

Living with Fire in NSW National Parks

Executive summary

Living with Fire in NSW National Parks – A strategy for managing bushfires in national parks and reserves 2012–2021 (the strategy) provides a statewide approach to managing bushfires in NSW national parks and reserves over the next decade. It contains:

- a vision for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to manage fire
- a set of fire management principles
- an analysis of trends and future challenges for managing fire in NSW parks and reserves
- objectives and priorities for the next ten years, including research priorities
- key strategies, actions and deliverables and key performance indicators to measure agency performance.

The context

Fire has been a feature of the Australian landscape for millions of years. During this time, ecosystems, including the plants and animals within them, have evolved to function under particular fire regimes. With the arrival of Aboriginal people in Australia, the interaction between humans, fire and the environment commenced. European settlement brought dramatic changes to land use systems and altered fire regimes. Modern fire management requires the assessment, measurement and mitigation of risk to social, economic and environmental values.



Bushfire in NSW – trends and future challenges

Recent drivers of change in fire management have been examined to help identify likely future trends and challenges. These drivers include:

- the increase in the number of people living in regional NSW near bushfire prone areas
- the ageing population of residents and firefighters
- the increasing cost of fire suppression
- the increase in size and distribution of protected areas
- the increase in average temperatures, the decrease in average rainfall and the subsequent increase in severe fires
- technological advances such as management information systems and fire and weather behaviour modelling.

Trends in fire management and fires in NSW parks and reserves include:

- the relationship between global climate and weather systems and the number of fires and area burnt in parks
- the slight downward trend in annual average size of fires in parks and reserves over the last 35 years due to improved bushfire detection and suppression
- various causes and origins of fires in parks, and the contribution of hazard reduction burning and unplanned fires to total area burnt.

These trends help establish strategies and key performance indicators for fire management in national parks and reserves.

A coordinated approach to bushfire management

The NPWS has statutory obligations for bushfire management as a public and firefighting authority. It works with NSW Rural Fire Service, Fire and Rescue NSW and Forests NSW, land managers and the community to manage fires. The NPWS is a long-standing member of the NSW Bush Fire Coordinating Committee, which coordinates fire management across government and non-government organisations.

Coordination of all bushfire management activities is undertaken by a specialist section in the NPWS, with support from regionally based bushfire management officers and teams, and other Office of Environment and Heritage corporate support sections.

The resources of the NPWS include:

- coordinated bushfire management strategies, policies and procedures
- more than 1300 well-trained, fit NPWS fire fighters
- a well-maintained fleet of NPWS fire fighting vehicles
- a specially fitted helicopter fleet and crew.

These resources are supported by additional funding of \$62.5 million over five years (2011–16) which has been provided by the NSW Government in response to the Black Saturday fires in Victoria in 2009, and will help implement this strategy in regards to enhanced hazard reduction and rapid response fire fighting.

Fire management strategies, actions and key performance indicators

Key fire management strategies, actions and deliverables are grouped under four key themes, each with assigned agency key performance indicators. These themes are:

1. Enhancing fire management capacity

- Fire management capacity, including personnel, equipment, technology and infrastructure, will be maintained and enhanced to manage bushfires, and meet future fire management challenges.

2. Applying a risk management approach

- Levels of bushfire risk to life and property, biodiversity, and cultural heritage vary within and between landscapes and ecosystems, in response to a range of factors.
- Fire risk varies as seasonal conditions change, and fires and land management activities alter fuel quantity and structure in the landscape over time.
- As a result, controls such as planning controls, fire prevention, awareness, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, will be applied to manage risk.

3. Best practice through building and sharing fire management knowledge

- Sound fire management policies, risk management planning, operations programs and procedures will be based on best available knowledge.
- Scientific research will be undertaken to continuously improve understanding of the effects of varying fire regimes on plants and animals, ecosystems, cultural heritage and natural resources; the factors contributing to fire behaviour; and the most cost effective fire management practices.
- Knowledge gained from research and operational practice will be shared to establish the NPWS as a 'learning organisation'.

4. Collaborating with partners and the community

- Fires are inevitable and do not recognise borders and boundaries. The factors influencing fire risks and impacts cross a range of physical, natural and social science disciplines, and therefore effective bushfire risk management involves a coordinated contribution from everyone.
- Coordination, cooperation and collaborative partnerships with communities, other fire authorities and other stakeholders will provide the foundation for NPWS management of fire.

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