

Sunday, 23 December 2018

Committee Secretariat
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
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Dear Sir/Madam,

Inquiry into the impact on the agricultural sector of vegetation and land management policies, regulations and restrictions.

I welcome this enquiry and trust my comments assist the committee in understanding the situation. I'm a suburban resident of a regional city in close proximity, but not directly adjacent, to bushland as I reside near the outskirts of suburban North Rockhampton.

Your TERMS OF REFERENCE and my response to each:

Past and current practices of land and vegetation management by the agricultural sector and regional industries

The Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) has a focus on bushfire mitigation, which is called Operation Cool Burn, and which starts at the beginning of April and is normally scheduled to finish at the end of July. According to their website https://www.ruralfire.qld.gov.au/BushFire_Safety/Pages/Operation-Cool-Burn.aspx "The types of bushfire mitigation activities include hazard reduction burning to reduce fuel loads, improvement of strategic fire breaks by landowners".

During and after the November/December 2018 fires, comments were made on social media that some landholders don't want to undertake hazard reduction burning (to reduce

fuel loads) in the cool season. Apparently a portion of landholders want to burn in the high fire danger (hot) season. If this is the case, then QFES should be resourced to undertake bushfire mitigation activities, and in particular to requisition rural landowners to get involved.

The Queensland *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990* (s.69) enables rural fire wardens to requisition hazard reduction measures (69, 4 (a) make and maintain firebreaks, and (b) deal with any vegetation) but lack of resourcing prevents rural fire brigades from enforcing these measures. Fire can start by natural means and at any time of the year. Cool season burns seem to be the best way to keep fuel loads under control, and prevent cataclysmic events such as the November/December 2018 fires.

The science behind activities such as back burning, clearing and rehabilitation

No comment.

The economic impact of vegetation and land management policies, regulations and restriction

No comment.

The impact of severe fires on the agricultural landscape, agricultural production and industry in regional, rural and remote areas

No comment.

Factors that contribute to fire risk in regional, rural and remote areas

The biggest single factor is **the lack of political will**, at all levels and across the spectrum of political ideologies, **to resource preventative management of bushfire fuel loads**. Many people in regional, rural and remote areas suffer due to this political timidity.

The Queensland *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990* (s.69) enables rural fire wardens to requisition hazard reduction measures (69, 4 (a) make and maintain firebreaks, and (b) deal with any vegetation) but lack of resourcing prevents rural fire brigades from enforcing these measures. How this affects regional communities is best explained by two examples.

In regards to the **Koongal firestorm of 18 October 2009**, we live in Rockonia Road, Koongal, (Refer to Map 1) and we saw the firestorm up close and dealt with the flying embers, even though we are a couple of streets off the bushland.

Please refer to Map 2. Between the National Park (green) and suburbia (darker grey), there are expanses of privately owned small acreage (lighter grey). Some of these are rural residential but some are being land-banked by speculators - many are vacant (ie absentee owners). To improve their profit margins these people cut holding costs by doing no maintenance on their bush blocks.

The Koongal ridge is infested by lantana, which is fire-supportive and also a restricted invasive plant under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*. Since I moved here in January 1997 I have not seen any landholders there make an effort to control the lantana (despite the legal requirement to do so) and it was a tinder box when ignited.

Please refer to Map 3. Fires broke out closer to the coast early in the week, and fanned by winds travelled west towards Rockhampton. All of that land is privately owned and much of it is small acreage, hobby farms. We have several friends and acquaintances who were fighting fires on their properties early in the week in the Tungamull and Keppel Sands areas.

The front we experienced travelled from Tungamull area parallel to Emu Park Road through the meat works paddocks and then the ex-meatworks paddocks owned by the Bromleys (Refer again to Map 2). Bromleys horses ran before it when it got to the grass and ran into their barbed wire west boundary fence, and were badly injured, both by the barbs and by the fire. The fire took out the row of Grevilleas planted by Council and some Ergon power poles, then scorched footpath trees across the road. The meatworks bridge on Lakes Creek Road was burnt. These details were widely reported in the media as were the horses injuries, treatment and recovery. Please refer to Attachments 1 and 2.

The northern part of that front then burnt up along the lower southern slopes through the privately owned acreages between the National Park and suburbia. We have friends up there who nearly lost their homes and they don't back on to National Park, they back on to privately owned land-banks. Whether there were fires starting in the National Park I can't say, but the one we experienced started outside, travelled outside and did enormous damage outside (without entering the National Park).

