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**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY

Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity - Report

13 - Inquiry into the ACT environment's bushfire preparedness

Government Response

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Introduction

The ACT is proud to carry the popular title as the ‘bush capital’. This title is reflective of the ACT’s extensive network of protected natural conservation areas, including national parks and nature reserves. These areas cover over 60% of the ACT and are recognised as a key part of the National Capital Plan that integrate the natural and urban environments.

A consequence of these extensive natural areas is an increased risk of bushfires. Bushfires remain as the main natural disaster risks to the ACT and have been sadly experienced during the 2003 Canberra Bushfires and the 2019-20 Black Summer Bushfires. Uncontrolled bushfires pose a significant threat to life, property and the environment.

The 2020 Orroral Valley bushfire burned over 40% of the ACT and 80% of Namadgi National Park¹. The impacts of the 2020 Orroral bushfire were exacerbated by high rainfall events that caused erosion and damage to infrastructure included the network of maintenance trails in Namadgi National Park.

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) within the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate is the ACT Government’s primary land management agency for these natural areas which are protected under the *Nature Conservation Act 2014*.

In December 2023, the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity (Standing Committee) of the Tenth Legislative Assembly announced a new inquiry into the ACT’s environment’s bushfire preparedness. The purposes of the inquiry was to “inquire into and report on the environmental factors contributing to bushfires in the ACT and surrounding areas, such as drought, climate change and fuel loads”, and “examine the management of bushfire risks and preparedness of ACT parks, reserves and open spaces, and coordination among government agencies in relation to bushfire risks”². The ACT Government is pleased to have provided evidence to the inquiry and host site visits, and also acknowledges those who took the time to also provide evidence.

On 20 September 2024, the Standing Committee released its report from the inquiry. The report makes 23 recommendations that aim to ensure PCS is conducting as much fuel management and track maintenance as is possible prior to each fire season, and that PCS is adequately staffed and resourced to conduct its operations.

The ACT Government has carefully considered the Standing Committee’s report and the associated recommendations and is pleased to present this response. The Government is pleased that many of the recommendations align with existing government policy for environmental bushfire preparedness. However, the recommendations provide helpful guidance to the ongoing work of the Government.

The effects of climate change is resulting in an increased frequency and severity of natural disasters such as bushfire in the ACT. This could result in potentially irreversible change to the ecology of Namadgi National Park and in some cases potential species extinction. The

¹ ACT State of the Environment Report, 2023

² Media Release. Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity.

Government will continue to invest in measures to reduce unplanned bushfire size, frequency, and intensity in order to protect life, property and the environment.

Government Response

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that PCS adopt a policy and practice that all planned prescribed burning activities be carried out to the greatest extent possible, unless there are compelling reasons relating to inappropriate weather conditions, firefighter safety or lack of resources to not carry out a proposed burn, or to suspend mid-burn.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

Pursuant to the *Emergencies Act 2004* and the ACT's Strategic Bushfire Management Plan, the Parks and Conservation Service, as the ACT's primary land manager, prepares an annual Bushfire Operations Plan (BOP) which is approved by the Emergency Services Agency Commissioner. The BOP describes the wide range of bushfire risk reduction and capability improvement activities that are planned by PCS as the land management agency.

Significant effort is made to deliver all activities scheduled under the BOP including prescribed burns. It is inevitable however that inappropriate weather conditions, resource constraints, competing priorities, or safety considerations will prevent the delivery of prescribed burns. Climate change is also impacting on opportunities for prescribed burns to be completed.

The Government delivered 30 prescribed burns scheduled in the 2023-24 BOP. Pleasingly, this reduced the residual risk of bushfire across the ACT from 37 per cent to 31 per cent. The Government will continue to prioritise the delivery of prescribed burns as an effective measure to mitigate fuel loads and associated bushfire risk. However, the Government reaffirms its position that prescribed burning is only one tool to reduce bushfire risk to the ACT community.

The Government, through the ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS), is adopting a tenure blind approach to risk reduction and consolidating work effort. This will result in a better use of funding and increased risk reduction. It will also enable better use of the volunteer membership to achieve planned burns.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that PCS continue to utilise alternative fuel load management methods and techniques when it is not safe to conduct prescribed burning, and that they be appropriately resourced and supported by the ACT Government to enable this to occur.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

Fuel load management is a key aspect of reducing bushfire risks across the ACT. Fuel load management is a complex, costly, and labour-intensive exercise that must be carefully balanced against the protection of environmental values. Information about the

Government's fuel load management strategies is available online at https://www.environment.act.gov.au/ACT-parks-conservation/bushfire-management/fuel_management.

