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Regional Operations Officer
Draft Fire Management Strategy Submissions
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Brindabella National Park draft fire management strategy

The National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA ACT) has a special interest in the draft fire management strategy for Brindabella National Park as it needs to work closely with the fire management strategy being developed for Namadgi National Park. Members of NPA ACT has been involved for some years now in researching fire management strategies which are appropriate for the region so we understand some of the complexities involved in effective fire management and it is pleasing to see how thorough the preparation has been for this fire management plan.

This is particularly important given the nature and location of Brindabella National Park. We understand that current fire risk models place a heavy burden on Brindabella National Park as a line of defence from large scale fires originating either in the park itself or in neighbouring State Forests and pine plantations. We also note that for some years this area was administered by ACT land managers and was considered something of a 'sacrificial' area to protect forestry assets within the ACT. There still remains in some quarters some distrust that this area will be managed so as to sufficiently protect the ACT from large fires burning in from the west under extreme fire conditions.

We have also noted over the past decade or so that pressure for increased prescribed burning and road construction in national parks has sometimes been associated with pressure to open up parks to recreational and commercial activities such as four-wheel touring and commercial horse riding. This is particularly true of Brindabella National Park where four-wheel driving has been a popular pastime, often to the detriment of the park itself.

Sections of the local community have developed a strong perception that long term, large scale prescribed burning reduces fire risk in montane and forested areas and development of a network of extensive fire trails in wilderness and remote areas enables easier prescribed burning and faster more effective response to unplanned fires. Our experience is that these two strategies are often over-emphasised in fire management plans because local fire services are not familiar with the impact of fire on specific vegetation types and

because they are still working on previous models of fire suppression which rely on heavy vehicle access to the fire ground.

However, the draft Brindabella Fire Management Strategy has such comprehensive information presented in its maps and data that managers (and politicians!) should be able to resist pressure for inappropriate activities. The comprehensive vegetation and habitat maps set out clearly areas which need to be protected from fire. Fire history maps – including hazard reduction fires – along with slope classes and fine fuel loads give a comprehensive overview and are valuable in showing where the greatest risk of fire spread is. It is especially pleasing to see the “Vegetation Threshold Analysis” map which shows what areas are already at risk of overburning. In fact this strategy has one of the most complete assessments of conservation values, fire risk and behaviour our organisation has seen.

Nevertheless we can see where a few changes would contribute to greater protection of conservation values of the area without diminishing its effectiveness in fire management, specifically:

- The primary objective of the proposed fire management plan would be better stated as “the protection of life and assets.”
- Reliance on trucking in water and fire fighting equipment is important to this area because of the steep terrain and lack of permanent water supplies. However, we are concerned that there appears to be a reliance on float standard roads which seem inappropriate in this area where smaller, more flexible vehicles should be used both in fire suppression and in prescribed burning.
- The plan should recommend that prescribed burning to protect assets should be carried out as close to the assets as is practicable for the purpose.
- The plan should recommend that prescribed burning to reduce the risk of future fires must be avoided unless there is sound scientific evidence it would actually reduce the fire risk over a specific period of time and each burn must be followed up with careful measurement and analysis over the expected life of the strategy.

Primary objective of the plan

We are concerned that the primary fire management objective of the proposed fire management strategy is “to protect life, property and community assets from the adverse impacts of fire.” We suggest that this would be better stated simply as “protection of life and assets.” As it stands it seems that the role of the strategy in protecting conservation values of the park is not given any weight. *Property* usually refers to land and buildings only and it is difficult to see most members of the community identifying conservation values as *community assets*. It is essential to clearly state up front that protection of environmental assets such as the alpine ash, bogs and wetlands and important fauna habitat is absolutely key to this strategy.

Use of heavy vehicles in remote areas

Fire management strategies should be the least invasive strategies which are appropriate and using large graders to bulldoze fire breaks is not suitable for this area. Heavy vehicles do much more damage to the soil and vegetation, are slow to be deployed and are difficult to use in the steep terrain. Over the past five years fire fighting in the Namadgi National Park has shown that hitting fires with small light vehicles, air support and RAFT crews to surround and extinguish fires quickly is very successful in heavily wooded or montane areas. While the theory of improving access for tankers and graders looks good on paper, the use of heavy equipment in these areas as recently as 2003 showed them to have limited impact.

Prescribed burning to reduce future risk

The increased use of prescribed burning in the western flank of the park to reduce fire risk in the area over the long term is a concern. We understand that pressure from those who are convinced it reduces the risk to property but consider that prescribed burning to protect specific assets should be carried out as close to the asset as is reasonable. Using prescribed burning to reduce the expected run of future fires is an inexact science at the best of times. It relies on predicting when and where future fires may strike and under what conditions they will be fought. It is doubly dangerous when it encourages re-growth of more fire-prone species.

Our experience in the ACT has been that prescribed burns do get out of control and damage surrounding areas, despite the best attempts to prevent it. The impact of natural fire must be endured but it is very hard to accept damage to fragile systems caused by prescribed burns which have exceeded their targets. We suggest the plan refers to prescribed burning to be used only where it can be shown to have a sustainable and long term effect on the reduction of fire risk and where its use can be supported by long term monitoring and scientific assessment.

This fire management plan goes a long way to defining fire risks in the area and setting out a sustainable plan to mitigate those risks. Nevertheless, it is essential that the plan emphasises the need for extreme caution in undertaking any action which could impact on the long term ecological viability of the area.

May we congratulate you and your team on a well researched and sustainable fire management plan.

Yours sincerely

Christine Goonrey
President
14 March 2008