Much of this could have been avoided had **rural fire brigades had the resources to compel bushland owners** to the east to engage in the standard practice, mosaic burns on a 3-5 year interval. Land-bankers should not be able to just hold land and neglect it. Landowners have a responsibility to the community to manage the fire hazard on land they own.

Politicians have tried to blame the October 2009 bushfire on Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service for not doing strategic cool season burns (eg Member for Mirani, Ted Malone, Central Queensland Telegraph, May 2013) but this is incorrect and Rockhampton residents all know it. Every year the QPWS advises when they are going to do their cool season burn and every year people complain about the effect on asthma and sinuses. I suffer from sinusitis so I'm keenly aware of the cool season burns every year in Mt Archer National Park.

I don't know what the economic cost was but the stress, distress and disruption experienced by those of us who lived through the Koongal firestorm of October 2009 was enormous.

In regards to the **Gracemere emergency evacuation of 28 November 2018**, you can clearly see from Map 4 that there is no National Park or other reserve of any size between the town of Gracemere and the fire origin. The land that fire crossed is private property though I'm not aware of the land uses. Again, if the **fuel loads had been reduced or removed by strategic cool season burns by landholders** to the west, the town of Gracemere (population 8,000) would not have had to be summarily evacuated at very short notice with great distress for all concerned (Refer to Attachment, Fire Inquiry Gracemere 1).

Both of these occurrences could have been avoided had rural fire brigades been resourced to requisition land owners to engage in the standard practice, mosaic burns on a 3-5 year interval. No-one should be able to just own land and neglect it. Everyone has a responsibility to their community to manage the fire hazard.

The role the agricultural sector has in working with emergency services and forestry management officials in managing fire risk.

The agricultural sector is not responsible for fires started by arsonists, or indeed fires started without a permit by land holders. The role the agricultural sector does have in managing fire risk is in managing fuel loads on agricultural land so that fires that do start don't become cataclysmic events that endanger urban and industrial areas and don't disrupt roads and escape routes.

As per my comments under your first TOR, the QFES should be resourced to undertake bushfire mitigation activities, and in particular to requisition rural landowners to get involved. Cool season burns seem to be the best way to keep fuel loads under control, and prevent cataclysmic events such as the November/December 2018 fires. If individual landholders are unwilling to undertake hazard reduction burning (to reduce fuel loads) in the cool season, government needs to step up with resources to protect the regional, rural and remote communities. Everyone has a responsibility to their community to manage the fire hazard.

I trust my comments will assist the committee in understanding the situation of regional, rural and remote communities.

Yours faithfully,

Susan Cunningham

[Operation Cool Burn](#)

Operation Cool Burn

Operation Cool Burn is a key period when Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) has a particular focus on bushfire mitigation. Most years, this period starts at the beginning of April and is normally scheduled to finish at the end of July however can be extended if necessary, for example if there is widespread unseasonal rainfall which impacts on planned burning.

During Operation Cool Burn QFES supports its land management agency partners such as the Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing, the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, HQ Plantations (Queensland's largest plantation forest company) and local government councils as well as landholders across the State to prepare for the coming bushfire season. There is also growing focus on community education to encourage everyone to be well prepared.

The overall clear priority for Cool Burn is the protection of Queensland's communities from the impacts of bushfires. Area Fire Management Groups have met across the state to develop priorities for mitigation activities in their areas based on a combination of state-wide data and reports and local knowledge.

The types of bushfire mitigation activities include hazard reduction burning to reduce fuel loads, improvement of strategic fire breaks by landowners and targeted community education to inform residents in the highest priority areas of actions they can take to better prepare for bushfires.

Whilst Operation Cool Burn provides a useful focus for bushfire preparation, preparations can also be undertaken at other times. To better prepare for bushfires it is recommended that people prepare a Bushfire Survival Plan and take the simple actions listed elsewhere on this website.

Last updated 21 July 2017

https://www.ruralfire.qld.gov.au/BushFire_Safety/Pages/Operation-Cool-Burn.aspx

***The* Bulletin**

How the Rocky bushfires unfolded

20th Oct 2009 5:43 PM

A timeline on how the Mount Archer bushfires have evolved since Friday.

FRIDAY

AM: Properties that back onto bushland in the Archer Ranges were asked to have their fire plan ready.

PM: The large fire impacted areas of Yeppoon Road between access six and nine during. Households were asked to evacuate in the Yeppoon Road area.

