

Conference Proceedings – Speaker Transcript

Address and welcome

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Good morning. It's so wonderful to see all of you. I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners on whose land we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and thank Uncle Madden for such a warm Welcome to Country.

I'd like to thank you very much, Stuart, for your fantastic presentation. I, too, would really like to recognise the longstanding and close partnership that NCC has with the Rural Fire Service and all the great work that we're able to do together. So thank you.

Welcome to everyone and thank you so much for coming. It's absolutely fantastic to see you all here and to see such a wealth and diversity of knowledge in the room, and also to see all of the different partnerships between NCC and different organisations.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the work of the volunteers and the member groups who, over the years, have supported NCC in our programs. I would particularly like to mention the NCC Bush Fire Management Committee representatives, many of whom are here today and many of whom have been stalwarts of the conservation movement for many years and have spent decades working in this space. Several of our bushfire representatives have been active since the Rural Fire Service commenced and the Bush Fire Management Committees formed. So I really would like to recognise all of their work over the years. They certainly have seen many changes to how bushfire is addressed in New South Wales.

This conference is a continuation of NCC's work in bushfire management and making sure that we are working to look after the environment as well as life and property in our programs. We've had 22 years of bushfire program conferences and 37 years of the NCC Bushfire Management Program. There is quite a lot of history there and I'd like to recognise everyone in the room that's been part of that.

As I mentioned, the bushfire program has been active in promoting sustainable bushfire practices since 1979. I'd like to recognise Rob Palin, who is the current Chair of the NCC Bush Fire Advisory Committee. I think many of you know Rob as he's been involved in this work since the late 1990s. Rob, I'd really like to thank you for all of your work.

I'm just going to take a few minutes to talk about NCC's contribution to fire management here in New South Wales. We have initiated community based and policy focussed programs over a long period of time that have helped to progress substantial improvements in protecting life, property and the environment. The influence of our bushfire programs has been pivotal in bridging contrasting views on bushfire management. Our programs emphasise that fire is a natural disturbance in the Australian landscape that needs to be managed appropriately so that life and property is protected, whilst avoiding unacceptable impacts to the environment.

Specifically, we have increased the acceptance by conservationists of the role of appropriate fire regimes in ecosystem management, along with the importance of protecting life and property. We have highlighted the need for fire and land managers to consistently consider environmental factors when planning risk mitigation strategies.

And we have provided information and input into the drafting of the *Rural Fires Act (1997)*, the Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code of 2006 and the report '*Enhancing Hazard Reduction in New South Wales*', which formed the basis of the Rural Fires Amendment Bill of 2013. We initiate and organise community focussed workshops, like the Hotspots project that was mentioned earlier, that really do encourage people in high risk bushfire areas to think more about how fire affects the natural environment as well as their own built environment.

Recognition of environmental matters has been a long term core focus of NCC's bushfire programs. Our involvement in the drafting of the *Rural Fires Act (1997)* was based on the conservation policies that NCC and its member groups held at the time. Today, the basis of those policies holds strong. We have a bushfire policy which has evolved over time, but retains the same core principles. Good fire management policy and practice can include both effective risk mitigation and positive environmental management outcomes. These goals do not have to be mutually exclusive.

We believe strongly that cooperation between land and fire managers and conservation organisations is essential to achieve effective management. Collaboration means each of us sharing our strengths and improving on our weaknesses so that we can work together to achieve better bushfire management outcomes.

I believe that this is extremely important because we all now clearly understand that bushfire management is everyone's shared responsibility. It's not just for firefighting authorities such as the Rural Fire Service and Fire & Rescue New South Wales or for public land managers such as Forestry Corporation and National Parks & Wildlife Service. These agencies do a fantastic job, but cannot do it on their own. We've shown that we are much stronger when we work together to achieve improved outcomes.

I would again like to recognise that NCC bushfire management committee representatives continue to play a critical role in helping to foster and maintain this positive situation, helping Bush Fire Management Committees maintain a balance between the need to do as much as practical to reduce risk to life and property and the need to consider ecological values and landscape constraints.

Now to focus on the themes of this conference. This conference builds on previous NCC bushfire conferences by exploring how we can move forward, as a community, on current fire management approaches that aim to minimise environmental harm and towards approaches that help us to protect, support and restore ecological values.

We have four themes that we will be exploring over the next two days. Our first theme is Buildings and backyards for people, plants and animals; risk, resilience and adaptation. With this we will explore how community acceptance of fire as an integral part of our natural systems can be supported and broadened. The second theme is using fire for restoration: how is fire being used for ecological restoration and integrated with other land management practices? Thirdly, fire and fauna: what has been learnt about the interactions of fire, fauna and habitat and how is this knowledge influencing on-ground management practices? And finally, fire, weeds and ferals: how can the interactions of fire, weeds and feral animal species be managed most effectively?

I would like to take a moment to speak a bit more broadly about NCC's Healthy Ecosystems program. We've had a Healthy Ecosystems Program for many years that includes some of the programs that have already been mentioned, but I'd like to lay them all out for you. We work to assist landholders and communities to understand and use fire as an integrated component of land management programs, to help rehabilitate degraded landscapes, to restore ecological integrity and to reinstate resilience into the community and environment.

We have four areas that we work in. We have the Hotspots fire project that was mentioned earlier and our Bushfire Program, which is organising this conference. We also have our Firesticks project and our Coldstream project. You will have the opportunity to hear more about some of those specific programs over the next two days. But I would especially like to recognise the work of Waminda Parker, who I think many of you know and who is the director of the Healthy Ecosystems program at NCC. She has done a fantastic job in growing the program and really expanding it over many years. So I'd like to recognise Waminda and also all of the staff that work across those different projects for their ongoing efforts.

In closing, I would like to again thank you all so very much for coming. I welcome you to really enjoy your next two days. Take full advantage of all of the fantastic presentations that we are about to hear and, of course, all of the networking opportunities that you'll have in the breaks and over the dinner. So really do enjoy yourself. Take away some fantastic knowledge to bring back to your communities and your work.

I would like to end by thanking a couple of specific people. Again our Platinum sponsors of the conference, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, Travers Bushfire and Ecology and, of course, the Office of Environment & Heritage. Thank you so very much for your support. I would like to close by really thanking the team that made this conference possible, Michelle, Greg and Micaela. They have been working tirelessly to put this conference together and I would like to thank them for their efforts. So, thank you all and have a fantastic conference.