



Government of **Western Australia**
Conservation and Parks Commission

Position Statement:
Prescribed burning on vested lands

May 2018

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The Commission's Position

The purpose of this position statement is to present principles for the development and implementation of prescribed burning policies and programs on lands vested in the Conservation and Parks Commission (Commission). Prescribed burning can be defined as the controlled application of fire under specified environmental conditions to a predetermined area and at the time, intensity, and rate of spread required to attain planned resource management objectives.

The Commission has adopted the following principles which are based on the nationally agreed principles endorsed by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (October 2016):

- **Protection of life is the highest consideration** - The protection of human life should be given priority over all other obligations in prescribed burning operations.
- **Landscape health is linked to fire and fire management** - Managing fire in the environment can help to create a mosaic of diverse fire regimes across the landscape. This aims to provide an improved range of habitats and ecosystems. Fire management also aids in the exclusion of fire from fire sensitive ecosystems by reducing adjacent fuel hazards. Maintenance of biodiversity can contribute significantly to the resilience of ecosystems in the face of bushfires and other threatening processes such as climate change and weed invasion.
- **Prescribed burning is a risk management tool** - Bushfires will never be eliminated from the environment. Prescribed burning can help to reduce the risk and severity of impacts that these events have on life, property, community and the environment. Prescribed burning is more effective where used alongside complementary risk reduction measures.
- **Engagement with stakeholders** - Community and business support for prescribed burning programs is essential to their success. Engagement is a two way model whereby the intentions of management agencies are communicated to stakeholders and concerns of stakeholders are identified and considered at all levels of prescribed burning planning and during the burn.
- **Prescribed burning is done in the context of measurable outcomes** - Objectives of individual prescribed burns should be clearly stated, preferably as measurable objectives. Clearly stated objectives facilitate the formation of suitable burn prescriptions, fire implementation tactics and allow evaluation of burn success for adaptive management purposes. Objectives of individual burns should be guided by and support strategic objectives. Strategic objectives include broad organisational level goals that are further detailed through performance measures that allow an organisation to monitor the success of burn programs.
- **Informed knowledge of fire in the landscape** - Knowledge of fire, including fire behaviour, ecological responses to fire and the measurement of risk reduction from prescribed burning, can all be informed by sharing research and experience. Informed knowledge comes from research outputs, effective measurement, monitoring and evaluation of the operational programs undertaken by agencies, and from across the community including the knowledge of Traditional Owners. Knowledge can always be enhanced, so fire managers must engage in an adaptive management process to ensure improvements can be made across all processes and activities in a continual improvement framework.

- **Traditional Owner use of fire in the landscape is acknowledged** - Fire is culturally significant to Aboriginal people and the use of fire to shape the landscape is widely acknowledged. Where Traditional Owners have not been able to continue these practices the depth of spiritual and cultural knowledge and connection to the land is maintained through stories and memories. Integration of this retained knowledge into current management practices should be actively supported and promoted. Where knowledge gaps exist, land managers should work with Traditional Owners to build that knowledge, and, where appropriate, revive practices.
- **An integrated approach is required across land tenures** - An integrated and cooperative approach across all tenures is the best way to minimise bushfire risk to lives, property and the environment. Responsibility for risk reduction should be shared between all landholders (including land management agencies) and achieved by risk treatment within the boundaries of their own property and cooperatively with neighbours to increase these benefits across their shared landscape.
- **Prescribed burning is carried out under legislative, policy and planned requirements** - Agencies that carry out prescribed burning on vested lands are required to comply with relevant State and Commonwealth legislation that address facets of land management, environmental protection, and Aboriginal cultural heritage, among other requirements.

Context and Background

Fire is a part of the Australian landscape, and many ecosystems depend on fire to remain healthy. Ecosystems and organisms have evolved in this fire prone-environment and have developed adaptive traits that enable them to persist with, and in some cases, depend upon a variety of fire regimes.

Fire is a significant part of Aboriginal culture and the knowledge of its use has been retained by many Aboriginal families as their culture and values are shared between generations.

Aboriginal people learnt to harness the naturally recurring fire caused by lightning and other sources to their advantage, which resulted in skilful burning of landscapes for many different purposes. Early European explorers and settlers commented on the Aboriginal people's familiarity with fire, and the presence of fire in the landscape continually throughout the year. This constant use of fire by Aboriginal people as they went about their daily lives most likely resulted in a fine grained mosaic of different vegetation and fuel ages across the landscape. As a result, large intense bushfires were uncommon.

Today, many Australians choose to live in fire-prone regions, leading to conflict between public safety and ecological management objectives, and requiring decision-makers and land managers to strike a balance between ecological, economic, and social values.

Fire diversity is essential for maintaining biodiversity, although some fire regimes can threaten biodiversity. Bushfires can also threaten people and property so from that perspective fire management is necessary to both conserve biodiversity and to reduce the damaging impacts of bushfires on community assets. Strategies to achieve these outcomes will invariably involve fire suppression and prescribed burning.

FIRE MANAGEMENT ON VESTED LANDS

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation, and Attractions (DBCA) is responsible for managing fire in forests, parks, nature reserves and other lands it manages by:

- managing fuel loads through prescribed burning and other means;
- responding to bushfires; and
- undertaking research into fire behaviour and effects.

DBCA's planning process for prescribed burning includes burn program planning, developing a prescribed fire plan (prescription), implementation and post burn assessments.

Forest and conservation reserve management plans prepared by the Commission through DBCA may also address fire management and may be relevant to other vested categories of land.

SUSTAINABLE FIRE MANAGEMENT

There is no single optimum fire regime that will meet all management objectives. There are a number of fire regimes, which based on best available evidence, can be applied to different ecosystems under various circumstances. These include fire regimes based on an areas bio-physical attributes, regimes that provide for fire diversity (diversity of frequency, season, and intensity), regimes that provide habitat diversity, regimes that create fine-grain habitat mosaics and regimes that aim specifically to manage fuel accumulation. Implemented in an adaptive management framework, these regimes provide opportunities for continuous learning and better fire management outcomes.

Research into prescribed burning in southwestern Western Australian forests, has specifically identified the primary objectives of fire management for conserving biodiversity at the landscape level as to:

- maintain a diverse representation of ecosystem seral states and habitat conditions; and
- protect fire-sensitive and fire-dependent ecosystems and niches, including riparian zones, aquatic ecosystems, and peat wetlands.

Effective and sustainable fire management practices should consist of:

- protection of life, property and community assets;
- maintaining resilient ecosystems and environmental services;
- collaboration and consultation with community and stakeholders;
- an integrated approach across public and private land with fuel management as one of a range of different management actions to protect lives and the environment;
- building and maintaining relationships with Traditional Owners;
- monitoring of the effectiveness of operations in achieving fire management outcomes;
- underpinning of management with science;
- research on the impact of fire regimes that adequately considers representation of vested landscapes and ecosystems and their conservation status; and
- using adaptive management approaches to seek continuous improvement.

The Commission acknowledges that prescribed burning is undertaken to achieve both community protection and biodiversity conservation.

References

The Commission has drawn from the following sources in setting out its position statement:

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