SATURDAY

6.30am: Frenchville, Lakes Creek and Koongal area residents told to finalise their bushfire plans. The fire was moderate and travelling west-north-westerly.

2.30pm: Berserker Ranges fire flares up as winds pick up. Smoke and ash began to shower large areas of Rockhampton's north side. This fire moves with erratic winds and is out of control.

4.15pm: Residents who back onto bushland in the suburbs of Frenchville, Koongal, Lakes Creek evacuated. Families evacuated from Peltophorum Street, Koongal and in the Cooper Street and Rockonia Road areas.

6pm: The bridge at the Teys Brothers meatworks bridge, Nerimbera reported on fire at 5.50pm. Lakes Creek School saved, but grounds burnt out.

9pm: A Poinciana Street, Koongal home was lost to the fire. Yeppoon-Rockhampton Road closed. Some evacuated residents of Lakes Creek area and at the base of Mount Archer told they can return home.

SUNDAY

9am: Triple 0 calls from Frenchville residents in Forbes Avenue with homes under fire attack.

10am: Fire near Forbes Avenue, Frenchville Road areas, Neill Street, Murlay and Thirkettle Avenue. Yeppoon Rockhampton, Emu Park Rockhampton and Lakes Creek Road closed.

11.15am: Saunders Street, Holt Street, Bloxsom Street and Shields Avenue in Frenchville, near the fire evacuated.

4.15pm: Immediate threat passed for Frenchville area. Fight to stop fire jumping on Yeppoon Rockhampton Road at Access 9 through the night.

MONDAY

6am: Bush fire at Mt Archer continues to burn, no immediate threat.

1.30pm: Residents that back onto bushland in the suburb of Norman Gardens and Guthrie Street, Frenchville, to enact their bushfire plans. 75 fire fighters worked to contain the blaze.

5pm: Residents asked to prepare to evacuate to PCYC. About 200 homes under threat.

7.25pm: Conditions eased and winds decreased which slowed the bushfire spread in the Mt Archer area considerably. Residents in the Norman Gardens and Guthrie Street areas were now not expected to be impacted.

8pm: Rocky declared a disaster zone, triggering thousands of dollar in relief funds.

TUESDAY

6.30am: Conditions eased slightly overnight in the Mount Archer area however fire fighters were preparing for another busy day, after working through the night.

8am: A large bushfire continued to burn in the Mt Archer National Park, east of Norman Gardens. It was about 800m from homes at the end of Sunset Drive but moving slowly.

9.30am: A large bushfire was located in the Norman Gardens area. Homes between Sunset Drive and Nagle Drive as well as houses on Guthrie Street were impacted.

11.40am: Fire crews worked to protect properties at Africander Avenue, Permien Street and Selwyn Court at Norman Gardens. Residents between Sunset Drive and Nagle Drive and on Guthrie Street were told to evacuate their homes or stay and defend.

2pm: 43 fire crews and three water bombing aircraft continued to protect properties around the Norman Gardens area as fire continues to threaten houses. Crew successfully protected about 100 homes, although some have fence damage. Residents in the northern part of Frenchville Drive, the southern side of Sunset Drive and residents in Guthrie Street can expect the fire to impact them soon.

5pm: Crews successfully contained a fire burning in the Norman Gardens area. Firebreaks in the Frenchville area have prevented the fire impacting on residents in the northern part of Frenchville Drive, the southern side of Sunset Drive and residents in Guthrie Street.

The Bulletin

The Bulletin

Fire horses face fight to survive

by Adam Wratten
20th Oct 2009 3:00 AM

ROCKHAMPTON'S Cheryl Bromley is praying her family's six horses survive after they panicked and raced through the main front of Saturday's wild bushfire at Lakes Creek.

"They are not good, but we're praying," Cheryl said from the Bromley's 28 acre property at the end of Mackay Street yesterday.

The horses' plight has captured the interest of the local community.

A handful of people had tried to cut through a fence to help the animals escape as the fast-moving fire approached.

However, the horses panicked and bolted back through the flames.

After reports in some media that they perished in the blaze, Cheryl was yesterday keen to let people know they'd got through - but only just.

At the moment the horses are all heavily sedated with painkillers from the vet and Cheryl has gone through tubes of cream for sores to treat them.

"We think two of them will be fine," Cheryl said.

"We are trying hard to keep them all alive and we're not writing any of them off yet because we just don't know."

