

MINUTES



ACT BUSHFIRE COUNCIL (BFC)

2nd September 2009

1600 hours

Gungahlin JESC

Cnr. Gozzard St and Anthony Rolf Drive Gungahlin

Wednesday 2nd September 2009

AGENDA

1. Opening and Introduction by Chairman

2. Attendees/ Apologies

3. Minutes of previous meeting

4. Actions running sheet

5. Correspondence

- Incoming
- Outgoing

6. Agenda Items

6.1 Presentation on the High Fire Project by Professor Mark Adams.

6.2 Council recommendation for approval or amendment of the TAMS Bushfire Operational Plan

6.3 Discussion and consideration of the new ESA and RFS Structure

6.4 Consideration and implications of the Recommendations from the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

6.5 Release of SBMP2 final Draft for public comment.

6.6 Process for our preparedness report to Minister

7. Other Business

8. Outstanding Items/Issues

9. Confirmation of next meeting

AGENDA ITEM: 1 – 5

DATE: 2nd September 2009 1600-1900Hrs

LOCATION: Gungahlin JESC

Meeting Opened Time: 4.10 Close: 1840

1. Welcome by Chairman

Kevin Jeffery opened the meeting at 4.10pm

2. Attendees/Apologies:

Kevin Jeffery	(KJ) Chair / Member
Tony Bartlett	(TB) Deputy Chair / Member
Michael Lonergan	(MIL) Member
Christine Goonrey	(CG) Member
Tony Fearnside	(TF) Member
Simon Katz	(SK) Member
Cathy Parsons	(CP) Member
Marion Leiba	(ML) Member
Ken Batt	(KB) Member
Peter Kanowski	(PK) Member
Tim McGuffog	(TM) Deputy Chief Officer RFS
Michelle Fleming	(MF) Secretariat

Apologies:

David Foot	(DF) A/G Commissioner
Conrad Barr	(CB) A/gDeputy Commissioner Fire & Rescue

Guest: (MA) Professor Mark Adams Sydney UNI.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting:

Minutes of the 5th August 2009 meeting tabled.

Changes to the minutes to be updated:

Minutes Accepted

Moved:

MIL

Seconded:

ML

4. Actions Running Sheet:

Action Required:

AGENDA ITEM: 6.1

SUBJECT: Presentation on the High Fire Project by Professor Mark Adams.

BACKGROUND: At its June meeting, Michael Lonergan provided members with a report on components of the High Fire Project which was being undertaken in the high country of Kosciusko NP. There was some discussion on this project between members and it was agreed that Council should try to get someone from the research program to attend and provide members with an update.

CURRENT SITUATION: Professor Mark Adams from Sydney University is the Principal Scientist responsible for the high Fire Project. He has agreed to attend the September meeting to address Council and to field questions on the project.

RECOMMENDATION: Members note Professor Adams attendance and information provided.

SOURCE: Tim McGuffog

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

ECOSYSTEM RESPONSES TO PRESCRIBED BURNING AND GRAZING: MANAGING FUELS AND WATER, CARBON AND BIODIVERSITY.

HIGHFIRE EXPERIMENTS

AIMS

- To address some glaring gaps in research on fire and grazing management in high country ecosystems:
 - *interactive* effects of fire and grazing
 - the responses of *vegetation structure* and *ecosystem physiology*, in addition to vegetation composition and biodiversity.
- To provide the necessary data on ecosystem structure and function on which to base decisions for sustainable management.
- To develop integrative modeling tools linking ecosystem structure, function and management.

HIGHFIRE PROVIDES CRITICAL SCIENTIFIC UNDERPINNING FOR LAND MANAGEMENT IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

- Only experiment addressing question:
 - How will prescribed burning and grazing affect water yield and quality in major rivers (e.g. Gungahlin, snowy, tumut etc)?
- Only experiment addressing question:
 - How will prescribed burning and grazing affect carbon balance of grasslands and woodlands?
- Only experiment addressing question:
 - How will prescribed burning and grazing affect greenhouse gas emissions?
- It has a strong, statistically rigorous design

HIGHFIRE EXPERIMENTS

DATA COLLECTION

- Fine & coarse woody (dead) fuel loads (leaf, bark, fine 0-6mm; 6-10mm; 10-25mm; >25mm).
- Species cover, height and composition (20000+ point samples & counting!)
- Tree mapping and diameter measurements
- Shrub understorey composition & structure

- Soil chemistry
- Permanent photo points

No doubt that prescribed burning reduces fuel loads satisfactorily, and does so for at least 5-7 years in sub-alpine woodlands.

