

Braidwood and District Fires Submission content

I am a landowner and farmer in the Braidwood region of the Queanbeyan - Palerang Regional Council area. I am currently a deputy captain with the Bombay Fire Brigade. I have previously been a group officer and worked as part of incident management teams at major fire incidents in the Braidwood and Shoalhaven areas.

My comments below are informed by my involvement in some sectors of the fires that impacted on Braidwood and surrounding district, including on my own and family properties, during the last days of spring and the summer of 2019-2020.

I was on fire ground on the first day of the North Black range fire - 26 November 2019 - and on the last day of operational activity for the Jinden East Fire – 6 February 2020. In total I attended at fires over 50 days either on a NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) tanker or assisting using my own vehicle.

Because of the drought conditions during this time I also needed to feed stock every second day which at times could only be achieved with the help of family members. On many occasions it was not possible for me to be available from early in the mornings when a fire crew was rostered on or for a full shift. The flexibility of using my own vehicle meant I was able to contribute when I could and work effectively with group officers and crews, landholders and other individuals - the so-called 'mosquito fleet'.

Within this submission I aim to identify:

1. potential lessons from each of the fires
2. learnings in relation to the actual firefighting effort
3. options on how fire intensity and asset protection might be better managed

Yours Sincerely

M D McGrath

1. Three Fires

NORTH BLACK RANGE FIRE

In the initial three days of the North Black Range fire, from Tuesday, 26 November 2019, National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) were responsible for fire management. The reluctance to aggressively attack the fire from the outset or to backburn against it at the earliest opportunities led to its uncontrollable spread and continuation with extensive loss of buildings, fences and other assets and destruction of the little remaining pasture on many farms.

The Incident Action Plan for 8am Thursday 28 November to 8am Friday 29 November sets out the mission that backburning from a containment line on the then eastern edge, 'Ralpine Valley' only occur as the fire approaches. Unfortunately under strong winds an intense fire passed this point of the prepared containment line by mid Thursday morning. Encouragement from crews on the ground seeking approval for an attempt to contain the fire by backburning on the Palerang Fire Trail and Gourock Fire Trail and from a new containment on the south side were not proceeded with.

Half jokingly on the Thursday evening of 28 November 2019, local Bombay fire crews suggested that ideally all of the eastern edge of the Gourock Range National Park boundary should be lit as a backburn. Sadly, by the time the fire was out it had burnt a much larger area than this, threatened Braidwood and Majors Creek, and burnt State Forests and private landholdings to the south and north.

Yes, the fire conditions were unpredictable. But unfortunately the outcome of not seeking to contain this fire at the start was also almost certain – as shown by the RFS own predictive mapping for Friday 29 November.

The RFS had provided crews from 26 November for shifts that extended into the nights. But for the eastern side when NPWS withdrew from direct attack the outcome was RFS crews attending for little purpose other than to watch. This was unnecessary and led to exhaustion of some of the key volunteers available when the fire finally emerged onto private land. It would have been better to have stood the RFS down from involvement unless active firefighting was required.

So, is the answer that NPWS should not be in charge where wildfires occur as they do not take a big enough perspective of the potential consequences of their decisions? I think so.

The RFS, in consultation with NPWS, should be the responsible agency for managing all fires in national park lands in NSW in addition to their current remit.

This is not to say that the RFS will always be perfect or have better results.

When the North Black Range Fire made its major run toward Braidwood on the afternoon of Friday, 29 November, the response was understandably chaotic at first and disorganised.

The RFS is never going to have enough resources to protect every home or to stop a raging firefront such as this. The RFS crews on the ground, however, were crucial in protecting houses and other assets. Most local crews made their own decisions as to where they would best go, based on local knowledge and direct communication with their community.

This is where out of area crews are at a disadvantage as they are limited to responding to emergency calls or directives from fire control.

Many homes and buildings were saved by the individual efforts of local landowners, their friends and neighbours. Some locals had already prepared with one independent grader, on the operators' initiative, working through Thursday night around homes from Majors Creek to Bombay. On Friday morning Queanbeyan - Palerang Regional Council graders operated to prepare breaks around other houses and then participated in direct attack by grading lines against spotfires and the main front on Friday afternoon.

