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## Your details

Dr

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**Title**

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**First name**

Kate

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**Last name**

Hughes

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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

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**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

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**Consent to make submission public**

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

Reconcile

Black fella fire is my desire  
I don't want no fight with fire.  
Accept and honour those who know  
Manage the fire to manage the land  
Manage the land to manage the fire  
Black fella fire is my desire

White fella burning makes no sense  
Dry skies, scratched eyes  
pink water, blackened fence.  
White fella burning makes no sense  
Black fella burning brings recompense  
Accept and honour those who know

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Manage the fire to manage the land  
Manage the land to manage the fire  
Black fella burning is my desire

Black fella burning, white fella burning  
Not conflict but enduring yearning  
Our bush and rivers, sky and seas  
We all wait for greater ease  
Accept and honour those who know  
Manage the fire to manage the land  
Manage the land to manage the fire  
To reconcile is my desire

Kate Hughes  
The Last Wharf  
St. Albans  
16 January 2020

Watch:  
<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=U3gMkRss-74&feature=youtu.be>

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

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### 1.1 Causes and contributing factors

There is a lack of well-timed hazard reduction burns using ecological principles as the guiding framework.

NSW Department of Health policy that opposes hard reduction burns in the cooler months due to risks to urban people with respiratory conditions. A 1998 NSW Government policy document is the basis of this misguided policy.

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### 1.2 Preparation and planning

Plenty of planning was in play but since the wrong principles were applied, the fires just got bigger and bigger. Planning needs to include input from local brigades. Rosehill RFS Headquarters needs a shake-up as they do not seem to be able to work sufficiently well with local brigades to plan for the particular terrain in each community. Notwithstanding this, the Commissioner did a very good job.

In 2003, two locally-initiated Fire Forums were hosted for the local community. It is worth looking back to this time since many of the same issues were in play then, as now. Records of these two meetings are attached to this submission.

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### 1.3 Response to bushfires

Containment lines seem good in theory but they often just make the situation worse. RFS staff and volunteers did their best under difficult circumstances.

A new approach is needed that combines traditional aboriginal and scientific knowledge. the Gospers Mountain fire started with lightning strike. If a raft team had been sent in at the start, the fire would most likely not have got out of control. Local people were appalled at this major failure to address fire risk in a timely and professional manner.

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### 1.4 Any other matters

Lack of preparation by private land-owners, [absentee landowners] proved to be major problem. My local former fire captain, now the President of the local brigade told me that in earlier times, he had the power to force property preparation in the advent of fire. In these fires, a lot of fire fighters were subject

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to additional risk because some properties were full of old caravans, tyres, white goods and other inflatable items. This made their job even harder than it was.

When out-of-area crews came in to help, they did not always approach fire situations in the right way because they did not have sufficient local knowledge.

Media coverage especially the ABC was very good.

There was a lot of wastage of food; many espies full of food were just returned, unused and then just dumped. Not sure how this can be avoided but it could be looked into as it is disheartening to see such waste.

recognising the value of aboriginal cultural burning practices is a good way to bring forward reconciliation with aboriginal people and a way to support young aboriginal people in their quest for meaningful work.

The NPWs needs a re-structure to allow full-time staff to take full ownership of parks. Highly skilled people can do the following: undertake small, well-targeted Autumn and Winter burns, shoot feral animals, protect ecological communities [plants and animals], keep fire trails open, build up usable risk mapping layers using GIS and other technical platforms. Experienced raft team should be re-instated as a normal part of NPWS operations.

Several rogue operators interfered with activities on the ground. it is likely that one former NPWS staffer had access to digital mapping and made calls that were not his to make.

## Supporting documents or images

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### Attach files

- fire forum one record\_0.doc
  - fire forum two record\_0.doc
  - Fire Tales NCC\_0.pdf
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# **THE MACDONALD VALLEY ASSOCIATION**

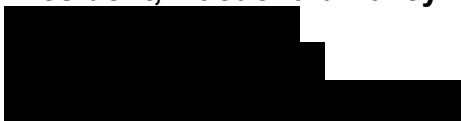
## **RECORD OF MEETING**

### **COMMUNITY FIRE FORUM ONE**

This meeting record was prepared by the Macdonald Valley Association, a community-based organisation based at St. Albans, NSW. The meeting was the first of a series of Fire Forums and was held at St Albans School of Arts Hall, Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2003.

The meeting record was prepared as a draft, circulated to those present at the Forum, including those who provided apologies and written statements. Comments and additional information was then included to finalise the document.