METHANE PRODUCTION BY BEEF CATTLE

- USA
 - 54 kg ch₄ head-1 year-1
 - 69 kg ch₄ head-1 year-1
- Canadian feedlot
 - 118 kg ch₄ head-1 year-1
- Australian herd
 - 54 kg ch₄ head-1 year-1

METHANE

So, 100 head of beef cattle might produce ~5400 kg methane each year.

But, high country soils oxidize methane at rates ~100 mg m⁻² hour⁻¹, or 1 kg ha⁻¹ hour⁻¹. That is, ~8760 kg methane each year for every hectare.

In other words, high country grazing is easily 'methane-neutral' and may even offset 'cow -methane' from other parts of the landscape.

HIGHFIRE PROVIDES CRITICAL SCIENTIFIC UNDERPINNING FOR LAND MANAGEMENT IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

- Current research is showing:
 - More water available for plants and run-off in areas that have been treated with prescribed fire
 - Much of the soils in the high country are strong methane-oxidizers and this is unaffected by fire or grazing
 - Virtually no emissions of n₂o from the high country soils
 - Prescribed fire and grazing have not increased weed abundance
 - Plant diversity increased by prescribed fire
- Planned fire (or prescribed fire) can be used to control fuel loads and fire risk in many upland woodlands and grasslands, including those that are grazed.

DISCUSSION:

(MA) We have tried to pick it up as much as we can but this sort of research requires longer 3 years; a long term study not some thing that can be done over night.

We looked back at what everyone else had done – looked forward for issues, including "Mountain Weather" by Rick McRae, analysis of impact of 2003 fires on people in high country in VIC, and over \$1 Million went towards the Bushfire CRC Fire Knowledge Network.

This is an examination of the effectiveness of prescribed burning and grazing as tools for managing vegetation in high country. \$925,000 received over three years – money had to be spent in three years.

(TB) You didn't say anything about the impact of grazing on fuel loads. What have you found so far?

(MA) In terms of grazing / fire interaction, so far there has been no impact by cattle either on burnt or un-burnt, no weeds, no loss of diversity, same impact on fuel loads, same water.

(TF) Why do you think the bio-diversity increases following a fire?

(MA) I think we would have predicted that from previous literature, there are a lot of species that haven't had fire through them for a long time so a lot of seed regenerators had disappeared, but there are enough sources of seed around and they have reappeared after the fire.

(SK) What about stocking rates?

(MA) This is a property of 1200 hectares and they don't run more than 100-150 head for three months of a year. Very low stocking.

(MIL) Those meters we saw that take samples measuring the methane production and producing overall negative results is amazing!

(MA) It has gained a lot of interest. There is a lot of interest in finding ways to off-set methane production by grazing animals.

(TM) In terms of exploration of the Cotter catchment, we're all aware that we've got a problem with very heavy understory at the moment and it's a balance between when to put a fire in to make sure you are not taking the species out. I expect ACTEWAGL is interested in the water quality and amount coming out of the area. How do you work out the balance of when you should be putting HR through to reduce the amount of under story?

(MA) The agencies all rely on models to try to achieve that effect at the moment. The models on species and effects of fire or life history are attribute based. Jeff Carey does this as a matter of course. The challenge is that the water side of the balance is not been well known. The water models have been relying on old data, particularly on the behaviour of the Melbourne catchments. If the balance of values is correct you can still burn and you'll get more water. If you run too many fires you run the risk of eliminating too many species. In order to run the models successfully you have to know the values that you are trading off – species v water v fire risk. We are trying to gather information to allow better models in the future.

(TB) What are the prospects of getting some realistic funding to continue the work? What have you been doing to try and achieve that?

(MA) The Victorian government has probably got more chance of loosening the purse strings. The member for Monaro knows the work and has promised support but has been unable to deliver as yet. We don't have a high fire project per say, in the new CRC they wanted thematics – carbon, water. We've tried the NHT for community engagement.

(PK) What is the estimated cost of maintaining the Cotter sites?

(MA) The instruments are expensive to maintain. We probably spend \$140,000 per annum in just maintaining the infrastructure at the Cotter.

(PK) Who has been paying for that?

(MA) We've been paying for it out of USYD funds and ACTEW and the ARC have stepped up to carry us for the next three years.

(PK) So the ACT is okay for the immediate future?

(MA) Fortunately ACTEW also have a controlling stake in Kiewa these days, so they are supporting that work as well.

