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**Date: 17<sup>th</sup> September 2012**

# **Submission**

**to**

**Ministry for Police and Emergency Services,  
[hazardreduction@mpes.nsw.gov.au](mailto:hazardreduction@mpes.nsw.gov.au).**

**on**

# **Hazard Reduction Discussion Paper**

**Compiled for Clarence Environment Centre  
by John Edwards  
Honorary Secretary**

# Submission to Ministry for Police and Emergency Services on Hazard Reduction Discussion Paper

## Preamble

The Clarence Environment Centre has maintained a shop-front in Grafton for over 23 years, and has a proud record of environmental advocacy. Fire, and in particular inappropriate fire regimes, is listed as a Key Threatening Process under the Threatened Species Conservation Act, and identified as a primary cause of the declines in numbers of a wide ranges of threatened flora and fauna. Therefore we believe it is imperative the fire regimes be carefully managed

## What is hazard reduction? Discussion and general comments

The opening statement: “*Hazard reduction is an activity carried out for the purpose of reducing fuel loads*”, should realistically read, “.... temporarily reducing fuel loads”. Most fire prone areas rapidly return to dangerous fire conditions, mainly due to the large amount of fuel generated by the hazard reduction burn itself, by;

- leaf litter from the scorched crowns,
- the trees and shrubs that are killed by the fire but remain standing
- the limbs and sometimes entire old-growth trees that have succumbed to the fire and fallen
- the frequent proliferation of coppicing pioneer species, and
- the expansion of highly flammable ground covers such as Blady Grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) and Bracken Fern (*Pteridium esculentum*).

This return to high fuel load can often occur within only two years, and the more frequently it is burned, the less canopy survives, and the more the fire hazard increases.

The opening statement of the Introduction to the Discussion Paper explains that, “*the Australian landscape has evolved under a natural and cultural regime of fire*”, without explaining that 175 years of land management by European colonisers on the north coast of NSW (200 years elsewhere), has seen the forest landscape altered beyond recognition.

Heavy logging, land-clearing (either by machine or by intensive grazing management incorporating high frequency burning), and underscrubbing, has left a legacy of highly flammable landscapes that worsen with every fire. Forests that were once dominated by very large trees, with trunks often over 2m diameter at breast height, have been replaced by dense stands of smaller trees, all highly combustible and fast growing, which force us into vicious cycle of ever more frequent hazard reduction burning.

Another reality is that most of the burning carried out on the North Coast occurs in the hinterland, where there is little need for hazard reduction for asset protection, and is generally carried out by landowners, either in the belief that it provides a “green pick” for livestock, or to satisfy some ingrained cultural belief that it has to be done. In some areas this practice has seen those landscapes become dominated by more fire tolerant, and highly combustible species like Blady Grass. This high frequency burning has also removed all humus from the soils, reducing them to an even lower fertility sandy wasteland, incapable of supporting better quality pastures or fire resistant species. This is land clearing by stealth, and has been going on for over 150 years.

On pages 11-12 we are reminded that: “*A core requirement of the Act is for all land owners, occupiers and public authorities to **take practicable steps to prevent the occurrence and spread of bush fires on or from their land.** The land owner is liable for the costs associated with this responsibility. Where a land owner does not satisfy his/her duty to prevent bush fires, the NSW*

*Rural Fire Service Commissioner may intervene*". This is followed by Question 5: "*Do landowners understand their responsibilities?*"

We contend that, not only do most landowners understand the above provisions, they actively use them to justify continuing to destroy/clear native vegetation cover from their land. Seldom do we see the burning or slashing of fire breaks which is all that is required to satisfy the above edict.

Much of what is deemed to be hazard reduction on public land, including national parks which is frequently done by dropping incendiaries from aircraft is, as explained above, simply increasing the fire prone nature of the vegetation. It is slowly 'eating into' those areas that are naturally fire resistant, such as rainforest and riparian vegetation, and other moister communities along creeks, gullies and drainage lines, that traditionally slow or halt bushfires.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of unmanaged fires in national parks were actually started on neighbouring properties, and subsequently "escaped", the Parks Service cops the blame and has become the whipping boy, spurred on by hysteria generated by a rowdy minority which have never managed to get over having their grazing permits for national parks revoked some 30 years ago.

## **Specific comments**

### **Bushfire period**

The statement (page 8) under "Fire season and weather conditions", claiming that "*The fire season over much of NSW is concentrated **between spring and mid-summer**, starting with the **north coast experiencing the highest risk in spring** and gradually shifting down to the southern inland, which has its worst conditions in mid-late summer*", is something that must be corrected. The north coast fire season, depending on weather, frequently starts in winter, around the end of July and, while the highest risk may occur during spring, we frequently experience severe fires in late winter.

