



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT environment's Bushfire preparedness

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TO: The Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity.

## INQUIRY INTO THE ACT ENVIRONMENT'S BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS

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CONCERNED RESIDENTS OF WESTON CREEK

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NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS NOT FOR PUBLICATION.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the **INQUIRY INTO THE ACT'S BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS**. Managing bush fire risk is a very serious issue and continues to be a source of stress and trauma for many in the Territory's community.

Having lived our entire lives in bushfire prone areas, we have had real life experiences ranging from fire mitigation and preparedness, volunteer fire fighting and community awareness. We would particularly like to acknowledge the work and subsequent report of the ACT Multi-Hazard Advisory Council and it is also hoped that the recommendations given to Government by the **Multi Hazard Task Force** will be adopted.

As long-term residents of Canberra we offer the following comments against the terms of reference for consideration.

### **A. THE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO BUSHFIRES IN THE ACT AND SURROUNDING AREAS, INCLUDING ANY ROLE OF WEATHER, DROUGHT, CLIMATE CHANGE, FUEL LOADS AND HUMAN ACTIVITY**

With a growing population, urban sprawl, and changes in weather patterns, the ACT has a number of factors that increase fire risk. These include:

- Long and hot summers with periods prone to drought.
- An increased fire risk season typically from October to March the following year.
- Areas of dry vegetation acting as fuel loads. A known risk is local park areas with long grass with irregular mowing. Of concern is the
- Increases in storm activity including wind and lightning. However, climate predictions show spring rainfalls are likely to decrease. Local ovals could be improved by irrigation to assist in times of need.
- Urban growth resulting in increased infrastructure and hard surfaces that contribute to heat island effects. For example, the Weston Group Centre area is an identified urban heat island as identified by the CSIRO. Population growth unfortunately also results in increased arson.
- With changes to weather patterns (such as the increase in temperatures and storm activity), due to climate change, people will change their routines and patterns. This may result in increased leave days from work and have a negative impact on the economy.

#### **SUGGESTIONS:**

- Protection of urban open spaces and green spaces.
- In 2022, the ACT Government initiated the '*Connecting Nature Connecting People*' ... *that will deliver urban cooling, habitat protection and community amenity*). Spaces affectionately known to residents as Cool Park (Weston Blocks 3-5 Section 75) and De Sallis Park Calder Crescent Holder should therefore be protected for liveability and future generations.
- Powerlines to be underground to avoid collapse and sparking and a danger.
- Careful plantings of fire-retardant species.
- Regular maintenance of shared spaces including park mowing.
- Well-advertised information for the community including general information, resources, risk assessments, preparation plans and guides.

## **B.THE IMPACT OF BUSHFIRES ON CLIMATE EMISSIONS, CLIMATE ADAPTION, AND BIODIVERSITY**

Bushfire conditions are now more dangerous than in the past, this included a lengthened bushfire season. Consequently, the costs of fighting fires are also increasing. This in turn has to be catered for in Government budgets, all of which impacts on the in community.

Smoke from bushfires and burn offs need to be monitored. The medical and long-term health impacts can be negative. Some residents are forced to relocate at various times due to poor air quality. Air quality in urban areas is an international health issue. Analysts are critical of poor collection and suggest better monitoring.

### **SUGGESTIONS:**

- Geographically Weston Creek has unique topography, making it a sensible location for an air quality monitoring station. Monitoring the air quality and sustainability is critical to measure exposure to hazardous substances in the air such as smoke, pollen, and dust in real time.
- The ACT Government develop, review and update fire/heat management plans.

## **C.BUSHFIRE RISK, RESILIENCE, AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS, INCLUDING CONSIDERATION OF THE IMPACT OF BUSHFIRE ON THE ACT COMMUNITY, WILDLIFE, AND FLORA**

According to the UN Report *Ten Impacts of Australian Bushfires* January 2020, bushfires contribute to global emissions and warming. In addition to human fatalities, impacts are felt on: animals, flora and wildlife, food production, mental health, other nations from smoke drift across the Pacific Ocean, economic loss and businesses closures, and water contamination.

Fauna and flora habitats such as the Western Edge should be protected. The area is bordered by the Murrumbidgee River and Weston Creek including Chapman, Duffy, and Rivett. Many residents do not see any logical reason for development of this area.

### **SUGGESTIONS:**

- Improved data collection and analysis, including air quality and the impact on the community.
- Sharing of accurate information with the community
- Protection of habitats such as the Western Edge
- Evacuation areas and comfort respite areas to be well advertised and understood by the community.

