

South East Queensland Roadside Burning Project – Solutions that Benefit Community and Environment

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Abstract

In some parts of South East Queensland (SEQ) concerns have been voiced by private landholders wishing to conduct roadside hazard reduction burns (adjoining their property) with regards to a lack of process for acquiring permission from local councils. Currently, only one council (South Burnett) has a formal process to manage landholder requests. Some councils have formal roadside fuel management programs, but they don't generally include requests from landowners. Consequently, landowners in some council areas are becoming increasingly frustrated. At risk from a 'do nothing' approach are tracts of high biodiversity value vegetation, valuable agricultural land and resources, businesses, homes and infrastructure – notwithstanding relationships between council and landowners, cooperation and community resilience.

In 2012, the South East Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Consortium (SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium) were asked to investigate options for land managers to efficiently manage requests for roadside hazard reduction burns. In undertaking this project, the SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium workshopped the main issues surrounding roadside fuel management such as: resourcing, biodiversity, insurance and local laws. The SEQFBC suggested options for addressing these issues. Further consultation revealed two working models with great potential:

- 1. the Coordinated Agency Model (comprising a proactive and cooperative approach between Toowoomba Regional Council, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Department of Transport and Main Roads and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service); and*
- 2. the South Burnett Model (including a process for landholders to apply for and conduct roadside burns whilst covered by council insurance). These models are described in greater detail in a final report that has been provided to all councils and relevant land management agencies within SEQ.*

The SEQFBC concluded that whilst the South Burnett Model was working very well, and council should be congratulated for their forthright approach, the Coordinated Agency Model offered the greatest potential for addressing the issue whilst minimising insurance risk to councils.

INTRODUCTION

Established in 1998, the South East Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Consortium (SEQFBC) is a network of land managers and stakeholders devoted to

providing a coordinated response and best practice recommendations for fire management, fire ecology and the conservation of biodiversity in the SEQ

region through education, community engagement and applied research.

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

In 2011, in response to community concern and lack of an identified process, SEQ Catchments (the natural resource management body for SEQ), considered a proposed policy paper on the issue of fuel load management on roadside reserves (Dale, 2011). Specifically, the paper dealt with the issue of private landholders wishing to burn council or state managed roadsides (adjoining their properties), for hazard reduction purposes.

In recognising that this was a critical community, fire and biodiversity issue, SEQ Catchments asked the SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium to manage the project. The objectives of the project are to:

- engage with land manager stakeholders to identify the main issues and any existing procedures; and
- outline existing procedures, how they may be utilised and encourage adoption.

NB: Any proposed procedures must align with the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) 'Permit to Light Fire' system.

Two major stakeholder consultation workshops were undertaken. The first was a land manager workshop, organized by the SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium. It was agreed that the four key issues facing land managers are: biodiversity values, responsibility and funding, insurance and local laws. This workshop featured a successful program

underway at South Burnett Regional Council, called the South Burnett Model. The other, was a road corridor management workshop, organised by the Upper Brisbane Region Catchment Network (UBRCN). This workshop identified that a successful coordinated agency approach existed in the Toowoomba Regional Council area, the Coordinated Agency Model.

THE SOUTH BURNETT MODEL

The process underway at South Burnett Regional Council (RC) requires landholders to complete an application form, council then assesses the application and depending upon various restrictions (e.g. the biodiversity values described below) may grant permission, with a set of strict conditions. The landholder must obtain a valid 'Permit to Light Fire' from the QFRS for their land and South Burnett RC obtain one for the roadside verge. As part of this process, landholders are covered by council insurance.

South Burnett RC used various mapping resources (e.g. Regional Ecosystem mapping) and ecological burning guidelines to identify areas of potentially high conservation value. This process identified six nationally and state listed species and communities in their region. Council then commissioned a study to map these species and communities and they also assessed all roads with a medium - very high fire risk. This information was used to develop a list of roads that do not contain high biodiversity values. These areas have pre approval for fuel load reduction burning for 12 months. All other roads are deemed to contain high biodiversity value and require assessment by council. The South Burnett Model is working very well

for the land managers and residents of the South Burnett region and council should be congratulated for taking a proactive approach to such an important issue.

THE COORDINATED AGENCY MODEL

The Coordinated Agency Model (Fig. 1) for roadside burning was developed through collaboration between key officers from the QFRS, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), Department of Transport and Main Roads (DTMR) and Toowoomba Regional Council (RC). Initially officers met through their participation in the Regional Inter-departmental Committee (RIDC) on Bushfire for the QFRS Southwest Region and ongoing interaction saw relationships develop over time.

Requests to conduct a burn are received by the QFRS via local Rural Fire Brigades and/or are assessed as a result of predetermined regional priorities.