She said the horses - Little Gem, Suzie Q, Gidget, Gemma, Mingo and Laura Pikachu - were well known in the neighbourhood and a favourite of many young children who loved to pat them as they walked along Cooper Street.

Ironically if the horses had stayed near the house area they would have been okay with the fire only reaching the fence at one end of their area.

Cheryl said the family's home was saved but the whole area was burnt out.

She said a lot of kangaroos, wallabies and wild deer had kept the grass around the house cropped short.

"I think that is what saved the house," she said.

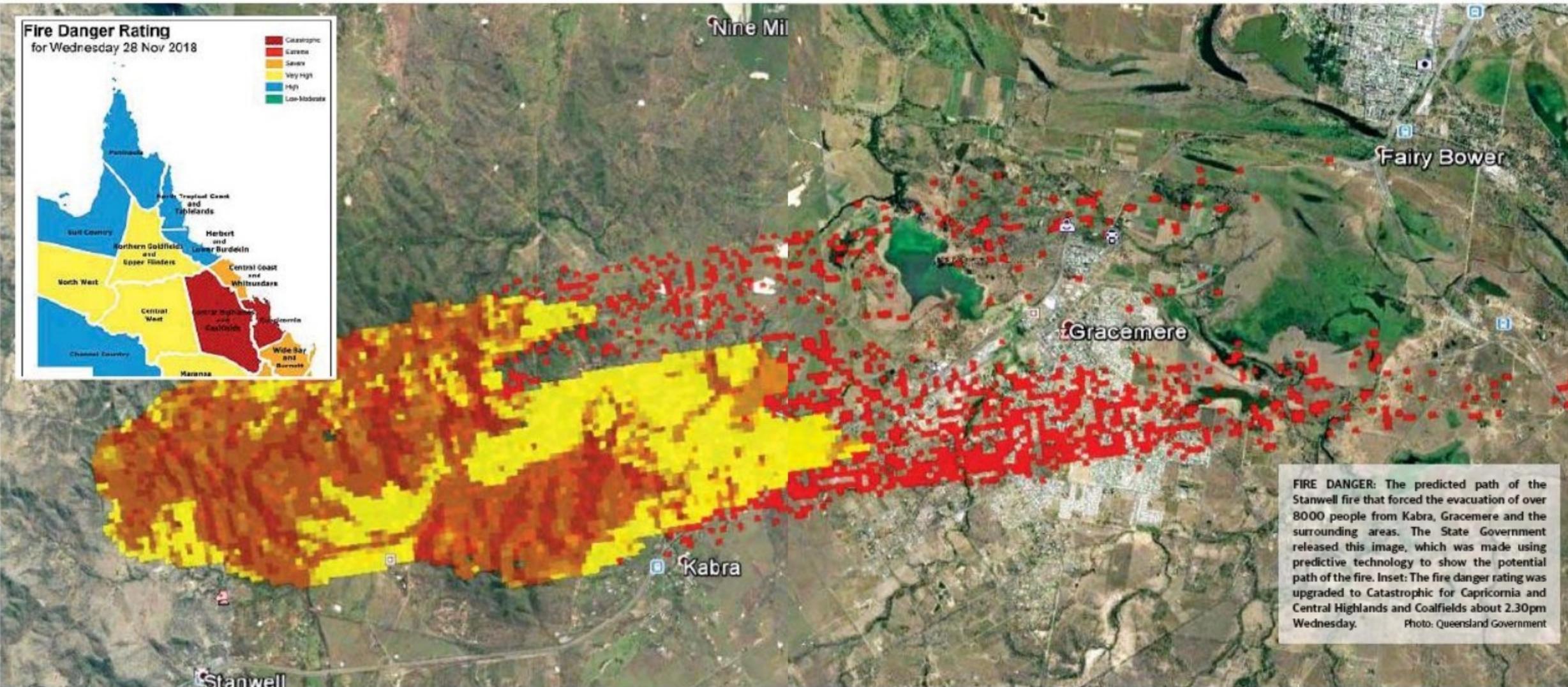




Our friends fighting fires on their properties early in the week

Meatworks and former meatworks paddocks





FIRE DANGER: The predicted path of the Stanwell fire that forced the evacuation of over 8000 people from Kabra, Gracemere and the surrounding areas. The State Government released this image, which was made using predictive technology to show the potential path of the fire. Inset: The fire danger rating was upgraded to Catastrophic for Capricornia and Central Highlands and Coalfields about 2.30pm Wednesday. Photo: Queensland Government