

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Opening address - Using fire for community and environmental outcomes

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[Link to slides](#)

I'd like to acknowledge my presence here today on the traditional lands of the Cadigal people, of the Eora Nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and to other Aboriginal people in the room and acknowledge the significant role the Parks Service plays in managing land that's of importance for Aboriginal people.

The National Parks and Wildlife Services are a significant land manager in New South Wales. We're responsible for about 9% of the State which is a lot of land. We are one of the four recognised fire authorities in New South Wales under the Rural Fires Act, so we have very particular responsibilities for managing bushfire and its associated impacts in partnership with other agencies. Fire management is led in New South Wales very much by the RFS but we're part of that framework. We're also fundamentally committed to conserving biodiversity through the use of fire in our lands through ecological burning and for the protection of conversation and of natural cultural heritage values including threatened species both on and off Park and Reserve.

We're talking at this gathering about the use of fire for community and environmental outcomes and one of the aspects of this I want to touch on briefly is the change of the Service from fire fighters to fire lighters. The last 15 years in the Parks Service, has had probably the most fundamental shift in our approach to fire management that the organisation's been through. Bob Conroy who's sitting in the room here probably drove that more than anybody, so I'm talking in front of the person who was behind that change, but there's an inordinate cultural shift that has gone on in the NPWS and I just want to touch on that very briefly. That shift is driven by two documents, the first one up there on the slide is called Living with Fire. It's a 10 year plan that maps out our agency's approach to fire in New South Wales. It comes on the back of a fundamental shift in our view of the role of fire. If I look at when I started 27 years ago we managed 2% of New South Wales. We were a very small agency and most of our efforts were very much focused on firefighting. I would argue we were responding to other people's efforts at managing our landscape for us – essentially responding to wildfire. We were a fire fighting agency who looked at the introduction of fire (through prescribed burning) as something we did in our spare time between really big fire seasons. And often when those seasons got very big and very large we very rarely had the energy or the effort to introduce fire into the landscape.

We're now managing 9% of New South Wales and if you go into the Eastern Division where most of the people in New South Wales live, most of our regions are looking at between 15 and 25% of the landscape is now within Service lands, protected lands, so our responsibilities to human life and safety

are significant. There's no doubt if you read the Living with Fire strategy it's driven by a need to protect life and property. We have a fundamental responsibility to minimise the impact of fire on the people that live in the landscapes around us and that drives what we do. We are a conservation agency but we have to ensure that people's lives and properties survive the experience.

As our responsibilities grew and the science of fire thresholds grew we started to determine that we needed a clearer strategy of how we were going to manage for biodiversity in the landscape and how we were going to manage for risk. That resulted in the development of fire management plans and every reserve in New South Wales now is covered by a Fire Reserve Strategy which sets very clear thresholds for what we expect to achieve in that landscape and that is very much about managing both ecological outcomes and safety outcomes.

When we wrote those strategies for the state, when we sat down and worked out how we'd implement those strategies, it was pretty clear we were under-resourced to do that job at hand. The other thing that was happening at the same time is we came through the back of a number of very large significant fire events and particularly a couple of the big fires in Victoria. The science was talking about mega fires, so conservation managers and fire authorities in Australia were starting to struggle with very large fire events that were coalescing and causing significant fires across the landscape with impacts on human life and impacts on ecology.

A program was taken to Government, the Enhanced Bushfire Management Plan, which was a separate funding program to basically lift our game. What lifting our game meant in this context was a whole bunch of extra resources focused on hazard reduction burning, prescribed burning, with our teams actually introducing fire into the landscape. If you look at the graph (slide 4) we had a long term average in New South Wales Parks of burning around 50,000 hectares per annum on a rolling average and that varies with seasons but we were fairly stable.

If you look at the last five years since the increase in funding you can see a fairly radical shift in where we're going. In the last three years of the program we've just passed the half million hectare mark on Park in New South Wales and we have a long term goal of 135,000 hectares as a rolling average for prescribed burning on Parks in the state and you'll see in that year in 2012/13 when we had a good dry season everybody jumped in and we burnt an awful lot. This year we've had a wet year, it's been very difficult but we've still managed to burn about 110,000 hectares for the year.

So, we have gone very much from being fire fighters in the Parks Service to fire lighters. What has that meant for ecological restoration? In terms of our thresholds just trying to understand what that's meant for the landscape, we've set ourselves goals. Those black bars on the graph, you'll see (slide 5) we didn't want to go over 35% underburnt, over 35% too frequently burnt and we aim to have at least 50% of our estate within threshold. As you can see we're well within those targets. Very small areas of land long unburnt and they've changed quite dramatically as we've introduced fire into long unburnt landscapes with a bit more confidence. You know we still have close to 20% of our areas over-burnt and we still deal with wildfire. We don't have control of the fire in the landscape, but you can see we're looking at over 75% of our reserves within the fire thresholds that we're setting.