The effectiveness of heavy plant - water trucks, dozers and graders, both private and council operated was to prove crucial throughout all of the fires.

Over the subsequent days and weeks of the North Black Range Fire the graders were perhaps the critical element protecting Braidwood and surrounding property. They led the direct attack against the fires on successive days when fanned by strong winds the fire sped over the grassland.

Many local landowners and other mosquito fleet members were also engaged in direct attacks on the fire. For example, when the North Black Range Fire made a further run on Thursday, 4 December, burning East from Farrington across open grassland and into bush areas toward Majors Creek, RFS crews were withdrawn to Majors Creek and, except for a couple who remained, the bulk of the work on stopping the initial advance of the fire across the grassland was achieved because of judicious containment lines put in by the landowner, direct helicopter waterbombing and the mosquito fleet.

Only constant monitoring by the mosquito fleet, predominantly local landowners, time and again over the next 7 weeks, and continuing responsiveness by the RFS to calls for assistance prevented the fire in the bush area behind 1450 Cooma Rd from emerging to potentially impact the village of Majors Creek.

There were some instances where the RFS decisions in relation to its local volunteers appeared to not appreciate the difficulties for local brigade members of the impacts of the fires on their properties, the continuing threat and the ongoing drought conditions.

Also, initially, the understanding of the need to extinguish fires completely required attention with RFS crews moving from active fire areas prematurely, though this improved as the fires progressed. There were some occasions where RFS crews did not recognise or provide help to landowners who were in desperate straits.

The need for the RFS to better engage with local landowners and the mosquito fleet is clear.

Fire crews and group officers should be encouraged to have an awareness of their responsibility to cooperate with and support landholders and other local community members engaged in firefighting efforts.

CURROWAN FIRE

From mid December until mid January I was involved with local RFS crews, RFS strike force teams and other members of the mosquito fleet between Tomboye and Mongarlowe

through Reidsdale to south of Araluen as south and easterly wind changes caused major fire impacts on my own and neighbours properties.

Because this fire was established as a s44 by the Shoalhaven Region there appeared to be an initial reluctance on the part of the Lake George Zone to engage with the issues the fire posed for the local community along its western edge approaching Mongarlowe and eventually all of the western edge of the Coastal escarpment from north of Nerriga to south of Araluen. This constrained to some extent the resources available and the attention being paid to its potential impact. There was also some reluctance to undertake backburning when containment lines were established. Many containment lines were overrun because of the failure to backburn from them at the earliest opportunity.

On Saturday, 21 December the fire impacted on Nerriga and along the area north of the Kings Highway which led to Lake George Zone RFS adopting control of the western edge. The out of area strike force teams and resources from New Zealand and elsewhere who were engaged made a significant difference to the way in which this fire was then able to be handled.

In sometimes difficult terrain and in the face of significant fire episodes NPWS, RFS members and the mosquito fleet generally worked well together in limiting the fire as it progressed south.

Whether earlier Lake George Zone involvement in relation to this fire would have helped reduce the impact on Nerriga and elsewhere on 21 December is open to debate. Without more open discussion and trust of onground decision-making for backburning the outcome should not be expected to have been any different.

I know discussions were regularly held between Incident Controllers of the different Zones but a better process for handling fires across fire zone areas would appear to be needed.

In a number of instances it was difficult from the fireground to obtain information or maps from fires in other zones to help determine future strategies or containment lines or even where likely next impacts were likely to be and when.

The other firezone information may well be available to the IMT but given the extent to which strategic control decisions need local involvement the information should also be available to all members and perhaps more broadly to the community. Perhaps it could be as simple as providing the relevant QR code so the information can be accessed electronically, as has transformed information flows within our zone.

There is a need for better communication between RFS control zones and on ground fire crews in an adjoining zone.

There need to be clearer guidelines on management of s44 fires where they impact multiple fire control zones.