PCS used a wide range of fuel load management strategies including prescribed burning, slashing, spraying, and the use of cattle grazing. The application and effectiveness of these methods are regularly reviewed and improved. In 2024, the Government invested in additional measures including heavy plant and alternative machine technology such as Flail Head and Himac. These machines can be attached to smaller plant to add further capability to the management of fuel loads.

ACTRFS work with rural landholders under the FarmFireWise program to identify actions being undertaken to reduce the risk to the ACT community. These actions contribute to reducing fire risk on lands of the Territory.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that as part of the current review of the SBMP and development of the SBMPv5, EPSDD and the ESA review the criteria used for assessing appropriate conditions for prescribed burning.

Government Response: AGREED.

Prescribed burning conditions assessment will be covered in the Bushfire Risk Planning and Land Management theme of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan v5 (SBMP V5).

ACT Fire Behaviour Analysts sit on National committees sharing data and lessons learnt to continually review best practice for Hazard Reduction burning. ACT use a Hazard Reduction decision making tool to determine if a burn should proceed. With climate change and other considerations, the window for burning is decreasing. Utilising all possible resources, including ACTRFS volunteers when a safe window to burn is identified, should also be considered to achieve the required outcomes.

EPSDD in conjunction with ESA are looking at alternative criteria for conditions that are appropriate for prescribed burning as part of the SBMP reviewing process. For example, prescribed burning at night, staged or progressive burning over both time and space, and ridge-top burning.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government more clearly explain to the ACT community the residual risk methodology and fuel load management strategy.

Government Response: AGREED.

Residual risk on PCS managed land is a key performance indicator for PCS and refers to the level of residual risk to life and property remaining after implementing the Bushfire Operations Plan. The residual risk target is 35-45 per cent and is referenced in the ACT Budget papers.

As referenced in the ACT Budget paper, “residual risk is measured using bushfire simulation computer software called Phoenix RapidFire. Calculation of residual risk from Phoenix modelling provides a measure of the change in relative risk to life and property and how it is influenced by the amount of planned burning in the landscape each year under the EPSDD [Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate] annual Bushfire Operations Plan. Results are calculated annually, in mid-July and reported on a financial year basis.”

The Government will look to strengthen the explanation of residual risk methodology using existing bushfire management information websites.

Public consultation during development of Strategic Bushfire Management Plan v5 and Regional Fire Management Plan will also include further explanation of residual risk methodologies and will be proposed to be used as a tenure-blind metric across the ACT.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to support and increase culturally-informed land management practices and cultural burns.

Government Response: NOTED.

The Government recognises the necessity, benefits and opportunities in collaborating with the ACT’s traditional custodians, the Ngunnawal people, to utilise culturally-informed land management practices and cultural burns. The Government utilises the Dhawura Ngunnawal Caring for Country Committee, that is co-chaired by traditional custodians and Government officials, as well as other engagement arrangements that enables this collaboration to occur.

The Government will continue to strongly support culturally-informed land management practices. However, noting the pressures that are placed on traditional custodians to engage with Government on a wide range of First Nation matters, the Government will rely on the advice and self-determination of the Ngunnawal people in terms of their capacity and willingness to increase cultural burns.

Currently EPSDD and ACTRFS are working closely with traditional custodians, passing on knowledge and teachings from traditional owners, allowing collaboration to achieve cultural or cool burning outcomes. These relationships will be further strengthened with the release of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan v5.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that PCS receive adequate funding for the 2023-24 EPSDD BOP to ensure all access maintenance activities listed as Priority 1, and that these activities are completed.

Government Response: NOTED.

The 2023-24 BOP of the former Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate has been delivered. Pleasingly, it has resulted in a reduction of residual bushfire risk across the ACT from 37 per cent to 31 per cent.

Eighty-nine per cent of Priority 1 tasks from the 2023-24 BOP have been completed. Where appropriate, outstanding Priority 1 tasks have been rolled over into the 2024-25 BOP.