Importantly, this process allows private landholders to make a request via their Rural Fire Brigades. The Coordinated Agency Model addresses the issue of biodiversity by including QPWS in the assessment phase. It also deals with insurance concerns by having QFRS staff and volunteers conduct burns (see below).

The Coordinated Agency Model has only been operating at its present level since September 2011, but in this short time has demonstrated enormous success. In theory, it can be applied to all local government areas across SEQ, provided key staff can be identified and there is a willingness to work together. It provides an excellent opportunity for local governments, other land managers and residents to achieve efficient and safe roadside corridor hazard reduction burns, whilst maintaining community trust and biodiversity values.

Coordinated Agency Model Flow Chart: Summary of Process

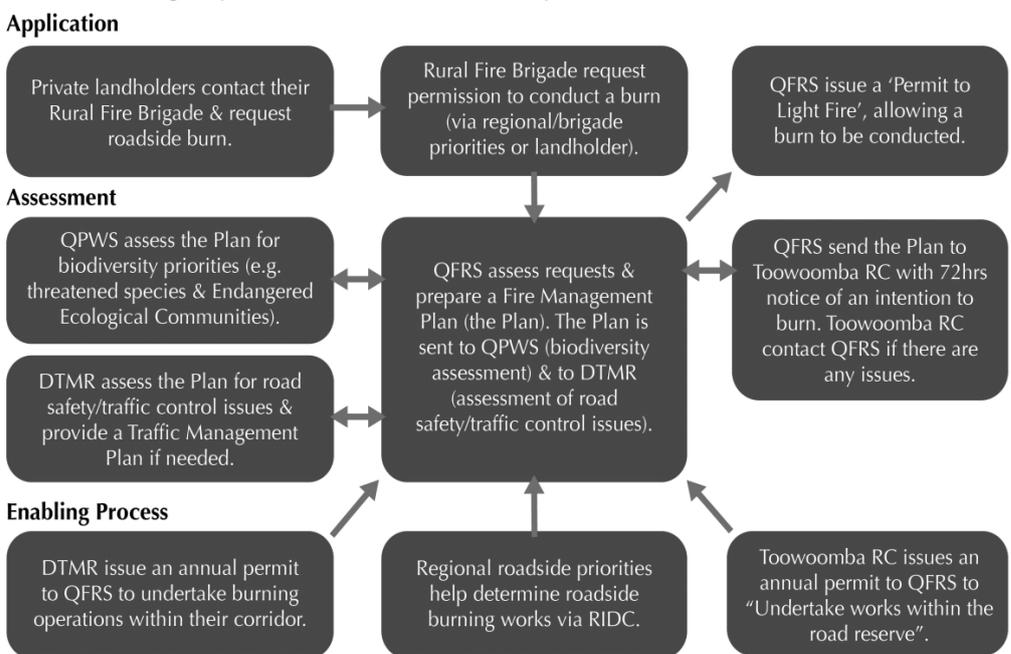


Fig. 1: A summary of process for the processes involved in conducting roadside burning using the Coordinated Agency Model.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium has provided the project report to all local governments, relevant state agencies, Powerlink Queensland and the SEQC Members Association and are currently liaising with interested councils. The SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium will also be promoting the report through conferences and various networks, including RIDCs and Fire Management Groups. To date, it can be reported that Somerset Regional Council (RC) are currently working with relevant authorities to finalise the Coordinated Agency Model for their region, this is a significant achievement and Somerset RC and partners are to be congratulated for undertaking this process. Progress on this outcome and the project will be presented at the spring 2013 SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium forum, being held at Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens on the 7th of November 2013. It is hoped that this report will encourage other land managers to assess their situation and make informed decisions regarding roadside burning. Interested local government or state agencies are encouraged to contact the SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium at www.fireandbiodiversity.org.au.

REFERENCES

Dale, J. (2011) *Proposed Roadside Burning Protocol*. SEQ Catchments Members Association Policy Proposal.

AUTHORSHIP

This document was prepared by Dr Samantha Lloyd, Manager of the SEQ Fire and Biodiversity Consortium. The information in this document has been prepared with due diligence and is based on the best available information at the

time of publication. It does not constitute professional legal or legislative advice and land managers are advised to seek legal advice on this issue if required. All planned burning should be conducted in accordance with relevant laws and with a valid QFRS 'Permit to Light Fire'. The views presented in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of our supporting organisations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Sam Lloyd has 13 years experience in ecology, fire, entomology and natural resource management. She undertook a Bachelor of Science (Biology) at the University of Wollongong (UoW) and graduated with 1st Class Honours in 1998. She undertook a PhD in pollination ecology at the UoW, graduating in 2006. Sam has managed the South East Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Consortium since 2010.