**For further information contact:**  
**Kate Hughes**  
**President, Macdonald Valley Association**



**RECORD OF MEETING  
COMMUNITY FIRE FORUM**

**ST. ALBANS SCHOOL OF ARTS HALL  
SATURDAY 29 MARCH 2003  
2 PM**

**BACKGROUND**

The purpose of the Fire Forum was to provide an opportunity for the residents of the Macdonald Valley to voice their concerns about the recent fires. The meeting was advertised by a flyer distributed to all letterboxes and several notices were placed around the Valley.

34 community members attended the Forum and all had the opportunity to speak. John Kent was the independent chairman for the meeting and stressed the importance of open dialogue and respect for everybody's views. John is a retired civil servant with many years' experience in Commonwealth and State governments. He was born in the Hawkesbury district.

The Community Fire Forum was hosted by the Macdonald Valley Association. The convenor was Kate Hughes. The main purpose of the Forum was to accurately record the issues of concern to residents. It also provided an opportunity for residents to express their ideas about future fire management in the Macdonald Valley.

No assessment of the accuracy or otherwise of the comments made has been undertaken in this record. The record aims to provide an accurate picture of people's experiences during the recent fires, not to assess whether these views are all "true"

**APOLOGIES.**

Brendan Barry, Ian-Burns-Wood, George Thompson, Mike Aronsen

**WRITTEN STATEMENTS**

Written statements were received from George Thompson, Chris O'Grady, Gil Jones, Terry and Ursula Prince, Ian Burns-Wood, Peter Hughes. Points made in written statements were as follows:

- it is essential that relations improve between the RFS and NPWS
- there was a massive waste of resources
- the financial cost of the Bala Range Fire should be provided to the community
- state budget should allow for ongoing fire prevention rather than be used to provide massive injection of funds during emergencies
- an assessment should be made of all volunteer-hours contributed

- many older residents made up a large part of the volunteers in recent fires
  - in future some older people may not be fit enough to fight fires
  - younger fire fighters are required for heavier duty rosters during fire season
  - younger fire fighters loose income for weeks as result of continual call-out
- lack of follow-up with spot fires and underground "creek raft" burn
  - inadequate notification re proposed hazard reduction burns
  - lack of communication about the meaning of a Section 44 fire
  - unwarranted back-burning of bush led to unnecessary risk to landholders
  - residents left to manage backburns without adequate support;
  - although trucks were normally at properties in time, crew and property owners often spent hours watching fires come through, and waiting for the go-ahead to back-burn. This sometimes meant that things were left to the last minute by RFS. This meant stress on crews and property owners
  - some residents were unable to reach their properties safely
  - delivery of services (water) during the fires was not always satisfactory
- confused or contradictory instructions to crews
  - lack of sensible deployment of local and external crews
  - external crews needed better quality information
  - inadequate consultation about use of private resources (eg water)
  - some residents were treated badly and had their rights infringed
- apprehension about fines means that no winter burns are undertaken
  - lack of use of local knowledge about terrain, fire history and water supplies
  - lack of recognition of the specific type of fire risk that exists in the Valley
  - not all current fire risk assessments for the Macdonald Valley are correct
- lack of understanding by NPWS of the role of fire in maintaining biodiversity
  - "separateness"/elitism is part of the organisational culture of NPWS
  - "incendiarism" should be added to the list of causes of fire
  - "containment strategy" was not successful
  - bureaucratic approach requires burn-off dates to be determined 6 months in advance
  - a "no-fine buffer zone" needs to be declared to allow seasonal burn-offs

sensationalist media coverage which:

- over-stimulated fear in the community
- encouraged the "hero" factor and curiosity/activity of firebugs
- push "political buttons" leading to over-reaction by authorities to fire situation

## RECORD OF DISCUSSION

These are main points raised by participants during the meeting.

### Total Cost of Bala Range Fire

- Cost of Bala Range fire needs to be provided to the community
- Annual budget for hazard reduction will reduce overall spending over time
- Why spend \$10 million every 15 years: it is better to spend much less than this to support hazard reduction each year
- Cost to individual fire fighters due to foregone income as well as assessment of those normal activities that could not be undertaken because of fire should be evaluated as part of de-briefing process
- The cost of the fires is not just property, plants and animals; people's lives are also at risk. Several "close shaves" during the recent fires
- Fire management was partly a response to larger organisational agendas relating to other fire management areas. The Bala Range fire was not to save people who lived relatively close to where it was lit.
- At beginning of Bala Range fire, some residents close to the fire had the very distinct impression that they were not going to be told what was going on
- During the fires, the shed was open for 24 hours a day. There was generally good communication and much communication done by volunteers.