All governments, businesses, and consumers are experiencing the consequences of the increased costs of goods and services, some as high as 30 per cent. These increases are placing pressure on the financial resources assigned to deliver the BOP for the ACT's parks and reserves. The Government is working as part of budget processes to better understand these pressures and identify the most appropriate response to ensure Priority 1 tasks are completed, and that ideally there is capacity to get ahead and deliver Priority 2 and 3 tasks in a considered manner so that they don't accumulate and become more critical and require more funding.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government reinstate in full the Tritter program for clearing roadside vegetation.

Government Response: NOTED .

The Government recognises the value of the Tritter program towards bushfire readiness and has a program for delivery already in place. However, the Government recognises that ecological considerations, environmental approvals, and resource pressures will influence the ability to complete the program in any one year.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review senior management positions and reassess against industry standards, while reflecting on levels of experience and risk that the positions are responsible for.

Government Response: NOTED.

The Government notes that there are no set industry standards for senior fire management positions. Recruitment to senior positions within the Fire Management Unit is carefully planned and considered, with a focus on selecting senior management staff that demonstrate strong, contemporary leadership abilities, alongside the capacity to manage an operational team in the fire environment.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure that senior PCS management (Director, planning officer, operations officer, prescribed burn officer) of the PCS Fire Management Unit have on-the-ground fire-fighting experience or training.

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The responsibilities of senior staff in the Fire Management Unit are diverse and may include fire operations, fire behaviour analysis, fire planning, aircraft operations, logistics planning and command/control.

As new positions are created or existing positions become vacant in the Fire Management Unit, the knowledge, skills, experience and qualifications required of the position are carefully reassessed and included as necessary.

Whilst it is preferable for senior staff to possess fire-fighting experience or training, it may be necessary for senior roles to be filled by staff with transferrable skill sets or experience to suit the priorities at the time. This will help to promote growth, learning and contingency options.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure merit-based recruitment for Fire Unit staff, and conduct recruitment with a focus on fire qualifications or experience for management to ground crew positions.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

All recruitment to vacant positions within the Fire Management Unit are subject to the requirements of ACTPS Enterprise Agreements, the Public Sector Management Act and *ACTPS Recruitment Policy and Guidelines* (Guidelines). All recruitment is based on merit, equity and fairness.

Careful consideration is given by PCS to the fire qualifications and experience of each position, and these are included in the position description.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure PCS remains an attractive place to work for those in the fire management space through provision of opportunities for career development, with clear pathways to management, and improved training and pay conditions.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

PCS is the ACT's primary land management agency that provides highly diverse career opportunities and training opportunities. Staff in the Fire Management Unit are presented with opportunities to progress their career not only within PCS but the broader ACT's emergency services into other land management or biosecurity responsibility. Many staff within the Fire Management Unit are provided with regular opportunity to travel interstate or overseas to participate in firefighting operations.

The Government will continue to adequately resource PCS to ensure that staff are provided with ongoing professional development opportunities and recognised for their achievements.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that PCS consider reviewing and streamlining the sign-off process for road maintenance contractor works and recruiting or training additional road maintenance contract managers with the appropriate skills and qualifications to assist in the delivery of the road maintenance program.

Government Response: NOTED

The management of over 3,000km of unsealed tracks and trails that are subject to the extremes of weather and nature disasters will remain a considerable priority, challenge, and cost to the Government.

The timely approval of works, engagement of contractors, and assignment of tasks with suitable levels of oversight is necessary to ensure maintenance tasks list remains manageable. Most importantly, it will avoid a further deterioration of tracks and trails that ultimately increases the cost and complexity of repairs.

PCS recognises that specialised knowledge, skills and experience is needed for staff responsible for managing the strategic planning and delivery of track and trail maintenance works. Heavy plant supervision training is being implemented for the FMU Roding Team and other operational staff. This will be an ongoing skills requirement for relevant staff.

Through Government investment in the ACT Budget 2024-25, PCS is also acquiring a bulldozer, excavator and float truck to provide an in-sourced road maintenance and fire preparedness capability which will help increase the delivery of the road maintenance program. Road maintenance skills and training opportunities for relevant staff will be actively pursued by PCS.

PCS in collaboration with the ACTRFS are also progressing a strategic review of the ACT's tracks and trail networks. This review will consider ongoing maintenance requirements, and the best approach to deliver this maintenance whether through competitive tender or insourcing. As part of the review, consideration should be given to the rural landholder trail network.

