

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Address and welcome – Day 2

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[Link to Slides](#)

Welcome everyone to what will be session three of the Nature Conservation Council's 2017 Bushfire Conference. My name is Naomi Stephens and I am the Director of Fire and Incident Management in New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service within the Office of Environment and Heritage. I'd like to apologise for not being here yesterday. The program looked great and I saw that a couple of OEH people were also speaking, who I would really like to have heard, but I'm very glad to be here today. I note that session 2 had a theme of 'Fire, restoration and biodiversity' and see that these important topics, their challenges and interactions, will continue to be explored over the course of today by speakers from a range of backgrounds and perspectives.

Session 3, with the theme of 'Fire and fauna', and this year's conference theme of 'Fire, fauna and ferals', are certainly close to the heart of those who work for National Parks and Wildlife Service (Slide 2). New South Wales is one of the most fire prone places in the world and its National Parks provide habitat to a unique range of fauna and flora, including pest species and feral animals, creating significant challenges for us in managing the State's large and diverse park system. Managing over 800 reserves, covering more than seven million hectares, approximately nine percent of New South Wales, brings with it a lot of neighbour interface, so from backyards to bush is also something staff working in National Parks can strongly relate to.

Firstly, I would like to talk briefly about National Parks and Wildlife Service's role and contribution to bushfire management in New South Wales, starting with its role under *The Rural Fires Act*. I know this is covering old ground for some of you who are here, who have probably heard it before, but it is critical to understand the legislative context, to understand how National Parks operates in relation to bushfire management (Slide 3). OEH National Parks is both a public authority and a firefighting authority under *The Rural Fires Act*. As a public authority, National Parks has statutory obligations to take steps to prevent the occurrence of bushfires and to minimise the danger of the spread of bushfires on or from land under its management. As a firefighting authority, National Parks assists other fire agencies and the community in the management of bushfires working together to prepare for and respond to bushfires.

National Parks is an active participant of the New South Wales Bushfire Coordinating Committee and at a local level we have representatives on most of the Bush Fire Management Committees across the State, participating wherever fire management is an issue on National Parks reserves. Consistent with the legislation, our primary fire management objective is to protect the community from bushfires and we do this through cooperative and coordinated arrangements with other fire agencies. Another key objective for National Parks under its own legislation is to manage fire regimes to maintain and enhance biodiversity. To illustrate how National Parks uses fire to benefit both communities and the environment, I'd like to talk about our Enhanced Bushfire Management Program (Slide 4), which we refer to as the EBMP.

This program is part of the New South Wales Government's response to the 2009 Victorian bushfires and part of a range of actions to increase the State's resilience to the impact of climate change. The program commenced in 2011 and following a successful first six years has recently been extended to 2022. The program provides for additional funding that enables National Park to do three key things: increase hazard reduction activity, improve bushfire response capability on parks and reserves, and enhance research capacity. In fulfilling our legislative requirements, a vital part of our program is ensuring our management of fire benefits the environment and its ecosystem values and conserves environmental and heritage values. National Parks aims to maintain and enhance biodiversity in its reserves through the combined use of prescribed fire that is within vegetation biodiversity thresholds, alongside targeted threatened species management and integrated pest and weed management where appropriate.

The agency's hazard reduction program is derived from the reserve Fire Management Strategies that we have prepared for each of our reserves. National Parks uses fire interval guidelines and biodiversity thresholds to guide decisions about when areas can be burnt without compromising biodiversity. The analysis of fire frequency across the landscape using biodiversity thresholds is an important step in programming hazard reduction burns and helps fire managers minimise impacts on biodiversity when determining what part of the landscape to apply fire to. Whilst these guidelines and thresholds help National Parks to manage fire for biodiversity at a landscape scale, another important OEH program, Save our Species, known as the SOS Program, presents opportunities to manage fire at a site-specific scale (Slide 5).

Relevant to our theme of fire, restoration and biodiversity, the Save our Species Program is \$100-million investment in threatened species conservation. As you would be well aware, many species and endangered ecological communities require particular fire regimes or fire exclusion to retain resilient local populations or communities. The EBMP and the SOS programs present opportunities for these different areas of OEH to work more closely to achieve mutually beneficial program outcomes, including SOS sites and species streams potentially being integrated into burn programs. It is early days on this work but it is one of the current focuses of the interaction between the two programs. The third component of the Enhanced Bushfire Management Program is enhanced bushfire research capacity. This work is pretty close to my heart, I must say.

