be wonderful.

Ms Vassarotti: Do we have that?

Mr Gentleman: There would be some mapping.

Ms Vassarotti: There is some mapping that we can do.

MINISTER VASSAROTTI: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:

I note that, subsequent to the hearing, Committee members were provided with a detailed presentation and explanation of residual risk modelling including the role of fuel load data.

In relation to public understanding of fire risks, the Australian Fire Danger Rating System (AFDRS) has been developed to provide community with an appropriate daily rating of bushfire risk. ACT Government fuel load data across a range of vegetation types and land-use classes were used in developing the algorithm that informs the AFDRS. The Emergency Services Agency is the lead agency for the AFDRS in the ACT.

Fuel loads are a key component of bushfire risk assessment. However, fuel load data alone is not an appropriate measure of risk. Fuel load as a component of bushfire risk is extremely variable. Whilst fuel load is measured generally on a weight-per-area basis, the level of risk associated with the load will depend on a range of factors including terrain, dryness and weather conditions.

The Government records fuel load at a number of spatial and temporal scales, as required to support specific activities. This data is not publicly available. Fuel load:

- is assessed annually across the estate to support bushfire risk management planning, particularly the modelling of residual risk that informs burn prioritisation and outcome reporting.

- Fuel load and dryness are assessed at identified burn blocks to support burn planning and implementation.
- is audited twice each year in asset protection zones managed by the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) to ensure the zones fall within fuel management standards set out in the ACT Strategic Bushfire Management plan. Fuel management is undertaken where the audits show fuels to have exceeded the standards. EPSDD compliance with the fuel management standards is assessed by the Rural Fire Service each season.

Approved for circulation to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity

Signature: 

Date: 10/4/2024

Minister for the Environment, Parks and Land Management