Winter is traditionally the driest season on the north coast, making it the period of lowest humidity. It is traditionally the windiest season, and in August, temperatures in the 30s are not unusual, fulfilling 4 of the 5 dot point triggers identified on page 9 (severe fire weather), providing all the ingredients for devastating bush fires.

This year, millions of dollars have likely been spent trying to control fires that have either resulted from controlled hazard reduction burns during late winter that have "escaped", sometimes days after the event, or by the previously described annual burn-offs by graziers in the hinterland.

Again for the north coast, we believe very few disastrous fires are caused by lightning strike (storm season usually starts in mid October), and generally occur in association with higher humidity levels or even rainfall, winds of only a short duration as the storm front moves through, and cloudy conditions which reduce temperatures.

In terms of Question 11: "*Are there additional planning strategies the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee should consider?*", we believe there should be a review of the north coast bushfire period, and burn-offs and hazard reduction should be conducted much earlier, and also on a more opportunistic basis when moisture levels are higher.

An example of where this was achieved was when Forests NSW managed to burn the moist Styx River State Forest in January 2012, during one of the wettest summers for years. It was a low intensity fire, and would have been an effective hazard reduction except that it destroyed significant areas of mapped habitat for the endangered Rufous Scrub Bird.

## **Benefits and of hazard reduction burning**

We seriously question the claim that: “*a large area can be treated in a short period of time*”, is in anyway beneficial, unless it is being undertaken to achieve a mandated quota. The purpose of hazard reduction is stated (page 6) as: “*the establishment or maintenance of fire breaks*”, and while not specifically stated, we presume these fire breaks are primarily for asset protection.

The mandated burning of large areas resulted from governments' knee-jerk reaction to deadly catastrophic bushfire events, so that a certain percentage of the State now has to be burned annually. The Parks Service has always undertaken prescribed burns to enhance biodiversity. We understand this is designed to mirror the “cultural” burning that those parks are perceived to have received prior to European settlement.

Given the dramatic changes that have been wrought on the forest ecosystems as a result of those forestry and agricultural pursuits, prescribed burning in the manner traditionally undertaken by indigenous peoples, cannot be supported. To suggest that this burning across large areas doubles as hazard reduction for asset protection, when those assets could be tens of kilometres away, also makes no sense.

**We believe a truly long-term strategy must be adopted for national parks**, aimed at returning those ecosystems to pre 1888 levels, a planning period of at least 100 years in many cases.

According to the relevant web sites, we learn that the National Parks and Wildlife Service manage some 7 million hectares of parks and reserves around the state, that is 3½ times the area of land managed by Forests NSW. However, according to the Discussion Paper, **the quota system for hazard reduction on the national parks estate demands that 6 times as much national park land has to be burned annually, compared to the state forests estate**. When national parks are supposed to protect threatened species and biodiversity values, why is there such an appalling imbalance?

The Discussion Paper's comments (pages 18-19) about the finding of the *Royal Commission Report* confirms our belief that much of the broad-scale burning that currently occurs in National Parks has no beneficial outcome and is simply being undertaken to meet a quota, stating that the Commission, “*recommended a hectare only target*” which led to, “*an emphasis on remote, large area burns to achieve the target, at the expense of smaller, more resource intensive burns that provide direct protection for more properties*”, and “*a burn at all costs attitude, which may lead to burning under marginal conditions in pursuit of the target, with adverse impacts on crew safety and the increased potential for fire escapes*”. **We believe this 'quota' policy has to change.**

We also understand that research in Gibraltar Range NP suggests that prescribed controlled burns are not hot enough to perform an ecological role (e.g. they don't burn enough ground fuel to expose soil for seeds released by hakeas/banksias etc to germinate), so hazard reduction burns over large areas in cooler months could be having a negative impact on species such as Hakea where the parent plant is often killed by fire, and will not release seeds until the plant, or individual branch, dies.

The results of this type of research must be taken into account when planning bushfire programs.

## **Biodiversity protection**

There are numerous pieces of legislation in place to protect threatened species and conserve biodiversity. Fire, particularly inappropriate high frequency fire regimes, is identified as a Key Threatening Process under the State's Threatened Species Conservation Act, and a major contributor to the decline of almost all threatened flora species.

Continued burning, coupled with forestry activities that causes huge damage to tree butts, through contact with machinery, falling trees, and hauled timber, eventually leads to the demise of many old-growth, hollow-bearing trees. Almost half our threatened land-based fauna species are dependent on those tree hollows, and their continued decline had been directly linked to the loss of that habitat.

