



Country Women's Association of NSW

*Incorporated in 1931 by an Act of NSW Parliament
Constituent Society of the Associated Country Women of the World*

ABN 82 318 909 926

17 April 2020

Dave Owens APM and Professor Mary O'Kane AC
Co-Chairs: NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

inquiries@bushfireinquiry.nsw.gov.au

Dear Chairs,

Re: NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

The Country Women's Association of NSW (CWA of NSW) has a very strong interest in the issues surrounding the preparation for, and response to bushfires. Members of the CWA of NSW represent a broad-church of affected persons, from community members who lost homes and properties, to local people providing structured community support and assistance, to members of local bushfire management committees through the Rural Fire Service (RFS), right through to emergency response personnel, be it the RFS, the SES or the Emergency Response and Disaster Recovery NSW or NSW Police. The CWA of NSW state office based in Sydney also runs a disaster relief fund (DRF) from which it distributes disaster relief grants to rural community members impacted by natural disasters such as fire, drought and flood.

Members of the CWA of NSW also have a long history of working and living in a rural environment and the natural landscape. Many of us are on the land, making a living from the land, and are involved directly in our local RFS, or supporting a spouse or other member of the immediate family who takes up that role. Many of us are in townships where the local economy is very much dependent on those working the land. In rural areas the connection to the land and the natural environment is strongly held.

Introduction

Not a single cause

The CWA of NSW position in relation to the 2019-2020 disastrous bushfire season is that there is not one single reason as to why the season was as bad as it was, but rather, it was the 'perfect storm' of a many number of factors, and all of these considerations need to be addressed as part of our response. There is no justifiable way to claim that the catastrophic bushfires were 'caused by' one thing or another. All that this achieves is dividing the community who ultimately all want the same outcome. The CWA of NSW would like to state upfront our very strong support for looking at the many combined factors that culminated in the worst bushfire season on a scale that many of us have never seen before.

This submission will raise some of the facets of the problem that we observe as a result of our direct experience in managing both the natural landscape and bushfires. No doubt

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there will be many more angles from other members of the community, and we argue that all problems need to be addressed as much as is possible, in order to have any real chance of not repeating the threat-level of the most recent fire season.

Causes and preparation

Hazard reduction (prescribed burning, controlled burning)

The overwhelming feedback that the CWA of NSW received from its members was that the hazard reduction burning over the years leading up to these fires, was simply not sufficient. Our members state that there was simply too much fuel on the ground. Our members know that hazard reduction burning is not the panacea to bushfire management; and that in high intensity fires, whether an area has been previously burnt or not, will not prevent a high intensity fire going through. However, we do believe that more hazard reduction burning does reduce the risk of fires intensifying, and reduces the risk of a fire becoming out of control.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service do an outstanding job in managing their parks, using expertise and highly specialised information, much of which the majority of community members cannot appreciate in terms of the conditions that need to be right for hazard reduction burning to occur, the testing and forecasting required, and even overcoming accessibility issues. In decades gone by, this was arguably a simpler task, with significantly less regulation surrounding hazard reduction burning.

Local RFS and NPWS committees and other land managers would use knowledge and experience from within the area, and handed down through generations to determine fire control plans. The reality of the current decade is, however, that regulations, insurance, and requirements that simply must be met to protect the safety of our staff and volunteers, has created a much more expensive and time-consuming exercise. This is not to mention the health impacts of smoke in highly populated areas as a result of hazard reduction burning. The window of opportunity for hazard reduction burning is becoming very small, and even where conditions are right, resources and costs may be prohibitive.

Another major problem faced by the community in understanding these fires is that it is unclear how much of the NSW land management authorities' (NPWS, RFS, Forests NSW, Crown Lands, Local Government and RFS) hazard reduction burning has taken place. We have heard, anecdotally, small percentages of the 'target', year-on-year have been achieved, as little as 7% for the NPWS. Various media outlets claim different percentages for various authorities; however, we cannot confirm what the state of our hazard reduction burning is in NSW.

The NPWS state on their website that through their Enhanced Bushfire Management Program (EBMP) that the NPWS has carried out hazard reduction burning of more than 1,000,000 hectares on NSW parks and reserves since 2011, and an average of 129,500 hectares annually over the last 5 years¹. These figures are helpful but do not give a clear picture. Questions remain- what does this represent in terms of the total national parks asset? And what does this represent in terms of a percentage of an overall ideal hazard reduction burn on both private and publicly managed land? The additional resources allocated to the EBMP should be supported, however we need the accurate account of the current state in order to determine whether firstly significantly more funding needs

¹ <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/parks-reserves-and-protected-areas/fire/managing-fire/bushfire-management-program>

to be allocated for these types of programs and secondly, whether we are taking the right approach through this program.