JINDEN FIRE

To underline the importance of an aggressive response to fire events, in the week preceding the lightning strike that commenced the Hell Hole fire - that became the Jinden Fire - a series of lightning strikes in this same area also occurred. It was from one of these that the

fire that subsequently burnt out Cobargo on developed. One lightning strike in the same region as the Jinden Fire, was immediately responded to by three Krawarree Fire Brigade tankers together with a dozer and grader. That fire was contained before it had burnt several hectares, else it might well have joined with the Countegany Fire and led to more widespread losses in a wider area of the coast surrounding Cobargo.

Similarly, if the Hell Hole fire had been able to be successfully contained in the first few hours, the Jinden Fire may not have occurred. Unfortunately the difficult terrain and unavailability of machinery prevented such early control.

During the first several weeks of managing the Jinden Fire, only four local tankers with four dozers and graders were available as all other resources were tied up managing the Currawan and North Black Range firegrounds. Using just these resources, the fire was successfully directed and prevented from destroying assets adjacent to National Parks lands for several weeks as it grew to present a more than 20 km² fire front.

As RFS resources became available they were tasked to this fireground. By 6 February, containment lines had been constructed and successfully backburnt from to control what was over 50 km of fire front, without the loss of one building and minimal loss of farm fences and pastures. Before its end the fire had merged in the east with the Currawan Fire on the coastal range and with the Slap Up fire on its west in the Jingera range at the headwaters of the Queanbeyan River.

The benefits of close cooperative locally organised backburning activity being undertaken to prevent wildfire from crossing constructed containment lines and using heavy plant in conjunction with fire tankers to implement this strategy is nowhere shown better than by what was achieved in relation to the Jinden Fire.

Backburning must continue to be able to be used by onground fire crews as part of their ordinary tools of fire management under the control of the Local Fire Brigade Captain for an area. The incident management team must engage with the local fire brigade captain in their planning and initiation of all backburning activity in a brigades area.

2. Firefighting Issues

MANAGEMENT

There are a lot of things the Rural Fire Service (RFS) does and did very well, including:

- its coordination of resources, both from within the Lake George Zone and from out of area including interstate and internationally
- all the logistical management associated with what became a long term campaign
- the incident action plans each day including mapping, fire information and weather predictions (especially its availability electronically through QR code downloads)
- the availability of the incident management team (IMT) and senior staff to discuss issues with local captains and onground firefighters.

The Lake George Incident Management Team deserves the highest praise for its coordination and management of the sheer volume of logistics required for the fire fighting effort. This logistical effort was extraordinary, with local crews as well as those from other regions, interstate and international support being sourced and allocated tasks and provided with necessary support, transport, vehicles, food, snacks, heavy plant - bulk water, graders, bulldozers and aerial, mapping and planning.

Lake George Zone proved it has the capability to deal with an extended fire campaign such as this which ran for 70 days across three firefronts.

As with all incidents some things go better than others and there are always some improvements to be made. I hope that through reviews of the fires the RFS will ensure that it does enhance its capacity to better support the community and its volunteers.

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT BY THE RFS

I found the RFS group officers, RFS staff from mapping, operations and incident management all to be readily available, open to suggestions and willing to discuss issues. During the Currowan fire and the Jinden fire, particularly, on several occasions I spoke with the senior members of the RFS incident management team in order to prepare containment options and seek support for onground activities. I was very appreciative of the willingness to support proposals for action put forward to them from a local perspective of what could work. There was a clear recognition that we were working toward the same goal.

While my view was only one input to what might be finally decided, at all times I was given a good hearing and reached generally satisfactory results.

However, I have been told that there were occasions when feedback from other onground personnel was ignored by operational staff who persisted with plans of action even though a different response may have been better.

Without an openness to and use of local knowledge the RFS risks becoming seen more and more as a travelling show that is run by a bureaucracy that has no commitment to the local

communities in which it operates, which will reflect in the willingness of people to volunteer.

Unfortunately the further the RFS develops as a bureaucracy intent on control of its operations there is likely to be continuing reduction in its acceptance of input or assistance from others and a reduced appreciation of its role of supporting trained volunteers to provide a service to the community.