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED: Nil

AGENDA ITEM: 6.2

SUBJECT: **Council recommendation for approval or amendment of the TAMS Bushfire Operational Plan**

BACKGROUND: At the August meeting of Council Mr. Neil Cooper and Mr. Dylan Kendal from the TAMS Fire Management branch provided members with a final analysis of works undertaken in the 2008/09 BOP. They also provided members with the proposed 2009/10 BOP.

CURRENT SITUATION: Under the Emergencies Act 2004, Council is to be consulted on the Bushfire Operational plans of ACT Land Management Authorities and to provide their assessment, recommendations and or alterations to the Commissioner ESA. The Commissioner must then provide a response to TAMS regarding the approval of their Bushfire Operational Plan.

The final field audits of the 2008/09 BOP are being completed by RFS and will formally complete the legislative requirements for that financial year.

Council agreed that it would assess the plan between its August and September meetings and provide their findings and recommendations to the Commissioner following.

RECOMMENDATION: Members indicate any alterations, additions or changes they deem necessary and advise the Commissioner ESA as such.

SOURCE: Tim McGuffog

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

Council to endorse the BOP

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ML

CG

ACTION REQUIRED: NIL

AGENDA ITEM: 6.3

SUBJECT: Discussion and consideration of the new ESA and RFS Structure.

BACKGROUND: At the last meeting of Council, there was a lengthy discussion and consultation regarding the forthcoming changes to the ESA senior management structure.

CURRENT SITUATION: It is expected that the findings and recommendations developed by the A/g DCO JACS will be available by this meeting and that a Senior Executive officer will be attending the meeting to deliver the final outcome and recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION: Council consider the findings and recommendations and decide on their endorsement or otherwise of the plan.

SOURCE: Tim McGuffog

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

(KJ) We put up information as to what we thought was needed. I have been to a few meetings with Pat Barling discussing the structure and a final meeting with the Minister. The question was asked about the relationship between joint services and the support agencies. The proposal is to establish service level agreements to ensure that the operational services are getting what they need.

(TB) What is the timing of implementation?

(KJ) Implement then recruitment within a matter of weeks.

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED: Nil

AGENDA ITEM: 6.4

SUBJECT: **Consideration and implications of the Recommendations from the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.**

BACKGROUND: The findings of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission we made public on 17/8/09. This full report is some 380 pages. Members were provided with a copy of the Executive Summary and recommendations of the report.

CURRENT SITUATION: The ESA has undertaken a preliminary review of the report and will commence development of an ACT position paper regarding the recommendations and an analysis of where the ACT is currently positioned in light of these recommendations. This position will be based on the recent evaluation undertaken by the BFC and the implications associated with the recently released SBMP2.

RECOMMENDATION: Members consider the recommendations and provide advice and feedback to the ESA Commissioner which will be incorporated into the ACT Position paper.

SOURCE: Tim McGuffog

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

Discussion was held around the draft recommendations from the Victorian Royal Commission, and how the Bushfire Council should approach them.

Key outcomes of the discussion were:

- At some point in time in every jurisdiction, the governments are going to have to consider what recommendations they adopt themselves based on the Victorian situation and which ones they don't. Some will be dealt with in a collective manner through AFAC. So our role is to go through and work out which of the recommendations the ACT has an interest in deciding what it's going to do. This may or may not be different to what we're currently doing and then work out a process to identify what advice Council provides to government.
- The day the recommendations came out ESA Management did a whiteboard exercise for the stay or go. Advice was provided to the Minister, we need to go back and do this more in-depth.
- BOM: Re the recommendations 5.1 and 5.2 the BoM nationally is trying to get in place for this coming season and NSW is our model. A new ratings scale with 50-74 which will be dubbed severe, 75-99 extreme and 100+ catastrophic has been developed and a numerical FDI will be issued alongside the daily fire danger rating. We will publish our fire danger ratings as well as the index on the external web. We may need an 'about the fire weather service' pamphlet developed. We will need to cap the FDI values at 100 both forecast and observed because one of the worst aspects that have come out of these Victorian fires is that it is not the first time it has happened. The Macarthur index is capped at 100 but unfortunately some of the bureau's computer programs have not capped the Macarthur index at 100 so we have been getting values in some instances of two and three hundred plus so of course the coroner has honed in on that and this value of catastrophic is meant to be 100+ but we think in the bureau that it's a bit too late. We are going to have to do some research on that. The fire agencies in NSW are happy with what I have just gone through and they are also looking at instigating the SMS warning service for this current season. The bureau nationally has a lot of work to do and this is not going to happen overnight but it is going to happen. It's a national not a state directive.
- The Victorian situation is very different to the ACT in regard to communities, as they had isolated villages whereas ACT has a long urban edge with some villages and rural properties.
- Recommendations of interest: 4.4, 4.2, 5.2, 6.1, 6.3, 7.2, 8.3, 8.5, 9.2 and 10.6
- you can break the population of the ACT into 3 categories, people at live in the rural areas, people that live on the urban edge and those that live internally and won't be physically impacted. I think our whole strategy should be organised in that way.
- The AFAC working group that Virginia and Greg Kent were on has developed a strategy for the national early warning system and the underlying structures to make this work. I suspect that is where David Foot is at the moment, because the AFAC want to get a definite position on the new system and get it adopted before the southern fire season. The other point is that we will probably line up with not only the fire