Cultural burning (and firestick farming)

The CWA of NSW takes a strong interest in traditional techniques of land and fire management. We support the notion that there are historically proven successful management techniques that are well worth bringing into the mix. Cultural burning as we understand it is the practice of much smaller, much more frequent burning exercises, combined with management of the land in a mosaic style of open grassy woodland (firestick farming). There is no reason why the practice of cultural burning and modern Australian farming cannot co-exist and in fact there are synergies to be found here.

Active management

Whether it is hazard reduction burning, cultural burning, allowing livestock to graze, mechanical thinning, mowing and slashing, it is clear that we must actively manage our landscape to protect both human life and property, and the environmental values of the natural environment that we all love.

Over the last few decades, the environmental impact on the land by human beings has been responded to in various ways by both State and Federal Governments, and the community in general. There has been a higher scrutiny on our environmental impact, and subsequent legislation by governments. In the case of NSW (and other states and Federally), the Government's response has been to legislate right down to individual trees, stems and shrubs, the management of land across the whole state. This has, on the whole, eroded our ability to actively manage our land.

There is no doubt that some level of regulation and legislation is needed to prevent broadscale destruction of native habitat, wildlife, and ecosystems. However, we do not believe the balance has yet been struck. There have been some recent attempts through the introduction of new biodiversity legislation in NSW, as well as some new 'clearing' rules for bushfire management zones in urbanised areas (For example, the "10/50 rule" which was in response to the 2013 fires). However, the central tenet of managing vegetation tree by tree, stem by stem, remains across all layers of legislation. This type of regime does not fit with active landscape management. Regional, strategic planning is desperately needed, which utilises, meaningfully incorporates, and employs local knowledge and expertise.

Climate change

The policy of the CWA of NSW on climate change is that we support positive action in responding to climate change, and we oppose any sort of carbon tax or negative carbon action which would adversely affect (predominately) agricultural industries that underpin the rural communities in which we live.

We support research, development and investment into renewable energy in rural Australia as a way of adapting and reducing the risk of climate change in rural areas while scoping and establishing, additional, yet sustainable, productive industries for rural populations. A whole of landscape, regional planning approach outlined above, needs to include the considerations of a changing climate, which many experts believe will result in longer, hotter, drier periods throughout the year, and therefore increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events, and more frequent and more intense and longer lasting heatwaves.² If this eventuates the available windows for hazard reduction burning will be seriously reduced, and will increase the drought and bushfire induced strain on

² <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/what-is-climate-change-what-can-we-do/>

our rural populations more frequently in future years. It will therefore be even more important to enhance active management, on a smaller, more regionalised, and much, much more frequent manner.

Response

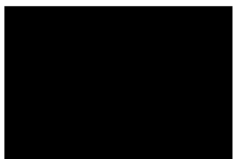
Our members have told us that there are a number of concerns about our State's management of the recent bushfire catastrophe. Having said this, many of our members were very supportive and thankful for the Government and community's response, in acting quickly and effectively. Non-for-profit groups and charities rallied quickly to provide supplies to where they were needed. Corporate Australia offered significant support, from telecommunications to financial institutions. The community also rallied to provide monetary support, both regionally and urban and these are all actions that the CWA of NSW is very appreciative and proud of.

Some of the concerns in relation to response raised include:

- **Safety of firefighting vehicles-** including rollover protection, crush protection and water spray. Whilst we acknowledge the vast costs that would be involved in updating the entire fleet, it could be addressed as a step-by-step process to ensure that our vehicles are world class in terms of protecting the frontline firefighters from harm.
- **Access tracks-** Those who were part of the RFS community firefighting efforts were so often unable to access areas through both publicly and privately managed land due to overgrown and inaccessible fire tracks. This is not acceptable and needs urgent action as part of the overall improvement to local land management and hazard reduction.
- **One road in and out** – unnecessary risk is created when there is not enough access out of an area, we need to ensure that evacuees can escape in a timely fashion. This is a whole of government exercise and requires input from local government at the regional planning level.
- **House safety-** From modern gutters to appropriate vegetation, there is a need to increase home fire safety checks, ideally through the local firefighting expertise/community liaison officers. We are aware that this occurs in some Fire Management Districts and not in others.
- **Co-ordination-** The consultation, liaison, and congruence with interstate policy and practice is vital, and the need for interstate/territory cooperation and consistency in policy and response is very important.
- **Education in urban and urban/rural interface-** More emphasis on fire management/mitigation strategies and education in these areas specifically.

We trust these comments are of assistance. The CWA of NSW sincerely thanks the NSW Government and the Independent Bushfire Inquiry team for the opportunity to reflect and comment on the recent NSW bushfires. We are happy to discuss these concerns further at any time.

Yours faithfully,



Danica Leys
CEO