The RFS must retain and build its capacity to accept local input from a range of sources. Input from multiple trusted sources can help ensure errors in approach are minimised.

One of the real standouts was the use of the local community radio station, Braidwood FM, to help inform the whole of the community about the fire situation as it developed. While credit for the focus of Braidwood FM on the fires must go to its manager, Gordon Waters, the hourly updates from senior RFS staff provided a reassurance for the community with the bigger picture being explained as well as questions about particular localities answered. This was not a level of service that the ABC could provide and went a long way to avoiding confusion, particularly over those days when visibility was totally obscured by smoke.

Another feature was the number of individuals who turned up at Braidwood Fire Control to help in whatever way they could be it in preparing meals or offer support. It demonstrated a strength of community in a time of adversity that might generally go unnoticed. I know that special efforts were also made in other villages such as Nerriga by its local publicans and by the wives and other ladies in the communities at Mongarlowe and Gundillion Hall.

Thank you to all of those who helped. This broader scale of volunteered support helps reinforce for me the value of helping my community both as a member of the RFS and otherwise.

VOLUNTEERS

The volunteer base of the RFS is its real strength.

As a local brigade member I was grateful and very proud to be a member of the RFS as day after day, units from across the Lake George Zone including Hoskinstown-Rossi, Captains Flat, Bungendore, all crewed by volunteers, turned up to help avert whatever crisis happened. More than 20 units from Lake George Zone were on fire ground each day and sometimes every available unit was manned. In addition, fire fighting crews from other NSW Zones, ACT, Victoria and Queensland as well as New Zealand came.

Some days were pretty mundane when conditions were mild, blacking out and patrolling. However, over the summer there was more than the average number of days on which dangerous fire conditions arose where these volunteers willingly put themselves into harms way to protect this community.

I hope that I am in a position to be there should those other communities ever need support.

The efforts have been appreciated by the local community too. Most of the brigades from other places in the Zone may not be aware, but many individuals sent cards, made donations or just turned up at different local brigade stations to say thank you for what was done to help them.

MOSQUITO FLEET - VOLUNTEERS

On each of the Lake George Zone firegrounds there were individuals and groups of people who had set up water tanks and pumps on their own vehicles. From the first significant fire overrun of the North Black Range Fire on 29 November onwards these mosquito fleet members – a term coined by one of the local brigade captains – performed an essential role in directly attacking any fire they came across. Quite a number of spot fires would have developed into more serious fires except for the efforts of these individuals.

On a number of occasions the landowners and mosquito fleet were the only persons constantly monitoring the fire edge following the passing of the fire front and provided eyes on the ground and a quick response capacity. I for one benefited from the efforts of these volunteers and appreciate the focus of this group on ensuring the fire remained out.

On many occasions the Mosquito fleet, Group Officers and RFS crews worked seamlessly together on the fireground to achieve blackout of the fire.

I have heard some RFS members disparagingly suggest that the Mosquito fleet was predominantly made up of disaffected former brigade captains. This is not at all accurate.

The Mosquito fleet include

1. Many who are land-owners and many of those are current RFS volunteers.
2. Others who are just members of the community who want to help but have no RFS connection at all.
3. People who are current RFS volunteers and who may crew RFS trucks as well but will choose to do own thing to protect own property, neighbours, friends etc, at some time either for convenience or in preference.
4. People who have got older and do not want to be on an RFS truck but still feel they can help.
5. People who have been in the RFS – sometimes at high levels – but have left for a variety of reasons e.g. they don't see how someone else who is not at the actual location can direct them where they should go and what they should do to help, prefer to rely on own local knowledge and common sense.
6. Most if not all of the former captains in this area of the Lake George Zone continue to be members of local brigades.

I was pleased that in the Action Review for the Lake George Zone fires the District Manager noted the role the mosquito fleet had played and encouraged Brigade Captains to engage with those individuals.

I strongly support the RFS accepting the volunteer role played by the mosquito fleet as a valuable assistance in controlling wildfires.