danger indices, warning signs, and standard messages but also adopt the national early warning system, the SMS's text messaging and standard message systems. We're also going to work very closely with NSW on this so there is no confusion across the border.

- In regard to these recommendations, I think if they've already done some of the work what we really need to do is provide feedback on whether we agree that they are relevant and the proposals are consistent with what we suggest. For example, it seems entirely sensible that we should be coordinating with what the other states are doing, that's part of the problem – there's been too much non-coordination in terms of the way things are issued.
- ACT needs to ensure that there is a way to measure bushfire fighting experience, and have experience levels count in qualifications for various IMT roles.

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED: NIL

AGENDA ITEM: 6.5

SUBJECT: Release of SBMP2 final Draft for public comment

BACKGROUND: The final Draft of the SBMP2 was released for public comment until 25th September 2009. Two of the BFC members have sat on the steering committee and Council has been advised and updated during the development of the SBMP2 and the supporting Regional plans.

CURRENT SITUATION: Submissions on the plan will be considered and incorporated as deemed appropriate and the plan is hoped to be in place for the coming fire season. One of the considerations forecast with the release of the plan was the possibility of changes arising from the Victorian Royal Commission that may need to be incorporated or some modifications made and adopted.

RECOMMENDATION: Council members review the document and provide comment back to Nick Lhuede if there are changes that need to be made to the plan.

SOURCE: Tim McGuffog

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

(KJ) SBMP2 is refocused strongly on actions and not just a book shelf document.

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED: NIL

AGENDA ITEM: 6.6

SUBJECT: Process for our preparedness report to Minister

BACKGROUND: The Minister has requested that BFC provide him with an annual report by 1st of November each year to advise him of the preparedness for the coming bushfire season and any issues or problem areas that they see or other matters such as resource enhancement that may be necessary. Council has provided this report for the last two seasons.

CURRENT SITUATION: Members need to discuss the preparation of this report for the coming season and establish a process to evaluate and identify any issues that they believe should be brought to the attention of the Minister.

RECOMMENDATION:

SOURCE: Tim McGuffog

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

(TB) In terms of the report to the Minister this year, we're obliged to give him some advice about what we think the state of readiness is, based on bushfire management plan and implementing previous ones and any other anecdotal observations we have.

(KJ) We will need input from RFS.

(TM) We're working to a tabulated pre-season preparedness checklist and we are ticking off actions once we've completed them.

(TB) That can inform us. Reinforce some of Bob Smith's advice and put comments down about what we think needs to be done in relation to these recommendations.

(TM) Visualising the things that comes out of Bob Smith's report, we've got what's going to impact on us out of the Royal Commission and the SBMP. Where I intend to go is to roll up all the key points and recommendations prioritise each against risk and that will form our business plan for the next 12 months.

(CP) It gives us a good opportunity to highlight the gap between the resources needed and the resources we've been allocated.

(KB) Particularly with a forecast above the normal fire season.

(CG) Do we know the summer forecast?

(KB) Hot and dry. 40% chance of medium rainfall and 65% of obtaining above average daytime temperatures.

(MIL) Maybe we could make some noises about people preparing their landscape around the western edges.

(KJ) It comes out in Bob's report. In terms of process for this, it is probably useful if we organise a small group to kick it off.

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED NIL

AGENDA ITEM: 7

SUBJECT: Other Business

Council discussed that it has not had a field trip to review the on-ground situation for some time. .

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

It was agreed that RFS would organise a field trip for Council during October, focussed on Western-edge of Canberra suburbs

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED: TM to arrange field trip for 17th October 2009

AGENDA ITEM: 8

SUBJECT: Outstanding Items / Issues

RESOLUTION AND/OR DECISION:

MOTION MOVED:

MOTION SECONDED:

ACTION REQUIRED:

Time and Date of Next Meeting: 7th October ESA Curtin Conference Room 1