



Media Release

Forest Fire and the Role of Hazard Reduction (311201)

If Minister Debus thinks that hazard reduction burning during the cooler months does not later help in wildfire suppression, he is dead wrong (SMH 29 Dec).

Years of experience by on-ground fire fighters has repeatedly demonstrated that fire suppression is easier when fuel has been reduced within the last 6 years. Research within State government agencies and the CSIRO show that fire intensity is directly related to fuel loads. Fire behaviour, notably crown fire and consequent spotfire ignitions, is strongly influenced by fuel load and the fuel's spatial arrangement. Heavy fuels produce hot fires; vertically arranged fuels lead to crowning and spot fires. Both lead to conflagration. Hazard reduction burning significantly minimizes both factors.

Fires burning under extreme weather conditions such as those on Christmas Day will not be stopped on fuel reduced areas more than a year old, but they will be slowed and are less likely to crown and produce spot fires. This means they are more manageable, allowing flank attack, either directly or from existing firebreaks, allowing faster backburning and giving fire fighters more time to organise containment as soon as weather conditions ease.

These are home truths known to Australian fire fighters for decades and it would alarm me if the Ministers' advisers are telling him anything different.

After each catastrophic year the State Coroner's report inevitably includes recommendations on improving hazard reduction performance but still not enough hazard reduction burning is being consistently achieved. Since 1993, when complete records have been available, less than 2% of the public forests have been hazard reduced each year, half the area which burns as uncontrolled wildfire.

The performance among land management agencies in fuel reduction is patchy at best. One agency with 30% of the public land achieves 80% of the annual hazard reduction hectareage. It is a lack of political will and the bureaucracy of environmental protection, including the regulation of air quality, which is hampering overall performance.

Minister Debus has the power to improve public protection from bushfire. He is responsible for the Rural Fire Service which, as well as managing the protection of the community's assets, and whose funding is arguably reliant on public reaction to catastrophic years, also monitors and should be publicly reporting the performance of those with hazard reduction responsibilities.

Mr Debus is responsible for the EPA which regulates air quality arising from hazard reduction, and he should be directing them to work with the land management agencies and the Bureau of Meteorology to manage smoke from prescribed fires to minimise the impact on urban airsheds. He is also responsible for the NPWS which is the largest public land managing agency having substantial hazard reduction responsibilities. He should ensure that sufficient funding and priority is given to fire management so that NPWS has a professional fire management branch and a fire management program that is at least equivalent to the best fire management programs in Australia.

The Minister has more control than anyone for our protection from catastrophic forest fire. With the wide range of relevant departments under his direct control, he has an opportunity to reduce the bureaucracy and conflicts of interest between and within agencies to achieve a more acceptable level of hazard reduction performance.

Ian Barnes
Chairman
IFA - NSW Division