



ACT Multi Hazard Advisory Council Minutes

Date: 2 August 2023

Time: 4 pm – 7 pm

Location: ESA HQ, 9 Amberley Avenue Fairbairn, Webex

Attendance	
Chair	Sally Troy – Chair, ACT Multi Hazards Advisory Council
Attendees	Dylan Kendall – Deputy Chair, ACT Multi Hazards Advisory Council (online) Tony Bartlett – Member Len Morris – Member Asha Naznin – Member John Brickhill – Member Nina Allen – Member Marta Yebra – Member
Apologies	Jason Jones – A/g Commissioner Rohan Scott – Chief Officer, ACTRFS
Guests	Minister Mick Gentleman Richard Glenn – Director General, JACS (online) Wayne Phillips – Assistant Commissioner, ESA Tony Prescott – Senior Advisor to the Minister Jon Peach – EGM, SEMD (online) Bren Burkevics – EGM, EPSDD Eliza Larson – Conservator Liaison, EPSDD
Secretariat	Lianna Luton – Executive Officer Judith Bielleman – HorizonOne Recruitment (Minute taking)

1. Welcome and Apologies

On behalf of the Council, the Chair acknowledged they were meeting on the land of the traditional owners, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri and other first nation peoples of the ACT. She noted the traditional owners have been responsible for the lands of the ACT for millennia and recognised their wealth of knowledge, their care and continuing connection to the land, and paid respects to elders past, present and emerging.

2. Declarations of Interest

Nil

3. Acceptance of Minutes from 5 July 2023 meeting.

The draft minutes were accepted with an amendment to include the following sentence in the discussion on the Woden flood risk:

“The Council noted the flood risk maps on actmapi indicate that one of the blocks (Block 12) appears to be almost wholly within the 1% Annual Exceedance Probability (AEP) and the other block (Block 13) has some area within the 1% AEP. “



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4. Review of Council Action items

Council action items were reviewed and updated. Mr Morris advised he had also circulated to Council members the Terms of Reference for the ESA Implementation of Change Oversight Committee which would be relevant to any future discussions on agency capability.

5. Response to MHAC report on Bushfire Management

The Council considered the recently received Minister's response to the Council's Report on ACT Bushfire Management since 2003. The Report made 23 recommendations, and the Minister's response agreed to 4 of them and another one in principle, leaving the other 18 recommendations as 'noted'.

Council members expressed disappointment with the response because it appeared the Minister and through him, the key government agencies, are missing the opportunity the Report provided to consider the improvements to bushfire risk management that would be needed into the future. The Council is concerned that, given the projected rapid and large increase in bushfire risk in the coming years, there is insufficient focus on ensuring a corresponding increase in understanding and risk reduction capability. Improvements that are identified and developed via annual, season-by-season operational-level planning and review mechanisms rather than forecasting 10 or 20 years ahead are unlikely to generate sufficient timely change.

The responses provided to each recommendation, even those where the recommendation was agreed to, tended to list the activities the government was already doing without specifically addressing the recommendation – this is significant because what the government is currently doing is exactly what led the Council to recommend the government do something different or additional in the first place. Overall, the impression is, unless otherwise explained, the ACT Government may be reluctant to change from what it is already doing.

The Council agreed that going through each of the 23 recommendations and its corresponding response seemed an inefficient use of time given the likely poor reception to further inquiry. The Council agreed to continue to prosecute the recommendations through its input to the development of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan Version 5 ("SBMP5"). The Council also agreed it would welcome further discussion with any and all government agencies, particularly ESA and EPSDD, on the recommendations.

Three examples were highlighted by the Council to illustrate some of their concerns and these are included in an attachment to the minutes.

6. Correspondence for noting

The Chair outlined correspondence received by the Secretariat:

- Letter from the Chair to the Minister on the management of Extreme Heat in the ACT and also requesting instruction regarding air quality hazards.
- Response from ESA in relation to MHAC comments on the Elevated Fire Danger Plan.
- Letter from the Chair to the Minister outlining concerns regarding flash flood risks and how these are managed through ACT planning processes.



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The Council discussed the response from the ESA in relation to the Elevated Fire Danger Plan. Dr Bartlett advised he did not consider the response to be adequate as it does not negate the concerns raised by the Council. He suggested it would be good to meet with Mr Rohan Scott from the RFS to have an out-of-session discussion to gain a better understanding of the arrangements and whether the controls are appropriate to the risk. Dr Bartlett also queried whether all ACT firefighters have been trained on the new Fire Behaviour Index.