As part of this it is essential that there be UHF radios retained by RFS crews in order to communicate with the mosquito fleet, and other landowners as well as heavy plant. If this is not done the RFS must establish effective arrangements for onground communication with and between all of these groups even if this requires providing radios.

I also encourage members of the mosquito fleet who are not part of the RFS to join their local brigade and enhance their understanding of and ability to contribute to the community and add value to the RFS.

Perhaps the disparaging comments that have been made about former captains and the Mosquito fleet reveal more about those making the comments and the problems in relationships that arise in some brigades where a change of management is orchestrated by a faction, without regard being had to the benefit of retaining the skills those individuals have – and which are sorely needed when a catastrophe arises.

The RFS is hardly so flush with capable and committed persons in its rural communities that it can afford for trained experienced and competent individuals to leave.

While I do not support constraints as to how the volunteers of any particular brigade choose to select its Captain, the RFS would do well to establish a form of exit interviews for senior and experienced volunteers who cease to hold management roles to obtain their perspective.

The faction-based slash and burn approach to changes of management is common across many community based volunteer groups but creates real difficulties where the organisation like the RFS provides an emergency service, where gaining qualifications and requisite experience takes many years.

CREW SHIFTS

Over the course of this summer the vast majority of occasions, if not all, when severe weather conditions led to significant fire runs this occurred from early afternoon until evenings. For the most part fire activity decreased significantly in late afternoon and evenings. The mild fire activity usually continued into quite late each morning.

Where a crisis arises, crews who have started early in the morning may well be spending very long hours on the fireground. Because of the lack of night crews nominating there is no-one to hand over to. Some out of state crews (not all) and NPWS crews seemed to take standing down at 6pm as sacrosanct. In one case I was told a NPWS crew lit a backburn and left at 6pm even though they had no replacements to monitor it.

The shift arrangements where crews are on for a day shift from 8am til 6pm needs to change to better support a more strategic approach, ie to enable crews to undertake

backburning and direct attack on the fire when it is generally at its lowest ebb - late afternoon and evenings.

I understand that in the Lake George Zone there had been only limited responses from brigades for crews to be available for a distinct night shift. I recognise the problems of nightshifts for Brigades with limited members and clearly is not the answer given its impacts on individuals for subsequent days. There can be difficulties for volunteers who are trying to balance fire fighting activities with other work demands who may lose 2 days of work time if they do a night shift or risk exhaustion as they try to add that night shift in after a full day of work.

While the Swing shift was used increasingly as fires progressed, this should become the main focus, including for briefing. Generally the day shift are the only crews to be briefed by a Group Officer before proceeding to the fireground.

The suggestion is that the majority of crews should start much later in the day so that they can both be available when a crisis is likely to arise and if not to take part in strategic control work as part of each other days regular shift.

Group Officers should continue to maintain their existing shifts as this help ensure they are up to speed on the fireground when the later or swing shift arrives. A formal briefing should be provided as a matter of course for this later shift.

CONTROL LINES

The planning and preparation to establish control lines in advance of the fire and around assets needs to be recognised and must continue to be part of an initial fire response. Locally, these control lines extended from Bungendore to Captains Flat, Braidwood to Nerriga and beyond, back along the Budawang range to Mongarlowe, then south of the Kings Highway to below Araluen, Majors Creek and to Krawaree, Snowball and the Badja.

This work was being undertaken at the same time heavy plant was engaged on the firefront itself, often involving the same operators, together with experienced locals and key volunteers planning and pushing control lines directly ahead of the fire.

While not always successful, the advance work was critical in attempting to contain and control the fire. It helped save countless properties and other assets and enabled a more strategic approach.

In some cases the control lines did not become necessary to be used. But it is clear from those occasions where the fire travelled many kilometres in the space of several hours, that unless the opportunity to put in control lines around houses or to protect an area are established at the earliest opportunity they may not be available when needed.

BACKBURNING

Throughout this fire season, responsibility for approval of any backburning operations by the RFS rested with the Incident Controller.

