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I am making this submission as	Emergency services
Submission type	Personal
Organisation making the submission (if applicable)	
Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	State Aboriginal Program Coordinator NSW Rural Fire Service
Consent to make submission public	Public
Your story	<p>Independent Bushfire Inquiry 2019-2020</p> <p>Introduction</p> <p>I am making this submission under the terms of reference for preparation and planning. I currently hold the position of State Aboriginal Program Coordinator for the NSW Rural Fire Service. I have worked for the Service for 16 years and over that time have held operational roles at a senior level but primarily in community engagement, preparation and planning and the past 4 years in the Aboriginal Program Coordinator role. I am not of Aboriginal descent but have worked closely with Aboriginal people over the past four years and particularly in the Cultural Burning field with people from the Firesticks Alliance and Local Land Services. I have worked with people such as Victor Steffensen and Oliver Costello recognised fire practitioners promoting and conducting cultural burning in the landscape. This submission of cultural burning and its benefits is not an answer to bushfire prevention in its entirety but an important tool to help reduce the impacts and</p>

the intensity of bushfires.

Background

Cultural Burning has been carried out by Indigenous people for over 60,000 years for many different purposes including bush regeneration, fuel reduction, ceremony and even warfare. After many years working with Indigenous fire practitioners I have learnt that cultural burning is vital for the survival of the bush and the protection of communities from bushfire. Cultural burning is not the answer to protecting all communities from bushfire but an important tool that can be strategically used especially on the urban interface areas to reduce the intensity of bush fire.

Cultural burning is a method of cool burning with a minimal flame height of around half a metre that is ignited with a spot pattern. Cool burning is hot enough to remove surface/ near surface and mid-story fuels but cool enough not to damage the ecology such as seed banks in the soil and flora and fauna. The ignition pattern of a spot that slowly burns outward in a circle that allows animals and insects to escape.

Cultural burning when conducted correctly has minimal white smoke and does not burn the canopy, which is seen to be sacred to many Indigenous cultures. It is very important not to burn the canopy as this causes leaf loss and more sunlight which in turn causes more mid-story growth with species of sclerophyll shrubs which generally are more flammable and thus causes more intense fires, so it is vital that the bush is burnt cool to prevent continuous hot burning cycles.

Issue

Current Hazard reduction practices are carried out using line burning techniques which is igniting a line of fire using drip torches. This rapidly increases the fire intensity which in turn damages the bush and creates the cyclic hazards previously discussed of rapid mid-story fuel growth.

This plus environmentally legislated fire frequencies preventing regular burning creates continuous hot cycles of burning with an excess of mid-story fuel which allows fire to quickly escalate into the canopy in bushfire conditions. Cultural burning fire frequencies are very complex and learned by years of experience, not a broad-brush approach depending on the vegetation type. Fire frequencies in cultural burning knowledge is layered and based on many things such as aspect, soil types, fuel types, flowering and time of year. Reading country is a learned skill and the bush is burnt when the bush is ready to be burnt not to a pre-determined fire frequency, this may be from one year up to many years or even areas that should be protected and not burnt.

Environmental legislation has added to the lost knowledge of burning and this is evident even in our farming communities which was once a normal farming practice. Fear of prosecution from breaching environmental law has deterred landowners from protecting their land by reducing fuel with fire. The complexity of environmental law not only confuses the private sector but also agencies trying to meet hazard reduction targets. The Environmental Assessment Code was developed to assist in gaining approvals for hazard reduction due to complexity of the legislation. This type of complexity is a real deterrent to hazard reduction burning and the development of the 'Code' has done little to address the red tape with complex and convoluted requirements, especially when it comes to fire frequencies. Drought has an effect on fire intensity with drier soil, fuel and humidity. This is why cool burning is so important in the changing environment. Burning at night or early evening and morning will reduce the intensity of the fire. This was common practice in Indigenous culture.

When using the fire triangle, fuel is the only factor we can control so it makes sense to invest in this area. Having worked in bushfire risk management, rarely are hazard reduction targets met. This is due to many factors including trying to make hazard reduction burning fit into our life style by burning only in the

daytime, on weekends or when the smoke won't affect us. As previously said – 'Burn the bush when it needs to be burnt', the window of opportunity is now so limited to burn when hazard reduction is conducted it is often in a hurry with too much intensity.

Recommendations

- Fire and Land management agencies need to invest in educating all staff and volunteers in traditional methods of burning. This can be achieved by attending Cultural Burning workshops, forums and conferences – see National Indigenous Fire Workshops
- Areas where cultural burning practices will benefit local communities in the protection from bushfire need to be identified and included in the local Bushfire Risk Management plans as a specified treatment.
- Governments need to invest in employing more experienced fire practitioners and Indigenous Rangers to allow more cultural burning in our National Parks and Reserves.
- Environmental Legislation regarding fire frequencies needs to be reviewed with input from Cultural Burning Practitioners to allow more frequent burning. Current legislation regarding Cultural Burning under the Native Vegetation Act is broad and often not considered valid by environmental bodies.

Conclusion

There will need to be a major cultural shift from current burning practices to implement Cultural Burning as mainstream. I believe we have little choice but to move forward and learn about the Indigenous ways of managing country by good fire. Australia has unique vegetation that has adapted to fire over of thousands of years and Aboriginal people learnt to manage the landscape with fire. Cultural Burning must be not only be seen as an important tool for reducing Bushfire hazards but also an important part of Aboriginal culture. Working on country and having connection to country is an important part of Aboriginal culture and should be treated with respect as part of healing. Fire agencies would benefit from Cultural Awareness training to appreciate the importance of fire to Aboriginal people. Building relationships and trust with Aboriginal people will be paramount in the success of Cultural Burning into the future.

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

1.2 Preparation and planning

1.3 Response to bushfires

1.4 Any other matters

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