Having a whole of territory approach will provide a greater network of trails, along with better access and containment options.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure tracks and trails are maintained, including increasing the annual funding level for maintenance of management trails from the current level of around 1% of the value of the asset, up to 2% or more, to address the increased impact of climate change and fires since 2020.

Government Response: NOTED.

The ACT's tracks and trails supports access to the ACT's parks and reserves for maintenance, emergency response, and public access purposes. Maintaining these tracks and trails is a

critical asset management responsibility of PCS that requires a carefully planned and considered approach.

The Government recognises that due to the scale and ongoing nature of road maintenance, and the impact of severe weather events, that is it simply not possible to guarantee that all tracks and trails will be maintained to the required standard at all times

The condition of the tracks and trails particularly in Namadgi National Park was negatively impacted by the 2020 Orroral bushfire and the subsequent high-rainfall events. The timely repair and maintenance of these tracks and trails was not possible in many cases due to the loss of Rocky Crossing at Orroral that prevented access by heavy machinery.

The Government's annual budget provides a mechanism for PCS as the asset manager to seek additional appropriation during times where repair and maintenance requirements are higher than the resources allocation. PCS is undertaking a strategic review of the tracks and trail network including maintenance requirements that will help inform future Government decision making about resource allocation.

Additionally, a review of strategic fire management infrastructure, including track and trails is a planned action in the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan v5.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the Multi-Hazard Advisory Council resume the Bushfire Council's practice of providing annual reports to the Minister on bushfire preparedness ahead of every fire season.

Government Response: NOTED.

The functions of the Multi-Hazard Advisory Council are prescribed in the *Emergencies Act 2004*. A function includes "advising the Minister about matters relating to natural hazards."

The Government will consider the requirement for annual reporting as part of the planned review of the *Emergencies Act 2004* that is expected to commence in 2025.

The Government is also working to increase collaboration and consultation between the Multi-Hazard Advisory Council and the ACT Emergency Services Agency to ensure recommendations can be considered and where applicable, implemented prior to the next high risk weather season.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government include detailed data on progress against the EPSDD BOP for that financial year in either the EPSDD or JACS Annual Reports that breaks down the data by:

- *The overarching type or class of activity (e.g. fuel management, access management, infrastructure, training, audit and monitoring);*
- *Activity (e.g. grazing, physical removal, prescribed burning, etc);*
- *The area (hectares), length (kilometres) or number of activities, courses or projects actually completed, as relevant, together with the planned number; and*
- *The percentage of completion for each over-arching activity class/type and activity.*

Government Response: AGREED IN PRINCIPLE.

The Government publishes information in Annual Reports; given the appetite for more detailed reporting, it will consider increasing the detail on progress with specific data in future Annual reports.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with the community on bushfire preparedness and response, with a particular focus on new Canberrans and those who may not be familiar with bushfire risk and response in the local environment.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

The ACTRFS and the Emergency Services Agency have a very comprehensive community engagement calendar. Engagement and education opportunities are targeted to community groups at risk, minority groups, neurodiverse, bushfire prone areas, at risk land users and residents new to the Territory.

Community engagement and education on bushfire risk and response will be further examined in the development of the Community Resilience and Awareness theme of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan v5.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure community fire units have been established in new suburbs in the Molonglo Valley and North Gungahlin zoned as bushfire prone areas and if not what if any plans there are to establish community fire units in these areas.

Government Response: NOTED.

Community Fire Units (CFUs) provide a practical way to manage bushfire risk in older suburbs, broadly speaking the risk profile of new suburbs has been altered due to the adoption of bushfire standards in planning, design, and construction. This altered, lower risk profile results in a decreased need for CFU's to offer protection, as new suburbs and homes become more "self-protecting" when compared to older suburbs.

Over the past 20 years, the protection of the urban environment from bushfires has become an important criterion in the planning and design of new suburbs. In conjunction with improvements in construction specifications and materials, the modern built environment has seen an overall improvement in its level of bushfire resiliency when compared to older designed suburbs.

The need for CFU's to bridge any perceived gap in bushfire protection has also significantly reduced due to improvements in suburb and building design.