### Command and Control

- Only one person should control fires within the local fire brigade boundaries
- Need for local control of local fire practices; this will achieve safety for the community; it is known as *good practice*
- *we need to change practices....lack of local control is a perpetual problem; we were smogged in for 8 weeks*
- Local brigade kept residents in touch with what was happening, visited properties and assessed resources
- *Out of areas* crew not as good as local guys dealing with NPWS
- When there are not fires that need controlling, what influence does RFS head Phil Kopperburg have; with whom does he speak; he is a person with a significant impact when fires are around
- "our process must integrate into theirs and theirs must be more accessible; ie a debriefing process to be more accessible"
- There is a contradiction of motivation between professional fire fighters and volunteers at local brigade. The professionals did not seem to want to put the fire out and engaged in large-scale lighting of fires from planes and also backburning. This approach was in huge contrast to volunteers whose motivation is to get fires out and make homes safe.
- The NPWS/RFS kept fires going for 6 weeks. Those fighting the fires were loosing money whereas those who were perpetuating the fires were being paid

## **Power and Phone**

- *During the Section 44 fire. Hawkesbury Council had crews manning the area 24 hours/day, as one of our problems was lack of communication ie. landline and mobile telephones. If the problem is power failure which allows the batteries in the Telecom Sub-Stations to fail after 6-8 hours, then an auxiliary power source should be available to keep batteries charged ie solar and/or mobile generator.*
- Electricity and phones were sometimes both out of service during the fires
- One resident's phone line that was underground and burnt by creek raft fire is still temporary after almost six months. Private business affected
- After the 1994-5 fires, there was an undertaking by Telstra to get better phone communication into the Valley during fires; nothing happened
- A Telstra tower already exists on high side of The Branch; something can be done to upgrade this.
- Need to involve new State MP for the Hawkesbury about the need for Telstra upgrade as well as inform him comprehensively about overall fire issues

## **Environment Protection Authority (EPA)**

- Role of this government agency was discussed
- Under state law, the EPA can prevent back burning if too much smoke may be produced. This has a "political angle" since smoke haze is an issue for MPs with electorates in the Sydney Basin
- EPA turned down 4 back-burn applications/ this was reported in the press.
- There is a need to understand the reasons why permission for hazard reduction has been routinely denied in the Valley; there is a Fire Management Committee with EPA/NPWS representation and records are kept; access to these records is essential to understand rationale for the "do nothing" approach
- EIS process is too slow: a clumsy instrument to protect the environment

## **Hazard Reduction and Backburning**

- Hazard reduction: "slow burning of undergrowth during favourable conditions.... etc"
- Backburning: "containment burn to form fire break between existing fire and areas threatened"
- This Valley settled since 1830s; also 40,000 years of aboriginal history
- fire is a natural part of the environment in Australia
- seasonal hazard reduction/Winter-Spring backburns is a significant issue
- back burning wont necessarily stop a fire;
- before the parks existed, backburning was done in Spring and late Winter
- under old back-burn regime, *the fires went slowly....we never burnt animals and the bush could regenerate. We need to have a couple of months of the*



*year where we can light small fires and allow safety zones around the farms; our hills haven't been burnt for 8-10 years;*

- On Crown leases, people would light grasses, similar to the aboriginal practice of burning to produce wild pastures
- Since 1984, the local brigade has never put a bush fire out apart from small fires. Fires have burnt out by themselves or been put out by rain;
- Local skills in evidence with long-term residents' buffer zone, mild burning during five and six weeks during August and September
- during the 15 years since the parks were created, there has been an accumulation of fuel
- after the parks were created in 1985, people were cautioned about fires going across Parks' boundaries
- one back burn "got away" and people were threatened with a \$60000 fine
- NPWS fire management plan; says we should implement our own fire prevention strategy
- how can residents get permission to burn without being sued by NPWS
- to prevent us trying our best is the problem.
- Need for a buffer zone and a relaxation of this magical boundary;
- the *cowboy factor* sets the lowest common denominator for seasonal burns
- Seasonal burn-offs have to be controlled; need to notify and get some authority to do this
- Before backburns are started, local knowledge must be factored into the decision on the timing of the fire lighting
- Without *back burning* there may be a repeat of fires next Summer; recent fires were a stressful and unhappy time over the Christmas period