Given the potential risks this is understandable. There is less and less use of fire as a tool within even the rural community so concern about a risk of a backburn leading to losses of assets and becoming a major fire in its own right is understandable.

However, over this summer of the three elements that make up the fire triangle, removal of the fuel available was the only feasible means of containing fire in the bush areas. Water was at a premium with extreme dryness of the landscape and heat wave conditions.

Confusion seemed to exist as to whether lighting to inhibit an advancing firefront from imminently impacting on a control line, ie reactive and usual practice, was to be regarded as a backburn, or if approval only was required for tactical strategic burning as a preventative measure to remove potential sources of conflagration in advance of the fire front arriving.

There has to be a degree of trust offered to people on the ground who will miss the opportunity to carry out a burn quite quickly if delay in approval occurs. This may be something that needs to be worked through in each Zone as part of workshops between District Managers and senior staff, group officers and Captains.

One aspect that is clear is that should a strategic backburn be contemplated by the management team this must be coordinated with the respective local captain. – see recommendation above. The local conditions and likely consequences and the need for local awareness of the potential for a change to the fire situation is essential.

HEAVY PLANT

Heavy plant was at priority end of all that we were doing over this summer, in preparing control lines and as part of the direct attack on the fire as well as support for backburning operations. So far as the fire trucks are concerned we are effectively using technology that has been around since the 1950s to 70s, with the added benefits of better pumps and foam.

One problem is, when heavy plant is at the most dangerous and critical spots we absolutely need best of the firefighters we have. These machines are not designed for working in fire zones, and as such fire crews need to provide protection and support to plant operators to ensure their safety. In the past fire units supporting heavy plant have been crewed by allocating the inexperienced and least experienced, i.e. surely not a hard job just follow around and spray water if a dozer catches fire.

This misses the point that the heavy plant is right at the most dangerous part of the fire and right alongside usually where it is going to get away. The risks are enormous for failure, and not only for the machine operators but to catch any breakout of fire where the fire gets past the heavy plant and to allow that heavy plant to continue to chase the fire edge. The support unit needs to put out what is missed or in an area where the heavy plant cannot get, i.e. too steep or is inaccessible, washed out gullies etc.

To do this needs not only the following fire unit protecting heavy plant but very competent capable and brave people to man the units in that situation.

How and where heavy plant are used must also remain in the control of the group officer or brigade captain in charge of a particular sector. On occasions this line has been blurred with the RFS Heavy Plant supervisor taking it on him or herself to direct where the heavy plant ought be causing confusion for the heavy plant operator and potential for the failure of agreed action plans.

3. Asset protection and fire intensity management

One of the consequences of the extreme weather conditions over the last fire season has been the intensity of any fire and the consequent destruction that has been caused. Virtually all of the fires that arose within the coastal ranges appear to have burnt to the sea.

I understand that about 50% of the fires actually commenced in a National Park while most if not all of those that commenced outside of National Parks also burnt through them. But overall only a small percentage of National Parks was burnt.

There have been any number of solutions proposed. Many of these relate to reducing the fuel loads. The main focus of calls for fuel reduction has been directed at National Parks.

So, what is this fuel and how can fuel be reduced?

TO BURN OR NOT TO BURN

Burning - Control burning, Aboriginal burning

Control burning and Aboriginal burning have both been put forward as potential solutions.

For both there are issues in relation to the time and opportunities when conditions will be right to enable them to be undertaken. A wet winter is likely to mean no burning is possible and conditions will vary greatly from the far north to the south.

However, in relation to either proposed approach, the real issue appears to be one of resources. The National Parks and Wildlife Service does not have a huge staff that will be available to undertake such burning. Are we seriously proposing significant increases in funding to enable such a control method? And what frequency of burning is required for either approach to be effective.

I recall media reports that in the 2019 year a much larger area of control burning was undertaken in National Parks than over the previous 10 years. If this is correct the conclusions must be either; that such control burning had no effect, and I do not know whether any of these areas that were control burnt were within the area affected by bush fires; or, alternatively, even with the larger area of control burn, nowhere near a sufficient area was burnt to have any material effect.