## **D. MANAGEMENT OF BUSHFIRE RISKS AND BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS OF ACT PARKS, RESERVES AND OTHER OPEN SPACES, INCLUDING: I. PREPARATION AND PLANNING BY GOVERNMENT, THE COMMUNITY AND OTHER ENTITIES; II. CURRENT AND HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO LAND MANAGEMENT; AND III. THE ROLE OF CULTURAL LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

Amendments to the Territory Plan can potentially have negative impacts on residents. It is concerning that important green spaces appear to be easily rezoned. Fire buffer zones, open spaces etc should be maintained. Planning in new developments must include the infrastructure that is needed to maintain a balance. An

example is the recently approved Shared Emergency Services Facility in Duffy. As this was a foreseeable need, it should have been planned in the Molonglo development in the first instance.

There are concerns about the lack of fire readiness of the whole of Cooleman Ridge and Narrabundah Hill and the need to provide our community with a maintenance plan for the fire season. These areas need attention.

**SUGGESTION:**

- Greater emphasis in the Planning Act and associated documents for the human right to a healthy environment, environmental protections, and community consultation.

**E. THE CONDITION OF ACT PARKS, RESERVES AND OTHER OPEN SPACES, INCLUDING CONSIDERATION OF FUEL LOADS AND EMERGENCY ACCESS**

The Molonglo Valley is in great need of services and amenities. Additionally, the suburbs have grown without suitable evacuation routes. This has been exacerbated with the delay in the John Gorton Drive Bridge construction. Although there are 2 exits, it is really only one road and stress could be compounded if the Weston Creek area was also affected.

**SUGGESTIONS:**

- Map suitable evacuation points, meeting areas and exit routes for Molonglo and Weston Creek.
- Advertise these plans widely to throughout the community

**F. COORDINATION BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCIES AND OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES IN RELATION TO BUSHFIRE RISK AND MANAGEMENT**

Government data suggests that bushfires are often as a result of arson. This is of concern with increased population and density.

Additionally, there is a shortage of firefighters. In the years 2013-16 there were none recruited. In the 2018/19 financial year only 6 were recruited. A targeted advertising campaign may assist with increasing recruitment.

Volunteering is also on the decrease nationally. It could be assumed that this in turn affects the numbers of volunteer firefighters and supervision/training for suburban mobile units. A comprehension training plan could include releasing volunteers from their regular jobs to attend training.

A coordinated approach is required between the ACT Emergency Services Agency (who has responsibility for many aspects of disaster preparedness and response), and other government directorates such as planning, education, policing, transport, infrastructure, and health.

Community-led approaches to disaster resilience, mitigation, response, and recovery would more effectively utilise and advertise Government resources. This in turn would guide the efforts of the community.

**SUGGESTIONS:**

- Increase police numbers and visibility to reduce arson attacks
- Recruitment campaign for firefighters
- Public education on risks and dangers of bushfires
- Volunteer training for community fire units

- Coordinated approach between all Government Directorates and policies for bushfire management
- Community led approaches and contact persons

### **G. CROSS-BORDER RISKS AND ISSUES, PARTICULARLY ENGAGEMENT WITH NEW SOUTH WALES AND THE COMMONWEALTH**

As an island within NSW, the ACT needs to engage and communicate effectively with cross-border towns. There appears to be missed opportunities for infrastructure projects such as connecting roads.

#### **SUGGESTION:**

- Greater partnerships with cross-border communities such as Queanbeyan, Yass, and Tumut.

### **H. ANY OTHER MATTERS IN RELATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL PREPAREDNESS BUSHFIRES.**

There is still a sense of trauma and insecurity for the residents of Weston Creek regarding bushfire preparedness. One major problem appears to be the lack of common knowledge of resources, access to information and recovery available support. The ACT community needs better access to information.

Relevant information needs to be readily available. For example, as suggested in the *ACT MULTI HAZARD ADVISORY COUNCIL February 2023 Community resilience to natural hazard disasters in the ACT*

*1) People with limited English proficiency – This wording refers to members of the ACT communities who would benefit from language support services like translated information.*

*2) People born overseas – This wording is applicable for both ACT residents with limited English proficiency and those with high proficiency in English but are not familiar with disaster risks and emergency services in the ACT. This definition can include people who arrived in Australia from English speaking countries (e.g. UK, US, NZ and South Africa), but still may be vulnerable due to their lack of awareness in disaster risks in the ACT and Australia.*

*3) People with multicultural backgrounds – The difference between this wording and the ‘people with diverse language and cultural backgrounds’ is that the latter is very similar to ‘culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people’. The term ‘CALD’ is widely used to describe people born in countries other than those classified by the ABS as ‘main English-speaking countries’ including Australia, UK, US, NZ and South Africa. Thus, it can overlook people born in Australia and speak English as their first language, but have multicultural backgrounds.*

#### **SUGGESTIONS:**

- Map overlays in the District Strategies such as heat island areas, evacuation areas and routes.
- Information in a variety of formats, deliveries, and languages
- Adoption of the recommendations From the Multi-Hazard Advisory Task Force