### **The likelihood of firestorms**

- One recent incident involved a firestorm sweeping into a narrow gully in Higher Macdonald, nearly trapping two local firefighters. Helicopter support was requested and received.
- It was reported that firestorms come through this valley; in the 1960s, there was a fire storm

### **Maroota Fires**

- there had been some hazard reductions
- the area behind a house that was burnt had already been the subject of a hazard reduction; in this case, house preparation did not stop the destruction because of the nature of the fire

### **Glenorie Fires**

- The Glenorie fire was a rare event;
- With respect bad feeling about the NPWS, people should also look at their own backyards

- one area was called *the death trap*; fire fighters were warned not to try to save a particular house because of the steep terrain and uncleared areas; could not turn vehicle around.

## NPWS

- NPWS has a job to look after animals; limited technical expertise and a bureaucratic approach.
- NPWS do not have access to their own water
- no-one in NPWS has any skills in fire management at the local level; smoke for months at a time
- have lost credibility with one participant; because of poor fire management practices. The Royal National Park has been burnt twice; *a black hole... they have lost it twice.*
- When to burn to protect biodiversity is critical: *a very hot fire everything burns and you are left with a moonscape.....a mosaic pattern*
- concern about the practice of incendiary drops and then burn around the bottom; causing a closing envelope of fire this is not natural and causes animals traps and not a good management practice; doing it at non preferable time of year ie summer fire from lightening strike; creating an animal trap;
- NPWS has *too many educated bureaucrats; fires are created by NPWS; its time to take NPWS to task; they have no water in the bush; the fire management plan took years because it contains no real knowledge;*
- Two participants asked why the NPWS had not been invited to the meeting. The meeting convenor explained about the need to engage the NPWS and RFS on community-determined terms and to respond to issues from a community standpoint. The convenor explained, referring the participants to the letters sent to NPWS Director-General (DG) Brian Gilligan. A **staged** process of consultation has been proposed to Mr Gilligan as a means of ensuring a good consultation outcome for everybody concerned. At the first stage of post-fire consultation/debriefing, the community needed its own time and place to discuss sensitive issues without any input from outside organisations. This approach was essential in order to avoid poorly-run public meetings, ensure a high quality process of community consultation and engage RFS and NPWS on "our own terms". It was important that the larger community be distinguished from the fire community
- It was noted that the RFS was currently in "de-briefing" mode; it is important to provide strength and input to their formal and authorised processes; need to support and not run counter to their process so we are not marginalised: need to ensure our recommendations are not counter/fit into, their formal process;

- 1998 Fire Management Plan (NPWS/RFS and St. Albans team surveyed 200 residents. The plan identified and designed Site and House Management Plans, fuel reduction, clearance zones and hazard reduction throughout the whole Valley was discussed. When areas are given priority for hazard reduction, NPWS must give clearance. The approval process identifies those areas for hazard reduction. Hazard reduction to be acted on within two or three weeks.
- Approval to burn (hazard reduction) is given months or years before the burn-off can be done; Each year each brigade asked to nominate those areas that require hazard reduction. The areas identified for this year had to go in to the authorities in August last year. Many requests for hazard reduction have not gone ahead.
- NPWS had already highlighted areas of concern with local fire brigade and are aware of the need to do implement their fire management plan. The plan takes into account the optimal cyclic times for hazard reductions. This may be too long for good practice hazard reduction to be done NPWS criteria is back-burns between fifteen to twenty years; yet some are needed between 8 to 10 years
- We need to deal with NPWS at the most senior level; need to liaise with someone at the top of the hierarchy
- Some discussion on suing of the NPWS; several events noted including current NSW WorkCover prosecution of NPWS for the Hornsby fire where lives were lost

### **Getting Approvals: Environmental Impact Statements etc**

- An EIS is required for large fires
- The EIS shows the risks to endangered species/flora and fauna/aboriginal carvings/sensitive areas
- the District Committee approves or disproves
- An EIS can take up to two years for approval; during this waiting period, more fuel builds up and lightning strikes continue. This means that the approval process results in a much bigger area of hazard (more fuel, more likelihood of lightning strikes over longer period)
- EIS's can be very large documents and take many months to produce. They are meant to be based on science but the science that is used is very selective and not always "good science". A good EIS requires a lot of resources/money to produce.
- The RFS and NPWS should provide access to all the EISs prepared for the Valley and adjacent localities
- It is important to get the NPWS to identify upfront the basis upon which they make their assessments and approve or reject requests for hazard reduction

