



BUSHFIRE PREPAREDNESS

April 2014

The Committee Secretary
Review of Auditor-General's Report No 5 of 2013: Bushfire
Preparedness
Via e-mail: committees@parliament.act.gov.au

The North Canberra Community Council (NCCC) wishes to thank you for the invitation to comment on the ACT Auditor-General's Office Performance Audit Report *Bushfire Preparedness Report No. 5 / 2013* (Audit Report No. 5).

The NCCC is impressed with the Audit Report No. 5 – it appears comprehensive, thorough and to provide appropriate recommendations to government and the community regarding bushfire preparedness in the ACT.

The NCCC is formally recognised as the peak community representative body in North Canberra representing the interests of the local residents and the communities of North Canberra. This area is located to the north and east of Canberra's City, to the north of Lake Burley Griffin and west of Mount Majura and south of Mount Ainslie, and is bounded to the north by the Barton Highway and Federal Highway. It comprises 17 suburbs: Acton, Ainslie, Braddon, Campbell, City, Dickson, Downer, Duntroon, Hackett, Lyneham, North Lyneham, O'Connor, Pialligo, Reid, Russell, Turner and Watson.

Many of the suburbs of North Canberra lie in the peri-urban fringe abutting various nature reserves. These reserves, and the many other significant assets in the area hold major biodiversity and heritage values enjoyed not only by nearby residents but many visitors to Canberra. These include the Australian War Memorial and the Canberra Nature Reserve.

This submission will confine its comments principally to the Term of Reference relating to 'Strategic readiness for bushfire prevention and preparedness:

a) strategic bushfire capability for the ACT—processes for preparation of a statement of strategic bushfire capability, review currency and processes, and identified stakeholder contributions’.

Further, NCCC will focus on those community interests relating to the North Canberra area as outlined above and in the context of the Bureau of Meteorology’s *State of the Climate Report 2014* findings. The Bureau’s 2014 report notes ‘There has been increase in extreme fire weather, and a longer fire season, across large parts of Australia’
www.bom.gov.au/state-of-the-climate/.

Audit Report No. 5 notes that:

- community awareness has been heightened through the processes of the public inquiries into the 2003 Canberra fires and the 2009 Victorian fires
- community must also take responsibility
- ‘Government agencies have a responsibility to inform and engage with the community to place the community in the best position possible to manage the threat of bushfires’ (p. 6)
- ‘[T]here is an opportunity to further engage with groups in the ACT’s urban community, including for example members of the community living or working in Ember Zones, who would benefit from more effective information campaigns’. (p. 6)

The NCCC agrees with these observations and would therefore recommend that greater attention be given to North Canberra with regards to effective engagement with stakeholders, provision of relevant information and applying appropriate measures in relation to the area’s ember zones.

To achieve ‘*a shared responsibility by improving the resilience and capacity of both the community and the Government for bushfire preparedness*’, NCCC recommends the following measures:

1. mapping assets and key stakeholders including residents, organisations (and employees) who live and/or work along the ember zones in North Canberra suburbs as mapped in yellow at <http://www.esa.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/act-sbmp-ember-zones-central-canberra.pdf>. The north Canberra section map is attached below at Attachment 1. The importance of mapping of bushfire-prone areas is also strongly emphasised by the Royal Commission into the 2009 Victorian bushfires www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Assets/VBRC-Final-Report-Recommendations.pdf
2. targeting community groups and associations, residents and organisations within the North Canberra ember zone with regular, informed, timely and relevant information. See Audit report No.5 ‘5.87 ‘Residents in the Ember Zones are an important community group that should be targeted for information on bushfire preparedness’ p. 143).