There are two things to take out of that. We for the first time have clear targets of how we're trying to see the landscape in New South Wales across the reserve system and we're starting to get close to achieving those targets, so we're feeling fairly comfortable about where we are.

What that's meant is there's resources and there's people. The fundamental change in the organisation that I've seen is that the culture's changed. We are now prepared to be fire lighters but more importantly we've got staff with the skills, experience and knowledge, which I would argue we'd lost over about a decade. Our trained staff know how to introduce fire into the landscape in a way that's effective and how to do it in a way that's safe which is a fundamental issue for us in our firefighting activities.

If you're burning 135,000 hectares in prescribed burning on a rolling average per year and probably another 100,000 or 200,000 in wildfires, maybe 300,000 or 400,000 in a bad season, you're exposing your staff to an inordinate amount of fire risk and managing this is a major part of our focus. Hazard reduction burning is putting lives at risk by choice as opposed to in response to an emergency event so it very much changes the responsibilities on staff and everybody in this room I suppose in the decisions they make about fire lighting. Anyone who's had to attend a funeral or go to a family member and explain a death in a fire knows how significant fire risk is. It's become a major part of our business but I think we've become safer and we've become more focused and it's about the ability to make choices about when we introduce fire and how we do it.

Now some of these areas are really large and showy, like the Jounama pine plantation in Kosciuszko, which is a very large pine plantation. Recently we introduced a very, very hot fire into an area that had been logged and the timber was sold. The aim was to restore the landscape, and all we usually get back in these pine landscapes is more pines in mass. This was a very, very hot high intensity fire which involved the use of the thing called 'the dragon' which essentially throws napalm out of a helicopter to ensure you get fire intensity. Now this is something that the Tasmanians have done for a while to be able to burn their wet forests in the south. It's the first time we'd used this tool in New South Wales and I suppose it's a fairly dramatic example of how fire can be used to achieve an ecological outcome. You needed a really intense fire to kill the seed source in this landscape and try and encourage the regeneration of native species.

Many of the other restoration programs are far less showy than this but just as significant. Some of them are opportunistic. We had two very hot wild fires in Bundjalung National Park four years apart and on the back of that there's been a very extensive bitou bush control program. You know bitou thrives post-fire event and unfortunately it loves the fire, it germinates like mad in an ash bed. We had two hot fires back to back, we realised that the vast majority of bitou seed which had had 30 years of accumulation in that park had germinated and a very extensive aerial spraying program over two or three years on the back of that, that's put a real dent in that program.

There's lots of examples now where we're using fire in a similar way dealing with coastal lantana and dealing with the issues of bell miner associated dieback in some of the landscapes in the north. Interestingly it was a bell miner associated dieback fire that resulted in the loss of one of our fire fighters when a tree fell on him. So none of these decisions are easy when you take decisions to introduce fire into natural areas but it's critical if we're going to manage for ecological health in the long run. Looking at the conference and some of the things that have been touched on there are Service people highlighting some of the ecological restoration efforts that we're doing with fire currently.

There's three key things I want to finish on. One is that we are still very much focused on prescribed burning to protect life and property and as long as we manage so much of New South Wales that will be a priority. We've developed a sound and I would argue rigorous strategic framework for that decision making to ensure we have some confidence that we're not damaging the landscape in our efforts. In many of our landscapes the introduction of fire more positively, more actively, by the Parks Services has improved our ecological outcomes. We have more areas that are within threshold and as an agency we feel like we have gone from being fire takers to fire makers. We feel like we have more control over the fire thresholds in our Parks, they're not being set by those around us, they're increasingly being set by us, and that was always the goal of Bob's program.

Looking at your conference program, one thing that I think we are weak is that we've been slower to come to cultural burning. We have formal relationships with Aboriginal communities over about 30% of the lands that we manage in New South Wales and within about two years it'll be over 50% so we have a very strong understanding of our responsibility to the traditional owners of this landscape about working with them on country because in many cases we have the last country left that looks like it did traditionally that Aboriginal people can operate in. Cultural burning is something we're still slow to come to. Some of that's a reflection I think of the knowledge in New South Wales. In many cases Parks and the local communities are working together to get a better understanding of what the historical fire patterns pre-contact were, because we didn't ask a lot and we didn't write a lot down but in many areas there's traditional knowledge that we can draw on. I know in the west a lot of that work's being done and you've seen more from some of the conference speakers but it's an area I think the Parks Service needs to do more in.

In conclusion, introducing fire into landscapes in a way that protects the community and delivers ecological outcomes is a key focus for the agency, it's something we'll do more of. We have a skilled, stable and capable workforce who are more able and more willing to do that than we have ever been before. We're better able now to learn from conferences like this, to learn from the input from science, from traditional owners and from other communities. We're more willing to use fire for ecological purposes and as we get on top of our strategic need to protect property we're going to be in a far better place to make ecological decisions around how we manage fire in the landscape in the future.