Action: Dr Bartlett and Mr Brickhill to seek a meeting with Mr Scott prior to the September meeting. Dr Bartlett to take notes from the discussion and provide the Council with an update at the next meeting.

Person responsible: Dr Bartlett and Mr Brickhill

7. Presentation on Bushfire Risk Mitigation and Environmental Approvals

The Chair welcomed Mr Bren Burkevics and Ms Eliza Larson to the meeting.

Mr Burkevics began by noting the balance between making decisions on burn programs and meeting statutory responsibilities for protecting nature. Ms Larson outlined the legislative context for approval processes and the bushfire management activities that trigger the need for an environmental assessment. Where works are not likely to have a significant adverse impact, the Conservator of Flora and Fauna provides an Environmental Significance Opinion and Ms Larson advised most BOP works are typically assessed as a whole with an ESO provided once a year. The Conservator can also approve minor public works for maintenance of tracks, and the Environment, Heritage and Water Group are looking to develop a code of practice for this, which would likely cover most BOP and bushfire mitigation activities.

Ms Larson noted the Council's interest in Blackies Hill (Bluett's Block) and explained the site has been zoned as a Strategic Fire Advantage Zone, but that burns will require careful planning to ensure minimal impact on Matters of National Environmental Significance as identified in the 2009 Molonglo Strategic Assessment. Parks and Conservation Services has developed a plan for the area which will be considered under an environmental impact process, though she confirmed there had been some delay due to confusion over the proponent for the works.

The Council noted that, previously, approval had been given to develop the Denman Prospect area on the basis the red stringy bark forest would be thinned. The Council also noted that modelling in 2020 had shown houses would be destroyed in a bushfire burning on a day of Catastrophic Fire Danger if no fuel management was undertaken. The Chair questioned how much fire risk mitigation was currently being included in the planning process and Mr Burkevics advised more integrated planning is being undertaken within EPSDD, with protective matters considered prior to development and that a 78 ha prescribed burn covering this area is included in EPSDD's 2023-24 Bushfire Operations Plan. Dr Bartlett indicated that, despite raising concerns about this area since 2019, this was the first time that advice had been provided to this Council or the previous Bushfire Council about the existence of Matters of National Environmental Significance in this area. The Council requested clarification of the status of the thinning required under the Development Approval and a timeline for any hazard reduction work to be undertaken on Bluett's Block.

Action: EPSDD to provide advice on the status of the thinning required under the Development Approval and on the timeframe for implementing the planned hazard reduction work on Bluett's Block.



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Person responsible: Secretariat to seek information from EPSDD.

Ms Larson also outlined the process undertaken for Mount Franklin Road which required an EIS due to the significant nature of the work. Mr Kendall noted this had involved significant costs in the ACT compared to NSW and suggested the requirement for an EIS be closer to that for urban development areas, as ensuring community safety from bushfires should be given the same value. The Chair also questioned whether work being undertaken through the Strategic Trail Review would require an ESO/EIS assessment and Mr Burkevics advised there was ongoing communication with the team to ensure an integrated approach.

The Council noted and supported the proposal to develop a code of practice for routine fire management and minor public works and endorsed the approach. They also requested a draft of the new code for review when available. Mr Morris questioned whether information was available to the public on fire management approvals and whether there were live updates on burns being undertaken. Mr Burkevics took the question on notice.

Action: EPSDD to advise on any information available to the public on fire management approvals and back burning activities.

Person responsible: Secretariat to follow up with EPSDD

The Chair thanked Mr Burkevics and Ms Larson for their useful and informative discussion.

8. Post Season Progress against the BOP

This item was postponed to a future meeting. The Chair requested Council members review the papers provided for the meeting and submit any questions for discussion at the next meeting.

Action: Council members to review the papers provided on the Post Season progress against the BOP and submit any questions to the Secretariat for circulation in the September meeting pack.

Person responsible: Council members, Secretariat

9. Minister and Director General catch up

The Chair welcomed Mr Richard Glenn to the meeting.

Mr Glenn provided advice on the outcome of the leadership alignment review undertaken within ESA to determine how the Executive team were working. He noted the review had found the different emergency services were working well together, but that more work could be done to communicate strategic goals to the organisation. An oversight team has been established to review this work going forward and mechanisms to improve communication and engagement will be established. The Council sought a copy of the report and Mr Glenn confirmed this could be made available.