ACT Fire & Rescue is focusing its future recruitment strategy on supporting existing CFU units in older suburbs to obtain/maintain an optimal membership level of 12 members per unit.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with volunteer firefighters to ensure there is a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities in relation to fire management and response.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

The ACTRFS has the legislative responsibility, under the *Emergencies Act 2004*, for bush and grass fire response in the ACT. ACTRFS volunteers are aware of their responsibilities and undertake their duties under the *Emergencies Act 2004*. ACTRFS members are very experienced and professional in protecting the ACT community.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider bushfire risk and response, and resourcing when considering the development of areas along the western edge.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

As described on the Government's Western Edge Investigation [website](#), the government has already completed a *Western Edge Investigation Area Preliminary Bushfire Risk Assessment* and is factoring the findings of the risk assessment into future planning and decision making.

The ACT is very well resourced compared to other jurisdictions with a fleet of 70 vehicles, including ownership of the majority of the Fire Management Unit fire fleet. As urban sprawl increases, resourcing type and placement is considered to ensure a timely response.

With better urban planning and bushfire management standard, the western edge risk has been reduced.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government focus on building morale in fire field crews through greater public recognition of their work.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

The Government expects that senior leaders in the ACT Public Service promote and uphold the employee values and signature behaviours to provide workplaces that are safe, attractive, enjoyable and where employees are acknowledged for their achievements.

The work of the Fire Management Unit, and the broader PCS is regularly promoted through social and other media. There is a dedicated PCS Facebook page where the work of the Fire Management Unit is regularly on display.

The Government will continue to explore new ways to promote the work of PCS' Fire Management Unit to ensure that staff feel heard, valued and appreciated.

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government increase investment to improve morale in the fire unit, ensuring improved communication and collegiality and accountability between management and ground crew staff.

Government Response: NOTED.

The Government will continue to look for opportunities to improve the morale and wellbeing of its staff in the Fire Management Unit and more broadly across all fire staff in EPSDD. Irrespective of the type of workplace, high-performing teams are built when there is strong leadership, collaboration, trust and communication between management and employees. This is particularly important in workplaces such as the Fire Management Unit, where staff routinely work in hazardous and unfamiliar environments where the nature of work changes on a daily basis.

EPSDD recognises the needs to acknowledge the efforts of PCS staff, in particular the Fire Management Unit, who work throughout the year to reduce bushfire risk to the ACT community, while being responsive to fight fires.

Senior Executive and Senior Officer attendance at staff toolbox talks, training sessions, pre-season briefings, and on-ground work are just some of the strategies that have been adopted to address the objective of this recommendation. EPSDD will also enhance public communications to deliver this message more broadly, so the ACT community has a better understanding of the critical role PCS fire staff play in public safety.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop a Natural Disaster Strategy that covers all aspects of health to ensure continuity of access to healthcare in the event of a natural disaster.

Government Response: EXISTING GOVERNMENT POLICY.

In September 2024, the Government published the ACT Disaster Resilience Strategy (Strategy).

The Strategy is the framework for building resilience to disasters in the ACT. The strategy aims to minimise the devastating losses our communities can face from bushfires, floods, storms, security situations and other hazards. The strategy also promotes collective responsibility for disaster resilience and a common vision and whole of society approach to disaster resilience.

This Strategy will improve the ability of the ACT to resist, manage and recover from emergencies, disruptive events and their effects.

In addition, the Government already maintains well developed emergency plans and arrangements, including the ACT Emergency Plan, to ensure the continuity of the ACT's healthcare services during the event of a natural disaster. The Health Emergency sub-Plan outlines the overarching health emergency management arrangements in the ACT and how ACT Health controls or coordinates with Health Sector partners during various emergencies, including heatwaves and bushfires.

This year extensive work has been undertaken to review and reinvigorate the Health Emergency sub-Plan taking into account best practice emergency management arrangements and lessons learned. ACT Government agencies have collaborated on enhanced Spring and Summer Emergency Preparedness and Planning that encompasses a range of measures to manage seasonal hazards and reduce the health impacts of natural disasters on the community.

Recommendation 23

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government conduct technology capability planning as part of the development of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan version 5.

Government Response: NOTED.

ACT Government, including the ACT Emergency Services Agency, has a current suite of technology used for hazard planning, preparedness, response and recovery.

This technology provides for but is not limited to:

- Clear communications with cross border organisations and other jurisdictions
- Vehicle technology for real time voice and data communications between incident management personnel and field crews
- Increased use of spatial and data collection applications providing better situational awareness and predictions for field crews

Technology capability planning will be further examined in the development of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan v5.