



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 Ms Jo Clay MLA on 2 April 2024: Mr Rohan Scott took on notice the following question:

In relation to Weston Creek Risk Assessments (Page 7 Uncorrected Proof Transcript):

MS CLAY: And in terms of the specific criticisms made by witnesses on the first day of hearing about those risk assessments, and again this might be something that you would like to take on notice and look at the transcripts, could you review the specific criticisms about the assumptions made in those bushfire risk assessments and come back to us and say, "Yes, here is why those assumptions were made" or "No, that is the wrong reference in the report" or whatever the response is.

So it was Dr Bartlett, and we also heard evidence from Dr Sally Troy about spreading the resources thinner. Would that be something you can go and review the transcript?

Mr Scott: Yes, we can take that on notice.

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

The Chief Officer of the ACT Rural Fire Service has reviewed the submissions and evidence provided by the Concerned Residents of Weston Creek and Dr Tony Bartlett. The Chief Officer's summary is attached.

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


Mick Gentleman MLA

Minister for Fire and Emergency Services

Date: 12/14/2024

Summary by Chief Officer, ACT Rural Fire Service
Submission 1 – Concerned Residents of Weston Creek

Section A

Planning of new urban developments, particularly in bushfire prone areas, utilises lessons learnt from the 2003 Canberra fires and other jurisdictions. Edge roads and asset protection zones are incorporated in suburb design to reduce fire risk onto the urban edge. These green asset protection zones are maintained to a standard set out in the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan V4 (SBMP). The maintenance of these zones is included in the annual Bushfire Operational Plans (BOP). Building in bushfire prone areas are built to Australian standards, including options for fire resistance landscape plantings and design.

Power lines in new developments are required to be placed underground to reduce fire risk and power outages in storm events.

ACT Emergency Service Agency (ESA) conducts a comprehensive “All Hazards” community education and engagement campaign for leading up to, and during the severe weather season (October to March) utilising an annual program of in-person engagement activities (community hubs, community events, pop up stalls, and targeted groups), concentrated social media communication methods, information on fire preparedness, and ‘calls to action’, are freely accessible to the ACT community across many platforms (including being available in multiple languages).

Section B

Air quality monitoring is not the responsibility of the ESA, however, smoke impact over the urban areas of the ACT is a critical consideration when undertaking hazard reduction burning. During a fire event, smoke plumb modelling is used to message the community of areas that could be impacted. Air quality and smoke drift are entirely dependent on the weather. A significant number of factors in relation to the poor air quality experienced in the ACT has been due to events (fire, pollen, dust) that have occurred cross border or further abroad.

The ACT has a robust governance structure for bushfire with a hierarchy of plans covering planning, preparedness/risk reduction, and suppression. Fire management plans are regularly dependant on the life cycle of the plan.

Section C

The Weston edge and river corridor are areas of environmental significance to the Territory, and a priority for protection. The Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP) has actions to reduce the impact of fire on flora and fauna.

Evacuation or relocation areas are identified in existing management arrangements but are not pre broadcast to the community for safety reasons. Every incident is different and has complexities. The execution of evacuations plans depends on the type and nature of an emergency incident. In relation to bushfires, several factors need to be taken into consideration including the direction the fire is heading and weather conditions. What may be a good evacuation strategy for one particular bushfire, may not necessarily be adequate for another bushfire in exactly the same area.

Incident warning and messaging will contain advice to the community on any actions they should be taking during an emergency, including safe routes and locations to relocate. As part of the ESA's community engagement programs, residents are strongly advised to have a current survival plan and to enact them early for their own safety.

Section D

The SBMP and Regional Fire Management Plan (RFMP) guide the risk reduction activities and management standards to reduce fire risk to the ACT. Annual BOPs outline the works program for specific areas and the mitigation actions that are planned. BOP activities are scheduled due to risk and potential impacts.

Fire management asset protection zones are maintained in accordance with the Bushfire management standards. Any development in bushfire prone areas will require adherence to the standards.

Section E

Refer to response for Section C.

Section F

ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS) membership numbers have remained steady over the past years (550 members as at March 2024). The depth and experience of the ACTRFS needs to be acknowledged, the members are available 24/07 and dedicate a significant amount of their personal time to protect our community.

The ESA works collectively with various areas of local and Commonwealth Government to meet legislative responsibilities and provide support when we are not the lead agency. Key stakeholder engagement occurs with private companies, utilities, and cross borders partnerships.

The SBMP is a whole of Government plan for a coordinated approach to bushfire management for the ACT, encompassing planning, preparedness, climate drivers, response, and recovery.

Section G

The ESA, including the ACTRFS, has very close working relationships with cross border counterparts. Mutual Aid Agreements and Memorandum of Understanding's are in place to allow easy sharing of resources and data to better plan, respond, and recover from the impact of fire. Risk identification and mitigation activities are assessed at both local and regional areas.

Section H

Recommendations from the Multi Hazard Advisory Council have been reviewed and accepted where necessary.

In relation to evacuation and public information, please refer to previous answers.

Summary by Chief Officer, ACT Rural Fire Service Submission 2 – Dr Tony Bartlett

Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP) Version 4 is nearly the end of its life cycle, with SBMP V5 currently being drafted. SBMP V5 will be a rewrite compared to previous SBMP versions following feedback from plan owners and key stakeholders and due to the changing environmental conditions and climate change.

SBMP V5 will have measurable outcomes and greater buy in from other directorates as they have been involved in the early draft of SBMP V5

Under SBMP V5 a nil tenure approach to land management to reduce fire risk will be implemented. 'Nil tenure' involves removing land ownership boundaries and looking at the territory landscape as a whole, this is undertaken by a geospatial review, utilising territory maps and data. Currently all mitigation actions are undertaken by individual land managers and rural leases. Having a holistic Territory wide approach will allow for greater use of resources, risk identification, and reduction.

