



CONSERVATION COUNCIL

ACT REGION

Submission: Strategic Bushfire Management Plan 4

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The **Conservation Council ACT Region** is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. We have been the community's voice for the environment in the Canberra region since 1979. Our mission is to achieve an ecologically sustainable and zero net carbon society through advocacy, education, research and engagement with community, the private sector and with government.

We represent more than 45 member groups who in turn represent over 15,000 supporters. We harness the collective expertise and experience of our member groups and networks. We work collaboratively with Government, business and the community to achieve the highest quality environment for Canberra and its region.

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Strategic Bushfire Management Plan 4

Introduction

The Conservation Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan 4 (SBMP4), and the engagement opportunities that have been offered throughout the planning process to date. We note that the protection against bushfire in the ACT is integrally linked to the management of non-urban areas including parks and reserves, and the protection of ecological values.

1. Increase risks related to climate change

The Conservation Council welcomes the section “Future Challenges”, which clearly identifies the risks that changes in our climate will bring both to the risk of fires starting but also the impediments to utilising prescribed burns for fuel management in nature reserves. It is clearly articulated that changes to our climate will reduce the windows of time available for fuel reduction burning, but also the increased risk of unpredictable weather events that might occur during prescribed burning activities.

Section 7 of SBMP4 highlights that prescribed burning “is at the forefront of landscape fire management practice nationally”, and identifies that “planned fire management will be used as the principal management tool to reduce bushfire risk.” SBMP4 outlines other strategies, such as slashing and grazing, which are also proposed to establish Strategic Fire-fighting Advantage Zones across the landscape. While the Plan notes again in Section 7 that climate risks will lessen the window available for fuel reduction burning, and makes fuel reduction burns generally more difficult, it isn’t made clear how these increased risks will be managed. **It would be useful to outline what strategies and contingencies could be put in place to ensure the ongoing benefits of fire reduction burns in this changing context.**

2. Management of ecological values

The Conservation Council welcomes the SBMP4’s acknowledgment that biodiversity and cultural heritage are assets, and the Plan demonstrates a strong awareness of the value of the environment throughout the document. We particularly support the commitment to Adaptive Management for Climate Change, and the ongoing research and evaluation that will accompany this, both in regards to mitigating the risks of fire and the predictions of fire behaviour in the context of the evolving climate. We also strongly support ongoing research and monitoring that will “target biodiversity conservation” as outlined in the actions.

3. Fuel reduction across natural landscapes

The Conservation Council welcomes the mention of maintaining a fuel age mosaic across the landscape and that strategic areas of low fuels are maintained without the need for repeatedly burning the same area. It is important to acknowledge the two-fold effects that fire can have on the landscape in terms of achieving biodiversity benefits and reduction of fuel load, but also to have a sophisticated approach to fuel reduction burning that support ecological values and water quality.

4. Residual risk

The Conservation Council supports the move to utilise a “residual risk” approach and move away from an approach based on “hectares burnt” approach in the Regional Bushfire Management Plan. Prescribing a target amount of hectares to be burnt may have been useful as an indicator of a broad target for fuel reduction, but is not in itself a way of identifying the most effective outcomes of fuel management activities.

A residual risk framework, already used in other jurisdictions, seems better suited to deliver a more strategic use of resources in terms of managing bushfire treatments on public land, with the aim of reducing the fuel load in places that will deliver the most effective impact. The residual risk model also acknowledges that risk can be reduced but not completely eliminated through fuel management practices.

We acknowledge that much of the detail about fuel reduction burning and other fuel management strategies in natural areas is incorporated in the Regional Fire Management Plan, however **consider that it would be useful for the risk framework to be outlined in the SBMP4**, both as it applies to fuel reduction burning and the strategy more generally. This would support community understanding of the decision-making processes that are used in regard to fuel reduction burning and managing the risk in the interests of community safety, asset protection and environmental values.

5. Asset protection zones

The Conservation Council reiterates its position that all inner asset protection zones should be located within the urban footprint of new development areas, and that asset protection zone should support ecological outcomes as well as the protection of other assets.

6. Indigenous fire management

The Conservation Council supports the inclusion of an Aboriginal Fire Management Zone for cultural burns and land management treatments in the SBMP4. However, **we would also encourage further discussion and development of indigenous fire management practices to be used across the ACT as a land management tool and for cultural practices, in collaboration with ACT Government fire managers.**