



## STEP Inc

Community-based Environmental Conservation since 1978

15 April 2020

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry,  
GPO Box 5341,  
Sydney NSW 2001

[inquiries@bushfireinquiry.nsw.gov.au](mailto:inquiries@bushfireinquiry.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Inquirers

STEP Inc is a local community-based environmental group, with a membership of over 400 in the northern Sydney area. Our main objective is to preserve natural bushland in northern Sydney from alienation or degradation and ensuring proper management of this bushland. Our group has considerable experience in environmental issues and regenerating and preserving natural bushland and native vegetation. The assessment of the response of bushland to fire experiences is an important part of bushland management.

While Sydney was spared from bushfires during the 2019-2020 season, the risk is ever present. Bushland is an integral part of Sydney's environment. Management of bushland, particularly of bushfire management, will have a significant influence on the long term ecological resilience of natural areas.

STEP's members have a strong interest in the maintenance of a healthy natural environment that supports Australia's unique flora and fauna. Bushfires are an inevitable occurrence in Australia so we are keen to see that the outcomes of the Independent Bushfire Inquiry will lead to improvements in relation to natural areas in the planning to reduce the impact of bushfires, the fire-fighting response and the postfire recovery.

We would like to comment on some aspects of the recent bushfire experience and the lessons that may be learned as follows.

### **Climate change**

The 2019-2020 bushfire season provided an example of the impacts of climate change in creating more severe drought and weather conditions leading to severe bushfire situations. The increased bushfire danger is likely to increase the length and severity of fire season. This will restrict the window of opportunity for safe and effective hazard reduction burning and increase the costs and the risk to the community from bushfire events across NSW. Government planning and budgets must allow for this. While not every fire season will be as extreme as 2019-2020 planning should include consultation with weather experts so that long term weather forecasts are incorporated in regular planning for bushfire management activities.

### **Hazard reduction burning strategy:**

There needs to be a comprehensive inventory of environmental assets, including the locations of threatened species and endangered ecological communities which are then included as environmental assets to be protected in Bush Fire Risk Management Plans. Treatments to reduce the risk to these assets must be identified where possible.

Hazard reduction burning should be undertaken strategically, with clear objectives for burns that show measurable benefits in reducing risk to identified assets rather than burning in natural areas located far from built assets. Targets of hectares to be burned without definition or reference to the assets being protected are of little benefit.

Asset Protection Zones identified in Bush Fire Risk Management Plans should be the focus for reducing fuel loads. The width of APZs required for asset protection must be based on scientific evidence.

Planning for bushfire response in extreme and catastrophic fire conditions, as experienced during the recent fire season, should recognise the body of scientific evidence that demonstrates that only very recently burned areas may reduce fire severity under extreme and catastrophic fire weather conditions. Under these conditions areas where hazard has been reduced, particularly those treated over more than 1 year previously, are unlikely to provide substantial fire suppression benefits.

#### **Land zoning and planning controls**

Planning laws must not allow new developments in areas with high fire risk such as the edge of ridges as has been the case in Sydney's bushland fringes and the Blue Mountains in the past. The same situation applies to development in regional towns such as along the south coast where road access may be limited. Development should be subject to the assessment of the ability to provide suitable Asset Protection Zones.

#### **Bushland and wildlife recovery actions**

Following major bushfire events, post-fire environmental recovery actions are needed including targeted recovery for threatened species and communities which are listed as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. Where significant proportions of natural areas are fire affected a priority should also be given to investigating whether known species in these areas will have lost numbers to the extent that they may now be at risk of being a threatened population. The efficacy of this assessment will be improved if there is detailed vegetation and animal species mapping available to provide baseline data. Recovery actions must consider pest species, weeds, minimising erosion and sedimentation and maintaining water quality.

There is no scientific evidence to show that grazing or logging will reduce fire risk and both can be devastating to threatened species such as koalas and damage natural processes. Government must ensure that neither is reintroduced into conservation areas.

#### **Funding**

The Government needs to commit to funding for management and post fire recovery strategies which are not aligned to specific grant programs and have funding certainty.

Yours faithfully,



Jill Green  
President