The past four years following the devastating 2019-20 fire season has seen significant periods of above average levels of rain fall. This has had a major impact on the ability to conduct hazard reduction burns and has also caused significant damage to infrastructure (roads and trails). Having a yearly target to achieve a number of hectares of burning is not an ideal approach to reducing risk of fire. There are significant environmental considerations and other mitigation methods that can be utilised to reduce risk.

The residual risk model is being implemented in many areas of Australia, replacing a target of hectares burnt. The ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) Fire Management Unit is responsible for managing the largest land tenure in the ACT. They are funded annually to conduct actions/works under their BOP. Moving to a blind tenure approach, all land managers (including rural landholders) will allow for a better use of resources and funding to reduce fire risk.

There has been some commentary around the PCS Fire Management Unit focusing too much on fire response more than land management. Fire response is the legislative responsibility of the ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS) and the PCS Fire Management Unit are a resource of the ACTRFS under legislation. Fire is just one method to reduce risk as a land manager. ACTRFS are vastly experienced and responsible for fire. The tenure blind approach, overseen by the ACTRFS, would reduce duplication, allocate funds/resources more effectively and include all stakeholders.

The Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) are leading a review of the Territory trails and roads on land that they manage. ACTRFS are part of this review and will include road and trail networks outside of EPSDD managed land. The current road network was developed over many decades and this review will help identify any gaps or required upgrade to the current network. Using adjoining rural landholder roads and trails and identifying new network will provide greater access to rural lands of the ACT. Recent maintenance of trails and roads has been hindered due to significant rain and storm.

Denman Prospect undergoes the same planning process for any new development. Planning considerations are in place for fire protection and asset management zones. Hazard reduction to the west of Denman has been identified and monitored since the planning of the development.

Section C

Following the devastating 2003 fires, there has been significant improvement within the Territory on how the impact of fire has been reduced. Some of these improvements are:

- Improved planning and development of new suburbs and refurbishment of existing.
- Increased fire capability and resourcing.
- Dedicated aviation resources for the heightened season periods.
- Fire behaviour modelling and predictions used for fire forecasting and during incidents.
- *Emergencies Act 2004*.
- SBMP implementation from a whole of government approach to fire management.
- Focus on environmental impacts for flora, fauna, and natural resources.
- Public messaging and warnings.
- Fire detections and mapping.
- Communications and use of technology.
- Fuel monitoring and utilising research to determine fire risk.

Section D

SBMP V5 will introduce an ACT Niltenure approach to identify and management the risk to the western edge. Holistic approach across the Territory of all land managers and rural land holders will provide greater risk identification and mitigation. Land managers and rural landholders will focus on managing their respective lands whilst overseen by the ACTRFS who are responsible for fire under legislation.

There will always be a risk of fires coming from the west. Significant changes post 2003 have been implemented to reduce these risks as highlighted above.

Comments regarding the number of hectares burnt should be read in conjunction to the weather impacts during the data collection and with the view of risk reduction rather than area burnt. Hazard reduction burning has many limitations due to weather. In the past seven years it has been either too dry or too wet to burn. Other mitigation activities that could occur during this time have reduced fire risk to the Territory.

The Territory invests a significant amount of money into risk reduction and land management. Having a tenure blind approach will produce efficiencies for risk reduction. Better utilisation of the 550 members of the ACTRFS, focus on business unit core business, and reduction in duplications will also provide significant gains for fire risk reduction and preparedness.

The impact to the Territory from severe weather events is increasing with climate change. The Multi Hazard Advisory Council provides independent advice to Government covering the main hazards identified under the Territory Wide Risk Assessment.

While there are a significant number of research and reports regarding broad scale hazard reduction burning, some of these reports contradict each other. The ACT is constantly reviewing research outcomes and recommendations that will best suit our vegetation and environmental make up. Combined with a changing climate, land management and risk reduction activities will be monitored and updated where possible to protect our environment and provide the need reduction in risk of fire.

Section E

The ACT continues to have one of the best trail and road networks in Australia. Despite the damage caused by the rain events, access would still have been possible if fires had occurred, noting that the risk of fires has been low.

Section F

As per previous answers, there has been significant improvement in planning and design since the 2003 fires.

Utilising fuel load monitoring, fire prediction modelling and improved estate planning, fire risk on the western edge has been reduced from the levels of 2003. The independent report supports this.

The Orroral fire of 2020 was one of many during that season that impacted the eastern parts of Australia. Following significant drought, this was the worst fire season in Australia's history. Many fires that started were extremely hard to contain and the fire behaviour was unprecedented. Many fires including the Orroral Valley fire, despite any previous risk reduction activities and resourcing, were out of control. Back burning was not effective and dangerous. The ACT was part of the Commonwealth's Royal Commission, and the ESA participated in the ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry, and the Operational Review of the 2019-20 fire season.

ACTRFS has dedicated aircraft on contract for each fire season. Aircraft is instantly deployed on days of elevated fire danger and Remoter Area Fire Teams are also deployed if safe to do so. These two capabilities and dispatch are improvements post 2003.

Land managers are subject matter experts in the land that they manage. Incident management of fires within the ACT rural areas is the responsibility of the ACTRFS, a core business function for the ACTRFS members. Incident management teams are established under the direction of the ACTRFS Chief Officer to manage an incident. The makeup of these Incident Management Teams is done so by utilising the most appropriate personnel.