

Opening Address

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I would like to begin by thanking Uncle Allen for his Welcome to Country address. I would like to pay my respects to the elders of Gadigal People both past and present. I would also like to acknowledge our fire Commissioner for the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Mr Shane Fitzsimmons here today and also the chairman of the Nature Conservation Council (NCC) of NSW Professor Don White, and the CEO, Mr Pepe Clarke. It is a pleasure to be here.

Firstly, I'd like to mention that I have been a strong advocate for creating ownership in the community. I come from an area in the far North, and in the past, I have seen divisions within my local community on how best to look after the community and how best to manage land, and that division is continuing to rise. Many of us here are aware of the ongoing debate in the Northern Rivers regarding coal seam gas. This is why I am here today, and it is very important to see a conference like this evolve, collect ideas, but more importantly bring people in from various works of life, various views, and melding them in to give some future direction.

When considering the theme of this conference, the inspirational message of strength, determination and ultimate success is apparent. Indeed, the message articulates a sound vision for governments, land owners, managers, non-government organisations such as

the NCC and the broader community regarding our goals in the face of the continued risk and threats of bushfire. It is a message of strength through unity, a message for us all to keep working together to achieve holistic fire management outcomes.

These outcomes will be achieved through healthier landscapes and cohesive communities that are more connected with their local environment, as well as programs by government, non-government organisations, fire and land managers, which support and foster environmental, social and cultural resilience. To this end, the NSW government collaborates with both government and non-government agencies and the community. For example, the NCC has provided valuable input to the Independent Hazard Reduction Audit Panel. This panel is responsible for conducting a review of the hazard reduction in New South Wales, and providing recommendations to the Minister of Police and Emergency Services on potential enhancements to hazard reduction in the state. To ensure that the RFS and other agencies are well equipped to achieve our 2021 targets. The NCC participated on the advisory group throughout the public consultation meetings; ensuring that matters such as community engagement were kept in the equation when it comes to developing strategies

for reducing the bushfire risk to the community.

Similarly, the RFS and the NCC continue to achieve results in their Hotspots Fire Project. It is a very popular program among rural landowners and farmers. In fact the project won the 2011 Australian Safer Communities Award in the education, training, and research section. It is a training program that provides landowners and managers with the skills and knowledge to participate in fire management, by building their capacity and confidence to manage hazard reduction burns on their property, in an ecologically sustainable manner.

The Hotspots Fire Project is now working with the NCC Firesticks Project, which aims to use fire to enhance the ecosystems' resilience within culturally connected landscapes, it integrates contemporary and Aboriginal fire practices, to create mosaics across the landscapes reducing wildfire risks and bringing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities together to achieve better results for land management.

The NCC also delivers the Bushfire Program, which is funded by the RFS. This program delivers community workshops centred on various themes including, preparing for fire, recovery of natural ecosystems following fire and the organisation of the biennial bushfire conference. The Bushfire Program also provides support for the training of regional NCC representatives, who sit on local Bush Fire Management Committees. The program's vision is to ensure that all bushfire management activities are ecologically sustainable

while protecting life and property. It has been actively involved in the evolution of fire management in NSW.

Another successful example in building resilience is the joint initiative of the RFS and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, called The Bushfire Resilience Project for Aboriginal Communities. This program is aimed at increasing the resilience of identified Aboriginal communities to the threats posed by fire, and is now entering its second phase. Its first phase was completed in late 2011 and achieved some very important outcomes, including the completion of bushfire risk assessment and reports for over thirty Aboriginal communities across NSW. The reports contain numerous recommendations for measures to better prepare Aboriginal communities for the threats posed by bushfires including the establishment of Asset Protection Zones, strategic hazard reduction burning, and the introduction of community education engagement programs, and the establishment of Neighbourhood Safer Places.

Many of these recommendations have already been implemented, and following further funding, phase two will see the implementation of further recommendations including:

- the employment of two project officers (one attached to the RFS, and the other attached to the Aboriginal Land Council);
- increasing of the number of Bush Fire survival Plans;
- assistance with the smoke alarm program; and

- providing training in preparing properties for bushfire;

Overall state recommendations include:

- increasing the number of identified Neighbourhood Safer Places,
- increasing the number of properties protected by hazard reduction works across all bushfire prone land tenures by 20 000 per year by 2016; and
- a 45% increase on the annual average area targeted by hazard reduction activities by 2016.

The work of the RFS in leading these and other initiatives are greatly assisted by the cooperation and commitment by organisations like the NCC and other stakeholders, who while having varying responsibilities and priorities are on the same page, as far as wanting to be part of the solution. That vision is reflected in the theme of this conference, and it represents a united effort within the local community.

At the recent fires down in Monaro, I personally witnessed an important activity taking place, which I believe to be a unique occurrence. Down there, the Forestry Corporation of NSW has a dog called Oscar. I am led to believe that Oscar is the only dog in the whole of Australia who can clearly identify where koalas are in various trees, within a certain area. I witnessed activities there which enabled both Forestry and a lot of the local communities to clearly identify populations of koalas. This allowed other agencies such as the RFS

to apply low intensity burns, therefore saving future colonies of Koalas. I was so excited about this that I began talking with my environmental groups in the Northern Rivers about it.

So in closing, I wish to congratulate the NCC for its tireless work and advocacy for the environment, and for organising this biennial event. This year's theme is 'Fire and Healthy Landscapes, Resilient Environment and Resilient People'. So it gives me much pleasure to declare the 9th Biennial Bushfire Conference open.

BIOGRAPHY

Mr Geoff Provest MP was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Police and Emergency Services in late 2011. He is a supporter of police and emergency service personnel at all levels and regularly goes out on night shifts with police and ambulance personnel in his Tweed electorate. Geoff is the Nationals member for Tweed. In Parliament he is known as 'Mr 100% for Tweed', because of his fierce advocacy for his constituents. He is a strong supporter of local volunteer community groups and small business families. Earlier, Geoff ran his own consultancy business, and before that he was the General Manager of the Tweed Heads Bowls Club. He has chaired the Regional Salvation Army Red Shield Appeal, the Regional Clean Up Australia Day Committee, Tweed Tourism and Tweed Neighbourhood Watch. His volunteer leadership has been recognised with numerous community awards, including the Centenary Medal and a NSW Premier's Award.