3. regularly monitoring community knowledge and understanding with the aim to actively affect appropriate fire-safety knowledge and behaviour particularly for those living and working within the ember zone
4. establishing Community Fire Units on the north-eastern peri-urban fringe in the suburbs of Ainslie, Hackett, Reid and Watson and, on the north-western fringe, the suburbs of Downer and Lyneham, and on the south-western fringe at Acton. This would align with the Ember Zones mapped on the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan dated 26/09/09 www.esa.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/act-sbmp-ember-zones-central-canberra.pdf
5. continuing the resourcing of the four Community Fire Units currently located in North Canberra. These are:
 - Dryandra Street North O'Connor
 - Cobby Street Campbell
 - Wongoola Close O'Connor
 - Dryandra Street South O'Connor
 - <https://esa.act.gov.au/actfr/community-fire-units/locations/>

Recommendations made by the 2009 Victorian Royal Commission that could be applied to North Canberra communities (and no doubt other Canberra communities) include the provision of:

- community guidance material on fire-resistant landscape and garden design, including a list of fire-resistant species.
- Information about specific local solutions at local bushfire planning sessions
- improved advice on the nature of fire and house defendability, taking account of broader landscape risks.

The NCCC notes that *'the ACT Planning and Land Authority's administration and enforcement of land planning and building regulations is outside the scope of this audit. The ACT Planning and Land Authority, in the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, administers the 2008 bushfire code building regulations, which are complementary to the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan'* (Audit report No. 5, p. 40).

However, the Royal Commission into the 2009 Victoria bushfires www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Assets/VBRC-Final-Report-Recommendations.pdf makes various recommendations applicable to the North Canberra area including:

- mapping and designating 'Bushfire-prone Areas' for the purposes of planning and building controls

- providing to the community and industry information about ways in which existing buildings in bushfire-prone areas can be modified to incorporate bushfire safety measures
- revising AS 3959, Construction of Buildings in Bushfire-prone Areas

These measures appear not only particularly relevant to the North Canberra situation but also for improving fire-safety in new buildings as well as ‘retrofitting’ current building stock in bush-fire prone areas. The NCCC raises these matters to draw attention to the recent changes to the *Planning and Development Act 2007*, s. 425. These require a pre-development lodgement community consultation written notice be submitted for prescribed development. The NCCC currently hears presentations from various developers seeking to ‘tick-the-box’ for ‘community consultations as mandated

<http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/af/2014-5/current/pdf/2014-5.pdf>.

The NCCC appreciates the need for improving fire-safety for buildings and would urge engagement with and provision of information to community councils and other relevant stakeholders regarding proposed changes to building controls.

We appreciate that we are very likely heading into increasing risk of more severe, extreme to catastrophic (as categorised by the Bureau of Meteorology www.bom.gov.au/weather-services/bushfire fire danger days/). Much of the community, particularly the Canberra community, is now aware that observed extreme fire weather has increased, and the fire season has lengthened, across large parts of Australia since the 1970s; and in future a further increase in the number of extreme fire-weather days is expected in southern and eastern Australia, with a longer fire season in these regions. We have better understanding of the science of bushfire dynamics, wind shifts, ember drop, ember attack and the need to modify buildings accordingly.

While endorsing the Audit report No. 5 recommendations we have chosen to emphasise the importance of stakeholder engagement, the provision of relevant information and applying appropriate measures in relation to the area’s ember zones including changes to building codes.

We appreciate that there must be various strategies adopted in the complex field of bushfire management. Such strategies must be undertaken to reduce loss of life, damage to property, biodiversity and other valued assets and cannot be left to simple solutions. It is vital that people in fire-prone areas are prepared. They must have a good understanding of what constitutes fire safety under such conditions – they need to understand what behaviours are appropriate given the conditions

forecast, and the capacity to act in their, and the community's best interests. Implementation and application of this suite of strategies provides greater assurance that the impact and cost of bushfires can be mitigated.

We would particularly like to acknowledge and support the vital work of the firefighters of the ACT: ACT Fire & Rescue, the ACT Rural Fire Service brigades and the TAMS brigade.

We would appreciate being informed as to progress on the Implementation of Audit recommendations.

Yours sincerely

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Attachment 1: North Canberra Fire Management Zones

<http://www.esa.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/act-sbmp-ember-zones-central-canberra.pdf>

