



**Media release**

**Thursday, 16 January 2020**

**Peak body for forest managers and growers releases key principles to understanding prescribed burning as a land management tool for bushfire mitigation** (also known as hazard reduction burning, control burning and fuel reduction, amongst other names)

With the devastating bushfires continuing, the peak body for forest managers – the Institute of Foresters, which is made up of some 1,200 forest and land management professionals and practitioners Australia wide and the Australian Forest Growers have released six key principles to understanding the need for prescribed burning as a key tool in managing bushfires.

President of the Institute of Foresters, Mr Bob Gordon said we have released the principles to ensure there was an informed debate on how the nation's forests are managed.

"Our members, who are asked every day to manage the landscape, have highlighted that any discussion of future forest and fire management must have prescribed burning as part of the solution to controlling bushfires," Mr Gordon said.

He also noted that some people confuse prescribed burning with back burning. He said, "prescribed burning is used before bushfires occur to reduce environmental impacts and aid suppression while backburning is used as a bushfire control tactic."

"While prescribed burning is not the panacea for our bushfire problem, fire as a landscape management tool has for thousands of years been part of the Australian environment and properly managed will significantly mitigate our bushfire problems. This is becoming even more critical in the face of climate change impacting on bushfire severity and extent"

Mr Gordon said to ensure informed debate on the matter the Institute of Foresters, including Australian Forest Growers had adopted the following five key principals.

"The first principle is that fire as a management tool of the landscape has been used since ancient times in Australia and it remains a key tool in the face of climate change," Mr Gordon said.

"Since ancient times, indigenous Australians have used fire to shape the landscape. More recently, the forestry profession has pioneered, and developed landscape-scale prescribed burning as a bushfire mitigation tool".

"Secondly, while nothing will stop intense bushfires, prescribed burning will significantly mitigate them.

"Not even the biggest water-bombing aircraft can stop a major bushfire in extreme weather, so neither can a prescribed burn, but history shows it can help.

Mr Gordon said thirdly, reducing fuel levels through prescribed burns enables fire-fighters to control fire quicker and reduce the amount of land burned.

"Many of the huge fires we are now experiencing were initially burning under mild conditions, so had the fuel load been reduced it would have assisted fire-fighters to control them before the on-set of dangerous fire weather conditions which has made them uncontrollable.



"Fourthly bushfires will still burn, but reduced fuel levels will reduce environmental impact. Put simply, less fuel, means less fire."

Mr Gordon said the fifth principle accepts that prescribed burning is not the perfect solution, but over time has been shown to be beneficial.

"The bottom line is that forest and land managers understand fire is a vital tool in managing bushfire and we must understand this if we are to have a proper debate on the matter.

"Finally, the IFA supports the use of fire in northern Australia, particularly by indigenous Australians for sustainable forest management including carbon emission reduction, forest health and ecological values.

**Attached (and next page): Key principles to understanding prescribed burning**

**For further information:**

Becher Townshend, Font PR

Phone: 0418 370 661



## Key principles to understanding prescribed burning

### **1 – Fire as management tool of the landscape has been used since ancient times in Australia, and it remains a key tool in the face of climate change.**

Both natural fires and fire used by Aboriginal people have shaped much of Australia's flora and fauna. For millennia, fire was used in the Australian landscape by indigenous Australians. More recently, land management professionals have developed and refined landscape-scale burning as a modern bushfire mitigation tool and indigenous Australians have been reintroducing traditional burning techniques. Whilst climate change is altering some of the parameters for prescribed burning, it remains a key tool in managing bushfires.

### **2 – Nothing will stop intense bushfires, but prescribed burning will significantly mitigate them.**

Not even the biggest water-bombing aircraft can stop the head of a major bushfire burning under extreme conditions, so it is self-evident that prescribed burning cannot stop the forward spread of very intense bushfires whose behaviour is driven by extreme weather parameters rather than fuel levels.

However, it is also a reality that around 95% of the time bushfires burn under moderate, mild, or benign conditions where their behaviour is primarily driven by fuel levels. The intensity of such fires which are the majority of bushfires can be substantially mitigated if they have reduced fuel levels from previous prescribed burning.

### **3 – Reduced fuel levels enable fire-fighters to control more fires quicker and reduce the amount burned.**

The primary value of reducing forest fuel levels is that it enables fire-fighters to more quickly control most fires with less area burnt. Many of the huge fires we are now experiencing were initially burning under mild conditions, it is apparent that reduced fuel levels would have assisted fire-fighters to control them before the on-set of dangerous fire weather conditions which made them uncontrollable.

### **4 – Bushfires will still burn but reduced fuel levels will reduce severity.**

Even when bushfires are burning under extreme conditions, reduced fuel levels provide a substantial benefit in reducing fire severity sufficiently to lessen impacts to wildlife, soil, water and cultural values in comparison to the impacts of the same fire burning through heavy fuels.

Furthermore, while reduced fuel levels will not stop the head of an intense fast-moving bushfire, they can sufficiently mitigate fire behaviour on the fire's flanks to allow control line construction thereby minimising the risk of broad fire flanks becoming head fires under a later wind change.

### **5 – Prescribed burning is not the perfect solution, but over time it is beneficial.**

There is no panacea for our bushfire problem, and prescribed burning should not be promoted as the only solution. Equally however, it should not be castigated and dismissed because it does not stop intense, fast moving bushfires. Such criticism is as misguided as dismissing the value of seat belts in cars because people still die in car accidents. Both seat belts and prescribed burns are highly beneficial most of the time.

### **6. The IFA recognises the fire management skills of the traditional indigenous owners of the land.**

The IFA supports the use of fire in northern Australia, particularly by indigenous Australians for sustainable forest management including carbon emission reduction, forest health, and ecological values. IFA encourages the extension of this approach to other regions of Australia.