Action: Copy of the report into the ESA leadership review to be circulated to Council members.

Person responsible: Secretariat



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The Minister then joined the meeting and the Chair invited him to address the Council. Mr Wayne Phillips and Mr Tony Prescott were also in attendance.

The Minister thanked the Council for their work. He noted the challenge around climate risks and the increase in ACT population and welcomed the Council's advice on ways to improve resilience in the community. He also cited some work being done in London to improve community intervention. The Chair outlined the Council's support for a more strategic Whole-of-Government approach and their strong interest in working with SEMD to improve community resilience.

The Chair also identified the Council's interest in looking at agency capability as a strategic issue and Mr Glenn proposed a conversation be held on this out of session. Further work will also be undertaken by the MHAC Secretariat to map the SEMD workplan into the Council's review of ESA strategic plans and sub-plans. Mr Phillips advised the new ESA Strategic Plan for 2024-2028 was in its infancy but that a presentation could be provided on this at the next meeting.

Action: Presentation to be provided to the next meeting on the ESA strategic plan to enable a discussion on the challenges for the ESA.

Person responsible: Secretariat to arrange with ESA.

10. Update on SEMD Workplan

The Chair welcomed Mr Jon Peach to the meeting.

Mr Peach outlined the SEMD 2023 Workplan and the areas in which he anticipated there would be consultation with the Council. In particular he identified the ACT Disaster Resilience Strategy and the ACT Disaster Risk Reduction Strategic Action Plan as key areas for input. The Council also flagged their interest in the Lessons Management policy and Emergency Planning Oversight. Council members highlighted their interest in establishing mechanisms that allow for open conversations and feedback, and Mr Peach confirmed the need to build organisational capability around strategic as well as operational reporting. He also acknowledged the significant changes required to embed a Whole-of-Government approach in emergency plans and the Chair highlighted the Council's letter to the Minister on the need for strategic plans across the different hazards, including extreme heat.

11. Discussion on SBMPv4 Full Evaluation

This item was postponed to a future meeting. The Chair proposed Mr Scott Seymour be asked to provide a paper for circulation within the next two weeks. Council members could then review the paper and submit any questions for discussion at the next meeting.

Action: Scott Seymour to be asked to provide a paper on the SBMPv4 Full Evaluation for the next meeting. Council members to review and submit any questions to the Secretariat for circulation in the meeting pack.

Person responsible: Council members, Secretariat

12. Council Member Updates



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Council members provided the following updates on activities:

- Ms Allen advised she attended the Burning Innovations program undertaken by the UNSW Bushfire Research Group and also attended the ACT NRM Farm Business Resilience Series webinar.
- Mr Morris advised he could undertake some quantitative analysis on disaster resilience in the ACT, based on information from the Natural Hazards Research Australia, and circulate the result. It was noted this could also be the basis of a presentation in October.
- Ms Naznin advised she could undertake some qualitative analysis on the London resilience program identified by the Minister, which could also be included in a presentation in October.
- Dr Bartlett noted that further discussion is required on the proposed structure and content of SBMPv5 and suggested a briefing paper be sought on these matters and the current status of work.
- Mr Kendall advised his planned trip to the Philippines to assist the World Bank had been delayed but should be occurring this week.
- Dr Troy advised she, Dr Bartlett and Nina Allen attended the UNSW Burning Innovations presentation, where she had a discussion with Professor Jason Sharples on how to assist ESA to develop an adaptive learning framework and embed science into operations. A meeting has also been scheduled with Professor Sharples and Dr Sophie Lewis, which will be attended by Dr Troy, Dr Bartlett and Mr Kendall.
- Dr Troy advised she and Mr Kendall met with the former Commissioner to discuss council effectiveness. A new meeting will need to be held with the new Commissioner.
- Dr Troy advised she met with Margaret Moreton, Executive Director, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience who suggested some inquiries the Council might be interested in. Dr Troy will investigate these further and provide an update to the Council.

Action: A written briefing paper to be requested on the status of the SBMPv5 in time for the September meeting. The 20th Anniversary bushfire report from the Council and the minutes from the discussion on the SBMPv5 at the July meeting to also be passed to the new SBMPv5 project manager.

Person responsible: Secretariat

13. Any other business and next meeting arrangements

The Chair noted the upcoming conference on Disaster Resilience to be held on 23rd and 24th August 2023. The Secretariat is already investigating if funding is available for any council members to attend AFAC and this could also be investigated. Ms Naznin expressed an interest in attending.

