

Personal submission

My name is Michael John (Mick) Beltran AFSM MPA CF MAIES and I am the Manager of the Blue Mountains Aboriginal Culture and Resource Centre, Katoomba. I am also a retired Chief Superintendent of the NSW RFS and an honorary (non-operational) member of the Shipley Rural Fire Brigade.

Issue

Aboriginal cultural burning is a practice that is currently receiving much attention and demand from the general public. Aboriginal organisations are rising to challenges of satisfying this cultural and societal need but the framework of permissions, planning, operations and assessment are inadequate for the purpose and require Government led multi agency/organisation focus for review.

Background

The bushfire crisis affecting NSW has demonstrated the potential for different approaches to fuel management across the state's (and nation's) natural estate. The call for Aboriginal cultural burning has been heard with enthusiasm and resolve by many Aboriginal communities. Not only will it serve a marvellous aspect of fuel hazard reduced bushland for both community protection and environmental improvements, but it forms a most basic function in building skills and esteem with Aboriginal participants and their community/ies and for those citizens of the broader community who regard the development of Aboriginal values most highly. It feeds fundamental aspects of the NSW Government's OCHRE visions.

I recently reviewed the planning documents of a large Aboriginal group who are planning to conduct Aboriginal cultural burning on a difficult parcel of land in north western Sydney. What cries out from this earnest document is the awkwardness of the planning building blocks in terms of the permissions prerequisites and operational requirements for this type of exercise to proceed. This, to me, demonstrates a huge gap between the will (need?) of our Aboriginal communities to enact traditional practice and the land management rules/views of the current bureaucracy post colonisation. The question that this raises is 'can true cultural burning be allowed?' or is the allowance of this style of activity only to be tolerated as a subset of modern practices that have been developed apart from, and in complete disregard to, traditional Aboriginal land husbandry.

The issue is made more complex by the diminishing (in the majority) of capacity of Aboriginals to practice traditional cultural matters, the changing of the natural landscape post colonisation (which has led to a changed natural vegetation regime e.g. higher forest fuel loadings and arrangements of fuel types) and the developed difficulty of ensuring the integrity of the bushland interface at the perimeters of, and within, the built environment.

Recommendation

The creation by Government of a forum for the analysis and review of the issues surrounding the development of Aboriginal cultural burning as an integral tool of NSW fuel management strategies and the development, training, equipping and use of Aboriginal cultural burning groups acting within the strata of fuel management necessities and opportunities within NSW. Such a forum would by necessity involve the Premier's office, emergency and land management authorities, the Dept of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal organisations.

Sincerely

Mick Beltran

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted contact information]