

Bushfire Update

Bushfires continue to be a major cause for concern for Association members. Apart from responding to the immediate challenges presented by bushfire outbreaks, volunteer bush fire brigades have been extremely busy responding to the reforms that have taken place over the last 10-12 years.

In the early 1990s, the NSW Government adopted a series of recommendations from several bushfire coronial inquiries, which resulted in the multi-brigade system operated by individual councils. In 1997, a new piece of legislation was introduced to replace the *Bush Fires Act 1949*. The *Rural Fires Act 1997* was proclaimed in September 1997 and is administered by the RFS. Under the new legislation, a number of new processes were introduced, including the formation of Bush Fire Management Committees to oversee the development of Bush Fire Risk Management Plans.

NSW Farmers Association, along with the RFS, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Environment and Conservation, Forests NSW, NSW Fire Brigades, Local Government and Nature Conservation Council of NSW, has been involved in a number of important reviews over the last 12 months. It is important that members are aware of these reviews, and what they mean for their local community.

Bush Fire Management Committees

BFMCs are statutory committees established under the provisions of the *Rural Fires Act 1997* and the *Rural Fires Regulation 2002*. They and their predecessors (the District Fire Committees and Regional Prevention Associations) have provided valuable advice and assistance with the coordination and mitigation of bushfires. BFMCs provide a forum for cooperative and coordinated bushfire management and community involvement in the bush fire risk management process within their respective Rural Fire Districts. They also assist the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee by drawing its attention to, or to the attention of public authorities in the district, any matter they consider relevant to the protection of life, property and the environment. These Committees are responsible for developing Risk Management Plans (see below). The structure, management, administration, community representation, resourcing and functionality of the Committees was recently reviewed by the Rural Fire Service, leading to voluntary amalgamations in some areas. The Association is currently developing a database of NSW Farmers Association representatives on local Bush Fire Management Committees to ensure that appropriate support can be provided to our representatives.

Bush Fire Risk Management Plans

The purpose of these plans is to protect life, economic assets (eg buildings, stock, crops and forests), and natural and cultural heritage. The Plans identify the risk rating and management strategies for each area. Many of the original Plans were developed in-house and were not regarded by members as being user-friendly. However, the five-yearly review process that applies to all Plans (twelve are currently under review) has provided an opportunity for members to positively influence these documents. The new Plans must outline the areas that local people consider to be at risk, what they value as assets, their ideas on what should be done to manage that risk and their knowledge of local fire history and fire paths.

➤ Canobolas Pilot

As a result of the 2001-02 Goobang fires, a process was developed locally to develop a risk plan that was tenure blind across the landscape to identify fire risk and hazard reduction activities that needed to be carried out to protect local assets. This resulted in the Canobolas Pilot, which is now in full operation and has been adopted as an official Risk Management Plan. The Canobolas Pilot highlighted to the RFS the importance of community consultation at the local level, and the importance of including Land Management Zones in the plans. This has resulted in a more streamlined approach to hazard reduction work across the state.

Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code

The original Code began operation in 2003 following concerns that environmental regulations hampered hazard reduction. Instead of landholders having to negotiate their way through a raft of environmental legislation in order to carry out hazard reduction activities, the Code enables RFS officers to conduct a free environmental assessment using the Code when landholders apply for a Bush Fire Hazard Reduction Certificate (NB: a Certificate is not required for existing consents such as maintaining backyard lawns or regular agricultural activities such as stubble burning, burning diseased crops, orchard pruning and grazing). The first Code covered hazard reduction only around houses and other buildings. However, the new Code, which took effect 1 February 2006, also includes broader hazard reduction work in forests, farms and reserves. This increases the area covered by this streamlined process from about 10% of NSW to most of the bush land in NSW.

Association Contacts

The Association's Rural Affairs Committee remains closely involved in all bushfires matters. Please contact the Association on 1300 794 000 if you require additional information on any bushfire matters.