- After a major fire event and following heavy rains, there should be a proper field assessment of the rate of erosion and degree of regrowth.
- Did NPWS do an EIS for the Bala Range fire? One participant explained that he had walked into the park since the Bala Range fire; *the area is totally like Glenorie.....The EIS is an absolute nonsense in terms of what has happened in the last few months... NPWS burnt off with incendiaries tens of thousands of hectares... not one blade of understorey.... huge damage was done by NPWS*

### **Local assessment for fire risk re new buildings re the 60 metre zone**

- *From the sublime to the ridiculous*; 60 metre clear vegetation free area is now required. For local blocks, this will affect the environment adversely due to slope, flora type etc. One could not effectively clear 60 metres without making a massive scar on the land. Quite a few small blocks recently sold
- It is absurd that one regulation applies to all situations; different environments demand different responses; ie high fire risk, low fire risk
- Need maps that correlate with reality; need proper assessment of fire risk on particular situations; The Valley is not the same landscape as Maroota, Glenorie or Canberra
- Maroota and Glenorie are built on top of the ridgeline. We are on the Valley floor and have control and management opportunities because we build half way down the ridgeline or more.

### **The Future**

- The importance of providing information about local issues to state and federal members of parliament was stressed; *it is all part of process of change*
- It is important for the community to understand who is the control authority; there is a need to address this at community level by increasing awareness. The RFS is the control authority. Once a section 44 is declared, it is Phil Kopperburg at Rose Hill who is the controller of the fire
- There is a need for the community to better understand key parts of the Rural Fires Act, which requires the RFS to actively, *suppress all fires*. This means that it *is not possible just to let a fire wander around*
- It is important to get talking to NPWS at the appropriate level so that our concerns can be addressed; *it is a good time to burn now; let's do it ... it is a good way to go*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations in Writing: provided by two residents who gave their apologies to the meeting

- A recruitment campaign be conducted state-wide for young urban volunteers to be trained in fire fighting skills in order to relieve the burden on small communities
- During the burn-off season prior to the date of August 1<sup>st</sup>, controlled burn-offs are to be burned between the areas of the mountain ridge top through down to bottom rock/cliff lines,(approx. midway down the mountain)
- With the commencement of August 1<sup>st</sup>, there be controlled burn off that shall be able to burn from the mountain ridgetop through down to the lower hillside/tree line, as per property owners individual discretion states

Recommendation from the floor

- that the community be advised as to the nature of the formal RFS/NPWS debriefing process and how the Community Fire Forum process fits in to this process

# THE MACDONALD VALLEY ASSOCIATION



## RECORD OF MEETING

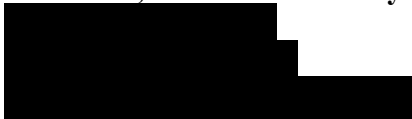
### COMMUNITY FIRE FORUM TWO

This meeting record was prepared by the Macdonald Valley Association, a community based organisation at St. Albans, NSW. The meeting was the second Forum and was held at St Albans School of Arts Hall, Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2003.

**For further information contact:**

**Kate Hughes**

**President, Macdonald Valley Association**



**RECORD OF MEETING  
SECOND COMMUNITY FIRE FORUM**

**ST. ALBANS SCHOOL OF ARTS HALL  
SATURDAY 22 MAY 2004  
10.00 AM**

**BACKGROUND**

The purpose of the First Fire Forum was to provide an opportunity for the residents of the Macdonald Valley to voice their concerns about the fires leading up to March 2003. The Second Fire Forum aimed to continue the process of dialogue between the community and the NPWS and RFS. The meeting was advertised by a flyer distributed to all letterboxes and several notices were placed around the Valley.

32 community members attended the Forum and all had the opportunity to speak. John Kent was the independent chairman for the meeting and he emphasised the need for everybody to respect the views of others thus avoiding argument in favour of informed discussion. John is a retired civil servant with many years' experience in Commonwealth and State governments. He was born in the Hawkesbury district.

The Second Community Fire Forum was hosted by the Macdonald Valley Association. The convener was Kate Hughes. As mentioned above, the main purpose of the Forum was to continue the process of dialogue between the community and the NPWS and RFS to provide an opportunity for residents to understand the future fire management in the Macdonald Valley.

No assessment of the accuracy or otherwise of the comments made has been undertaken in this record.

**APOLOGIES**

Steven Pringle, Local Member for Hawkesbury.