OEH currently invests in research by in-house researchers, one of whom, Liz Tasker, you have heard from already at this conference. We also invest in the research program of the Bushfire Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre through membership in the Centre and through an extensive commitment of time as lead end user for a cluster research group. In addition, we have had an ongoing research partnership with the Rural Fire Service and the Centre for Environment Risk Management of Bushfires at the University of Wollongong. As you can see, OEH has a strong ongoing commitment to bushfire research and the Government's recent decision to increase the funding available to OEH for bushfire research has led to a decision to establish a new bushfire research hub (Slide 6). The hub is an outcome of a recent evaluation of OEH's investment in research relating to fire ecology and management.

A review of the existing OEH research program by Dr Dick Williams found that whilst the existing co-investment model was effective and should be maintained, enhanced research capacity was needed. The hub is expected to focus on three key nodes or themes which are described on the slide behind me (Slide 6). Research in these nodes will address a range of the immediate and medium-term objectives in the bushfire management program logic that has been developed by OEH and will also underpin our efforts to achieve long-term objective as outlined in National Parks' 10-year fire management strategy, Living with Fire. I brought a copy of that document with me. Some of you may not have seen it because it's already six years old. It's a really important document to us and we refer to it in everything that we do in bushfire management. I would definitely suggest that those people who are interested have a look at that [on our website](#).

The hub will be overseen by an expert steering committee with representatives from OEH and RFS and with independent specialist fire management and ecology experience. Together, work in these research nodes will provide information necessary for OEH to evaluate the relative benefits of various fire risk mitigation options in landscape scale fire management. Those benefits will include those to ecological and cultural values.

Now, to provide an example of OEH research work on the ground, I'd like to talk about the Wambelong fire of January/February 2013 that burnt over 40,000 hectares, including most of the Warrumbungle National Park (Slide 7). Some of the fire area was burnt at extreme severity, leading to concern that significant losses of biodiversity were likely. A multidisciplinary Warrumbungle fire project was established in 2014 to assess the impact of fire across four broad areas: biodiversity, cultural heritage, soils and water, and fire behaviour, with additional contributions from citizen science and knowledge management.

This project was a combined OEH Science Division and National Parks effort and has produced tangible outcomes for land management staff on the ground. The successful consultation process with local on-ground staff helped to ensure the projects were relevant to the concerns of the community and future management of the reserve. This communication engagement culminated in presentations of preliminary findings to National Parks staff and community representatives and a weekend of guided workshops across the themes on Park in April 2016.

I mentioned earlier that alongside the protection of environmental values, National Parks' fire management objectives include the protection of heritage values. A big part of that is Aboriginal cultural values and you heard yesterday from Den Barber how the revival of Aboriginal cultural burning can be used to restore country (Slide 8).

National Parks recognises that Aboriginal people's use of fire is important to enhance and protect natural and cultural values, to express and maintain culture, kinship and identity and to continue to share knowledge and practice. Although it has already been presented by Oliver Costello from National Parks yesterday, I would like to briefly recap on a recent achievement by National Parks and OEH here. I am really proud to be able to talk about our recently developed National Parks Cultural Fire Management Policy. This project was on my work program for five years and every year I made efforts to progress the project and I failed. It was a huge bugbear to me. I talked about it wherever I went and I said to people, "This is a really important project and we need to make some progress on this," but I wasn't able to make any progress at all.

Then about 12 months ago, in an example of how working collaboratively can achieve things that would never have been achieved outside the environment, staff from five key areas across Parks and OEH got together and with those people in the room we were able to map a path and then progress the project to achieve a very good outcome. This policy and supporting guidelines aim to balance National Parks' responsibility for safety in a fire management context with the socially inclusive methods traditionally used by Aboriginal people. In sharing our knowledge and abilities while planning, conducting and monitoring burns together, we will build capacity and respect between Aboriginal communities, fire agencies and the broader community. As Oliver would have spoken about yesterday, the Policy is in draft and we are undertaking consultation with stakeholders. We will undertake a review in 12 months to ensure that those views are included. We have actually already had interest in the draft from Fire & Rescue New South Wales and from land management agencies across Australia and internationally.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Oliver Costello, Max Beukers and the rest of the project team on the work they did. I'd also like to mention the paper by Max Beukers in the session this morning on People, Bushfire, House and Koalas on the Far South Coast of New South Wales and the contribution of Peter Croft to the paper on Habitat features in relation to disturbance by fire being presented by John Hunter. OEH is proud of the involvement of its officers in work in this area, even when they challenge us. Fauna and fire continues to be an area requiring a concerted effort to build knowledge and building knowledge will assist us in doing a better job to protect those values.

In closing, I'd like to say our National Parks represent some of our most valued areas of public land. They protect native plants and animals, conserve natural beauty and offer many opportunities for recreation and enjoyment and they preserve cultural values. As I said at the start, actively managing for fire, fauna and feral forms a large part of what we do in National Parks to ensure those values remain. Thank you very much.