Despite this, and an acknowledgment (pages 13-14) that: *“The purpose of the Threatened Species Conservation Act is to protect terrestrial species, populations and ecological communities. This includes eliminating or managing certain processes that threaten the survival or evolutionary development of threatened species, populations and ecological communities”*, we are then advised that: *“Hazard reduction work done, in accordance with a bush fire risk management plan, bush fire hazard reduction certificate and any relevant bush fire code, is exempt from the Act”*.

**In fact hazard reduction burning is virtually, if not entirely, exempt from all laws pertaining to environmental protection, particularly when, as they so often do, break containment lines and threaten property.** Therefore we find it hard to comprehend Question 9 which asks: *“What steps could be taken to dispel the perception that environmental issues prevent hazard reduction?”* Clearly they do not, and the only suggestion we could make is that those who hold that perception be taught to read, or join a fire brigade.

We note the clause, *“in accordance with a bush fire risk management plan”*, but seriously question how the regular dropping of incendiary devices to cause broad-scale indiscriminate burning of a national park, can possibly be included in any management plan in the first instance.

While page 25 of the Discussion Paper delineates between hazard reduction (Asset Protection Zones (APZ)), and prescribed burning for biodiversity management (Land Management Zones (LMZ)), these operations become 'blurred' when planning to meet all legislative requirements including the mandated quotas.

Asset protection is an imperative that requires hazard reduction of a matter of metres only, depending on site conditions such as slope, and vegetation type (e.g. stringy barked trees as opposed to smooth barked species). It does not require the broad-scale burning of entire landscapes.

We are pleased to note that there is an acknowledgment that: *“The mapping of Endangered Ecological Communities is an area where more work is still required to enable land managers to conduct hazard reduction works with confidence”*. However, we point out that even with such a large amount of land in private ownership, there is still no requirement for landowners to undertake any environmental assessment prior to obtaining approval to clear or log their properties, so threatened species and ecological communities are seldom identified. Even the Forests NSW experts are unable to correctly identify Endangered Ecological Communities, a clear indication that mapping is indeed needed. How this mapping will help private land managers that are allowed to drop matches, or parks service staff who can drop incendiary devices from aircraft, remains to be seen.

### **Sundry comments**

Question 26. *“Is there support in the community for increased hazard reduction in Land Management Zones?”* Yes, but often uninformed, and: *“Is there a need for more hazard reduction burning in Land Management Zones?”* **No!**

Question 27. *“Is the current decision making framework flexible enough to conduct hazard reduction works when the conditions are favourable?”* Probably not.

While acknowledging that: *“In general, works undertaken by Department of Primary Industries – Crown Lands, local government and private lands are focused on the protection of life and property”*, is correct, we do not agree that sufficient consideration is given to, *“works aimed at managing fire frequency thresholds”*. Often we find fire crews back-burning from residential areas, often into national parks, with little or no attempt to restrict the fire to the prescribed APZ.

Question 30. *“Does the community understand the impact of weather conditions on the ability to carry out hazard reduction work?”* We believe they do, but it doesn't stop certain sections of the community raving on about the failure of agencies, particularly National Parks and Wildlife, for not doing enough.

If they accept the average days per year when hazard reduction can safely be undertaken (*In some areas there could be as little as 20-30 days a year*, (page 6)), they must also accept that to do more in that limited time, more manpower and equipment will be required, and that they, the taxpayers, are the ones that will have to pay for it. For too many people in our society, the simplicity of lighting up the entire perimeter of a national park and just letting it burn itself out, is all they see. They have no consideration for the impacts on biodiversity and the threatened fauna those parks are supposed to protect, so we believe **an enormous educational effort is required to correct this perception, and it needs to start in the State's primary schools.**

Question 31. *“Do private land owners understand bush fire risk and what they can do to mitigate the risk?”* We do not think so. Nobody understands the risk until they have faced a raging bushfire.

Question 32. *“Are cross tenure hazard reduction works being managed effectively?”* and, Question 33. *“Are there any barriers to conduct cross tenure hazard reduction works efficiently?”* There is certainly some animosity (not sure that is the correct term) between volunteer firefighters and paid employees of agencies such as Forests NSW and the national parks service, particularly when the “anti-national parks” element (as described previously) are present as volunteers.

Question 34. *“Are there any areas of green tape or red tape that prevent landowners from carrying out hazard reduction works?”* Yes, it is inconvenient when a farmer wishing to burn the corpse of a dead animal, for example, to have to drive, sometimes considerable distances, to the nearest permit issuing office to pick up a permit, instead of simply doing it over the phone. As for burning off, most graziers avoid all types of “tape” simply by dropping a match, walking away, and denying all knowledge.

We thank the Ministry for this opportunity to comment, and hope those comments will be taken seriously

Yours sincerely

John Edwards  
Honorary Secretary.