**WRITTEN STATEMENTS**

- Written statements were received from Gil Jones.
  - Bala Range Fire in retrospect: an open letter to the RFS and NPWS.
  - Motions 1, 2, 3, 4.Both documents are attached. A decision was made to discuss proposed motions but not vote upon them given the format of the meeting.

## Invited Guests

### National Parks & Wildlife Service

Bob Conroy, Director, Central Directorate

Tom Bagnet, Regional Manager, Central Coast-Hunter Range Region

Richard Colbourne, Ranger, Parr and Yengo National Parks

### Rural Fire Service

Karen Hodges, Superintendent, Wilberforce

Max Ryan, Deputy Superintendent

Responsible for 2783 square kms of land and 21 brigades

## RECORD OF DISCUSSION

### Bob Conroy

- Noted the huge scale of the Yengo Wilderness, part of World heritage and comprising 1.5 million ha. NPWS also have to manage numerous Reserves.
- Indicated that his area of responsibility was Sydney North, South Central Coast etc. Basically north of Hawkesbury River, east of Putty Road. 'The Hunter Range' - Sandstone country with a lot of fire issues.
- Referred to the experience of parks fire management and the staff willingness to learn and listen. He was happy to take sensible suggestions 'on board'.
- Current thinking within the NSW Government is that fire management is no longer the responsibility of a range of different entities. It is a partnership with RFS, State Forests and National Parks. It is recognised that fires do not respect boundaries, and this fact required a coordinated approach.
- Parks use their knowledge of fire thresholds and principles for asset protection of flora and fauna protection.

### Tom Bagnet

What are Parks fire management objectives?

How are plans made to manage for the event of wildfire in parks?

What is the relationship between *on park* and *off park*?

### Fire Management Planning

- The NPWS assists in defining the strategy and actions to be implemented to achieve the primary fire management objectives.
- The NPWS is a member of the NSW Bush Fire Coordinating Committee and as such assists the Committee in developing and reviewing the State Bush Fire Plan and Policies.

Section 52 of the Rural Fires Act 1997 refers to the development of bush fire risk management plans.



## Preparation of Fire Reserve Plans

The planning process is not simple. There are 3 types of plan.

### Type 1

A short statement from the NPWS used for the management of fire in the area.

### Type 2

Medium to high fire risk management and it is more complex.

### Type 3

Multiple factors to be considered involving detailed analysis, background information, wild fire history, assets, bush fire management zones. The community is invited to comment. For Type 2 and 3 plans the planning is regional.

There is an Advisory Committee including community members who comment on the outcomes of the plan. It is not just put together by the 'bureaucrats'.

Yengo, Dharug National Parks and Parr SCA have Type 3 Fire Management Plans (FMP) that are in a slightly older format. Contractors, in consultation with NPWS staff, prepared the FMP. The planning is now undertaken in-house with community consultation meetings held in the consultation phase.

During the planning process, strategies are assessed and reviewed. The planning process is continually evolving; it is not set in stone.

There are 8 acts and regulations that Parks is required to observe, including NPW Act 1974 and Bush Fire Risk Management Plan 1997 etc. Their aims are various with the emphasis on the need to protect life property, assets, and to manage fire regimes so that flora, fauna and heritage are protected. There are 'Heritage Management Zones'.

The emphasis of strategies is on boundary fuel reduction measures i.e. park boundaries and also aerial surveillance after thunderstorms. There is a rapid suppression of wild fires wherever possible or the containment of wildfires in the wilderness areas.

Hazard reduction issues are critical. The emphasis on hazard reduction allows for the development of ecologically sustainable fire regimes within core areas of Yengo / Parr / Dharug. There is a need for compliance with identified fire regime thresholds for all vegetation communities.

## **Richard Colbourne**

Richard is responsible for fire management in Yengo NP and Parr SCA. His area takes in just east of Putty Road, Macdonald River up to Bucketty along Wollembi Road, Dharug / Yengo border and back down across the Hawkesbury to Colo Heights.

### Strategies

- Boundary fuel reduction.
- Aerial surveillance.
- Fire trail maintenance.
- Rapid suppression of wild fires.
- Monitoring of fuel levels.
- Strategic heritage management – to use or exclude fire to maintain diverse vegetation communities and age structures.
- Hazard reduction on boundary areas to allow for ecologically sustainable fire regime.
- Environmental assessment is undertaken before any activity.
- Pre burning surveys for threatened species / areas with aboriginal relics.
- Monitor post fire regeneration.
- Compliance with identified fire regime thresholds.