Alternative dates will need to be canvassed for a Council dinner in December.

The next meeting will include:

- The Pre-Season report
- Update on Western Edge Investigation
- Strategic Preparedness program and Reframing Recovery program from SEMD
- Post season progress against the Bushfire Operations Plan
- Discussion on SBMPv4 Full Evaluation and work on SBMPv5

14. Confirmation of Communique



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The draft meeting communique was discussed and agreed:

On 2 August 2023, the ACT Multi-Hazard Advisory Council was provided with an update on the Security and Emergency Management Division workplan by the Executive Group Manager, Jon Peach. Council also received a presentation on Bushfire Risk Mitigation Approvals from representatives of the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, Eliza Larson and Bren Burkevics. The Council also had a discussion with the Minister and the Director General of Justice and Community Safety on strategic issues.

15. Meeting Close

Next meeting 6 September 2023



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Attachment to minutes of 2 August 2023

Review of Minister's response to the Council's Report on ACT Bushfire Management since 2003

Three examples are provided below to illustrate the concerns of the Multi-Hazards Advisory Council:

Recommendation 3

EPSDD and ESA should jointly commission appropriate fire experts to conduct an independent analysis of fire management programs since 2003 with a view to establishing which activities have assisted bushfire suppression operations and how mitigation activities have impacted on environmental, cultural and water catchment values, with a view to the lessons learnt from this analysis informing future policy and planning.

Response:

EPSDD and ACTRFS have appropriately skilled and qualified staff that monitor and determine best practise to manage fire risk. Additionally, EPSDD, PCS and Conservation Research team have embedded expertise in land and fire management.

Existing and developing models for prediction draw on the learning from previous incidents and frame future responses. The Phoenix modelling capability that underpins EPSDD residual risk assessment is one example of this. The capability is being further enhanced to address ecological and ecosystem service values.

There are many variables to be considered when looking into past incidents and management programs, particularly with a changing climate. The focus should be to adapt to the changing environment and climate drivers.

Both EPSDD and ACTESA have processes in place to monitor and implement recommendations from Royal Commissions, Coronial findings, and enquiries.

The SBMP Governance Committee (chaired by an independent Executive) has direct responsibility for reviewing, monitoring and reporting on the progress of SBMP objectives and actions and ensuring that the SBMP's objectives are met.

Problem with the Response

Response does not address the central theme in the recommendation to have external experts undertake an analysis of fire management programs since 2003. Rather emphasises that the government has its own experts and what is currently done.

Recommendation 12

The ACT Government should introduce a system by which the resources available to provide bushfire protection along the rural-urban interface automatically increases to be commensurate with the length of rural-urban interface managed.



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Response

The response provided indicated that the Bushfire Prone Area is regularly reviewed, ESA business rules and the BOP determine the resources needed and that bushfire risk mitigation is incorporated into the design and development on the urban interface.

Problem with the response

The response did not address the central issue in the recommendation that the quantum of resources available to protect the urban interface needs to keep pace with the increasing length of the urban interface, otherwise the available resources will be increasingly stretched, increasing the risk to the community.

Recommendation 13

The ACT Government should introduce policies, procedures and approaches for supporting and empowering communities and individuals to identify their own resources, capabilities and needs, and to do their own planning for bushfire preparedness and response. In doing this, to be especially cognisant of changing demographics and vulnerabilities in northern and western edges of Canberra.

Response

Current community engagement and preparedness activities are established and capable of being adapted to the changing needs of the community.

Communication and the dissemination of key information is a shared responsibility of ESA and other areas of Government. ESA works closely with Whole of Government Communications team in CMTEDD to ensure this occurs. Groups, such as non- English speakers and the aged, are a focus to ensure the ESA maintains effective communications with these groups.

The ACTRFS Farm Firewise program is another example of a successful program working collaboratively with a community in a high-risk category for fire.

The ESA aims to ensure that the community is encouraged and empowered to assist each other to understand, prepare for and respond to **the call to actions** provided by our warnings and alerts systems.

The ESA provides access and links to a wide range of resources to enhance resilience in the community, for example the ACT All Hazards Survival Plan.

Problem with the response

Empowering communities and individuals to be better prepared to deal with bushfires requires much more than just disseminating information, as important as that activity is. The response does not indicate whether or how the current community engagement and preparedness activities will be adapted.