If the area burnt was inadequate then clearly greater areas would need to be burnt.

The level of accurate knowledge of aboriginal burning practices is somewhat limited. If it were to be used some training would also be required.

The consequences of Aboriginal burning would also be to change the landscape that currently make up National Parks land.

If Bill Gamage's claims in his book 'The Biggest Estate on Earth' are given credence, by the time of European settlement of Australia, Aboriginal burning practices had created a

parklike woodland - less trees, no understory and grasses - rather than the choking scrub and heavily timbered bush within current National Parks. I am not suggesting that this would not be a good outcome but it is a potential consequence. If there is a change to a parklike estate the underlying grass cover would be likely to be even more subject to fire, although it is probably unlikely to burn as hot as a bushfire in a densely timbered area.

The current eucalypt tree bushland we have in Australia has also been attributed by some individuals to aboriginal burning practices over the last 40,000 years. Because of the very flammable oil contained in the eucalypts we may still have potential for an uncontrollable wildfire regardless. Or are we prepared to try to reinstate the biodiversity of flora that apparently used to exist?

I do not doubt that either or both of control burning and /or Aboriginal burning might have a place in trying to manage fuel loads within National Parks. However, because of the cost and uncertainties of effectiveness I doubt they alone will be adequate.

Non burning options - firebreaks, grazing, timber getting, reducing National Parks

Alternatives to burning could include provision for strategic firebreaks. Firstly on the perimeter of National Parks, to protect the National Parks from outside generated fires and to protect surrounding property from fire within a National Park. Second, firebreaks could be implemented strategically within National Parks. Looking at the approach adopted this summer by State Forests, in order to protect its timber, these firebreaks would need to be cleared in the order of 70 to 100 metres wide.

Again, there would be considerable expense introducing such firebreaks. But doing so would remove the costs currently incurred for creating control lines whenever there is a fire within a National Park. A non-treed area would also provide for grasses to help feed native animals including kangaroos and wallabies and other herbivores.

Allowing grazing within national parks is proposed as an option. This is seen as merely returning to intermittent/summer grazing that had been undertaken before National Parks were established. While some areas may still have feed sources, the lack of any active management of the bushland has meant in many areas that trees have replaced grassland and there is little feed available. The difficulty for much dry western sclerophyll bushland is that there is no feed source available on which livestock might graze.

Therefore, the option of allowing grazing would likely also need allowance of bush management activities aimed at promoting a more suitable environment for grazing. The attractiveness is that it would be a low-cost option. Fees for access could also be applied.

If timber getting were allowed in National Parks, the extent of tree cover would be managed. There would be a potential source of income. Provided trees were used for construction or furniture, there would also be a lock-up of carbon.

More or less National Parks

Should we have more or smaller national parks

One of the media articles that I noticed was a proposal by some conservationists that in order to help the recovery of native fauna impacted by the fires more country should be set aside – by way of an expansion of national parks.

There has been significant destruction of biodiversity as a result of an inability to control fires in the National Parks this summer, so locking up more land would seem to be providing a wider area on which such uncontrolled fires will occur and an increase in the cremation of wildlife.

Perhaps one answer is that what should be a National Park could be limited to the key rainforest areas, cliffs, waterfalls etc, which it could better manage. Such an approach would open the way for the remainder of the land to be handed to State Forests or allow other uses. That land could then be managed in a more effective manner leaving the NPWS to focus its limited resources on those places with remarkable natural features.

ADDENDUM

Private Land issues

A particular issue apparent locally during the North Black Range Fire is the problem of a lack of vegetation management on private land.

While the North Black Range Fire started in the National Park, once the fire broke out on the Friday, 29 November 2019, much of the losses at Bombay were due to spot fires on to private land which then took off particularly through inaccessible tea tree/kunzia. Control was only possible on open grazed lands adjoining such areas.

Private landholders should be required to manage their land and flora, including invasive native species, which create such a fire risk, so as to provide an area of protection for neighbouring properties. The approach of Landcare, post fires, to assisting in revegetating privately owned country must also ensure that firebreaks are maintained within a property where such native species exist.