Strategic fire management zones are in place, designed to reduce risk of damage to life and property within and adjacent to the parks. They provide for strategic containment of high intensity wild fires.

Richard gave history of fires in his area, using maps. He is trying to get a picture of the total fire history; the asset protection zones had a pattern of burning and this information can be used in planning for next hazard reduction.

Asset Protection Zones have a habit of burning. Those that haven't need attention with hazard reduction.

Areas that haven't been burnt for some time need to be identified because they are overdue.

There were prescribed burns in National Parks in 1994 – 2004.

Bala Range fire is an example of where we failed with the fire burning 80 to 100 thousand hectares.

It is possible to rate how many times an area has been subjected to fire. The Macdonald Valley area looks OK. There is a need to have a look at what areas were burnt off, and when. It is a fairly complicated process to identify fire frequencies.

Fire and Threatened Plant Prescriptions under Threatened Species Conservation Act nominates species in our areas that require protection. Bush fire assessment code provides for establishing fire frequency. Environmental impact is always done for eg:

- Rainforests - no fire.
- Wet sclerophyll forest - fire interval of 25 years.
- Dry sclerophyll shrub forest – fire interval of 7 years.
- Sclerophyll grassy woodlands – fire interval of 5 years.

Need to determine the desirable fire frequency in dry open forest and woodlands in Parr SCA and Yengo NP.

Decline in species composition is predicted if more than 2 successive fires occur at an interval of less than 8 years.

Decline in species composition is produced if successive fires result in total scorch or consume tree canopy as in Bala Range fire.

There are Fire and Threatened Plant Prescriptions for Heritage Management Zones for such species as:

*Tetratheca grandulosa*      Vulnerable

*Zieria involucreta*              Endangered

There are Threatened Fire and Fauna Prescriptions for such species as:

Bush Tailed Rock Wallaby

Koala

## **Comment on legislation**

Bob Conroy highlighted the Bush Fire Assessment Code, developed by RFS and Commissioner with the aim to overcome legislative hurdles to doing prescribed burns. This was a problem in the past due to regulatory acts. Biodiversity and clean air was the framework of operations at this time and Parks were compelled to comply with these pieces of legislation.

The Government then changed the Rural Fires Act to make it much easier to do prescribed burns. Before a review of environmental factors was required and this could take a long time. Changes made it easier for landowners to get permit to do hazard reduction on private property.

Karen Hodges commented on the assistance that the code has provided. Fire Control can issue a certificate for landowners.

National Parks is a neighbour to many private landowners in the Valley. In the past, if a property owner lights a fire and makes their best effort to control the fire yet it still escapes, National Parks could sue the landowner.

## **Richard Colbourne / Tom Bagnet**

The issue was raised as to the timeliness of the prescribed burns that NPWS conduct. Tom explained that the window of opportunity is small and the aim is to reduce the fuel levels on the ground. Burn too early and you risk wildfire and burn too late and not enough fuel is burnt. The outcome of a burn must be the reduction of fuel.

Richard was asked 'What if an area had been hazard reduced or had a wild fire pass through is the area assessed differently?' Richard explained that the current systems in place aren't sophisticated enough to be that specific. Never the less, this issue is being studied.

A question was raised regarding burning the National Park that experienced fire in 2002. The park won't be burnt unless a lightening strike results in wildfire then a decision is made whether to put out the lightening strike e.g. Bala Range, remote area fire fighting took place. National Parks have a lot of expertise in remote area fire fighting. Rounding fires up before they get bigger is a large part of this work. The Bala Range fire had adverse weather conditions. In the early days of the fire, Parks very concerned. Extra crews were sent in to try and 'round that fire up'. Six of our fire fighters were overrun by fire in an area that we could not get them out. It was very risky.

Some fires haven't been put out with the aim of getting a mosaic - burning pattern over a number of years. This season we have had a number of fires in

back country. We have let the fire take its course. The long-term aim is to build up a mosaic - burning pattern.

Rapid response to lightning fires is assessed very carefully by the NPWS and managed in consultation with the RFS.

Fire suppression is becoming so effective that fuel loads are increasing.

Back Blocks = NPWS  
Asset Protection = RFS

A question was raised about assessment of local wind patterns when putting together a hazard reduction plan. The NPWS do take it into account but they are unaware of any specific studies on the matter.

### **Resident Gil Jones**

Gil Jones put forward motions referred to above which dealt with the subject of economically and environmentally responsible fire management. He mentioned in detail his experience with lee and windward slopes and the different approaches to back burning that could be utilised. Lee slopes are generally slow to burn. This needs to be understood by Parks and could assist in the refinement of fire fighting techniques in narrow valleys and gullies such as those in existence in the Macdonald Valley. There is a need to read the landscape better and adapt with more sophistication. It was noted by Gil that the Valley floor was home to large, mature trees and that the lower valley slopes and valley floor were the most susceptible to long-term damage.

### **Tom Bagnet**

Tom responded to Motion 1 by explaining that National Parks are our neighbours. Wildfire or hazard reduction and the boundaries for containing them vary. Hazard reduction won't pull up on the boundary of a private property. Max Ryan reiterated that it is dependent upon a suitable containment line. Recent management is supported by the Bush Fire assessment Code.

Tom responded to Motion 2 by explaining that the NPWS and RFS weigh up the potential loss of fauna against the possibility of the fire getting away and becoming uncontrollable. Resources are constantly juggled and things are done more quickly. Max Ryan indicated that it would be ideal to have an endless timeframe in which to deal with fauna and terrain considerations prior to burning however things also need to be done when volunteers are available.

Tom responded to Motion 4 by explaining a lot of fire planning fell under his command during October 2002. Tom assured the group that decisions were not made lightly. The fire was running back through only 12 months of fuel and was

still able to run fiercely. The fire was threatening Cessnock, Pokolbin and Gosford hence the large-scale back burn was necessary to pull the fire up. The Section 44 Report states that the strategy employed was probably the best strategy.

Bob acknowledged what Gil was saying and drew attention to the back burning policy. Bob will forward the policy to Gil. If Gil wishes to have some input, Bob will look at accommodating some of his thoughts. Gil acknowledged that it is a highly debatable subject.

The question was put regarding the outcome of the Bala Range fire if nobody had dropped any incendiaries and indicated that it was sheer assertion to say that fire management was controlled by the back burn as there was no evidence to support this.

Max Ryan stated that the idea of using incendiaries was to try and get the fire into the gullies where it wouldn't be exposed to the winds of the next day. The gullies are followed when dropping incendiaries and fire sits in the gullies when the weather hits thus buying time to identify fire containment lines. Max reiterated that the threat to Gosford was very real.

### **Local Fire Captain Greg Bailey**

Greg noted that there had been a great turn around in attitude. With Richard's new approach, there is a chance that we will not have these major fires again. He indicated agreement with Richard's approach, which gave support to volunteer fire crews. Greg would like to gain access to water in National Parks. He would like to see safety areas and well maintained fire trails. He noted that a kick off point was needed as the Valley very long ... a unique area with specific goals for hazard reduction.

### **Karen Hodges**

Karen had noted that one of the things that volunteers had raised was standards required for fire trucks. There were guidelines, which allowed the identification of gaps regarding frequency of fire trails, truck numbers and standards.

The Bala Range fires resulted in a lot of damage to vehicles and resources were always needed to maintain and upgrade them. National Parks have a District Committee where this issue was raised. Jack's Track for example was the quickest way into the park and it allowed a rapid response from St Albans Volunteer Fire Service.

It was indicated that it was possible to apply for funds for strategic fire trail maintenance and improvement. Where fire tracks are on private land, the RFS can apply for funds to improve them.

## **Halifax Hayes**

Indicated that St Albans Valley has a lot of fire trails on the ridges, and that they represent a great asset to us. If the money that had been spent on the Section 44 fire was spent maintaining fire trails to get access to fires, then action can be taken that is quicker and simpler. This reduces danger.

Some of the fires could be better controlled if access tracks were better. Meaning that they would not necessarily turn into bigger fires. Fire tracks need grading maybe once a year.

Tom Bagnet explained that the District Bush Fire Committee does look at the matter of tracks and makes recommendations. National Parks support RFS in their endeavours to improve access. He also indicated his commitment to undertake a further review of the management plan for Yengo-Parr. As part of the review, the community would be invited to participate in this process.

## **Peter Hughes**

Noted that funding is an issue and that Treasury set aside a certain pool of money for disasters. If the community could persuade the Treasurer to spend some on these funds in advance, prevention would be stronger. He asked what the cost of the Bala Range fire was. Response was that the Bala Range fire involved many people and agencies and that it was a complex exercise.

The issue of 'knock off' time of Parks staff was also noted with volunteers staying on to fight fires. It was explained that Parks people work 12 hour shifts and are governed by WorkCover requirements.

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