

## **COAG INQUIRY ON BUSHFIRE MITIGATION AND MANAGEMENT**

### **BACKGROUND / INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION ABOUT THE SOUTHEAST QUEENSLAND FIRE AND BIODIVERSITY CONSORTIUM (SEQFABC)**

Before we discuss the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss the ‘Consortium’ and how we have operated in the southeast Queensland region. The success of the consortium and its messages may provide a useful model for implementation in other regions of Australia. We firmly believe that a balance between both protection of life/property and conservation of biodiversity is achievable and we have demonstrated this within our region.

The consortium was formed in 1998, with a meeting between some local government authorities (Brisbane, Logan, Ipswich and Gold Coast City Councils, respectively) and Griffith University. The LGAs were keenly aware that land acquired by them for conservation purposes also required ongoing management, including fire management, and the question “How often should we be burning these areas to keep the biodiversity?” was asked. The simple answer was that we did not know, so we tried to find out by reviewing existing knowledge to determine appropriate fire frequencies to maintain biodiversity. The large body of work revealed as many questions as answers, and it was obvious that more work was needed, particularly in the areas of community awareness and education (even amongst professionals). It was also evident that, within SEQ at least, there was no one consolidated body that could help address the pressing issues surrounding fire management. A successful National Heritage Trust application (2000–2002) allowed us to employ a fulltime project coordinator to achieve the objectives of the project. The consortium’s work is able to continue, thanks to ongoing external contributors (most LGAs in SEQ, the Qld Rural Fire Service and the Qld Parks and Wildlife Service) working in partnership with Griffith University.

Our structure is unique. We are not an official corporation, business or entity as such. The consortium is a collaborative group of like-minded people working together towards a balanced view to fire management in the landscape. We have representatives from:-

Beauresort Shire Council, Brisbane City Council, Caboolture Shire Council, Caloundra City Council, Crows Nest Shire Council, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Department of Primary Industries (Forestry), Gatton Shire Council, Gold Coast City Council, Greening Australia (Qld Inc), Griffith University, Logan City Council, Noosa Shire Council, Pine Rivers Shire Council, Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service, Queensland Rural Fire Service, Redland Shire Council, Toowoomba City Council and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

As you can see, a diverse group of people! Even though we are not a ‘real’ entity, we continue to play a significant role in assisting contributors on fire management, ranging from high level consultation on issues including fire management strategies and natural disaster mitigation, facilitation of research through our strong association with Griffith University, and public communication via bushfire forums and landowner workshops. As part of our ongoing commitment to the promotion of education and awareness we have produced a number of high quality and strongly sought-after products and working materials. We continue to develop new products and materials to reinforce our messages.

In addition to this submission, we have included our submission to the House (Representatives) Select Inquiry on Bushfires in the Appendix, which recently published their report “*A Nation Charred*”.

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The current state of bushfire management in Australia, including:

**Risk factors contributing to bushfires, including deliberate fire lighting;**

**Bushfire mitigation strategies in national parks, state forests, other Crown land, other open space areas adjacent to urban development and private property;**

Fires have always been a part of the Australian landscape and fires in the future must be accepted as inevitable.

Our job is to try to minimise risk, not to eliminate it. We have taken this approach to all levels of consultation and it seems to have worked. We advocate a balanced approach towards protection of life/property and biodiversity.

We have representatives from state and local government and we reach out to private property holders in our fire-management workshops. In our documents and messages, we have always advocated a high level of mitigation effort (to reduce risk) in and around areas considered important to protect life and property. If these areas are properly managed, other areas can be considered on more ecological grounds. This simple idea of zoning has worked and continues to work.

We have also promoted that hazard reduction does not always have to involve burning, though burning is usually the most common method.

Our other key assistance with these mitigation strategies is to facilitate increased communication and collaboration. If private landowners adjoin a state government agency (like national park or state forest) we are in a position to be able to encourage this collaboration so that the objectives for both are satisfactorily met. Our ‘independence’ has allowed this freedom to contribute and not confront, which has been a key to our success.

We consider that the most important aspect of fire mitigation strategies is education and awareness, at all levels. In too many cases, people living in fire-risk areas are unaware of the risk, what they can do, and who can assist. It is also clear, that there needs to be some national ‘standard’ regarding development in identified high bushfire-risk areas, which provides recommendations that will limit or stop development in these areas.

Relevant SEQFABC document for referral
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Literature review (Tran and Wild 2000)

Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit (SEQFABC 2001)

Ecological Guidelines (Watson 2001)

Strategic Fire Management Manual (Tran and Peacock 2002)

**The impacts of bushfires on the environment, human life, property and the economy;**

We acknowledge the role of fire in the landscape and that the environment has adapted to regular fires. The key, as land managers, is to maintain a fire frequency that will support biodiversity outcomes. If we take the necessary measures to reduce the risk to lives and property, then these outcomes can be achieved.

Appropriate fire frequencies have been determined for the broad vegetation types in southeast Queensland, by thoroughly reviewing the results of research conducted in SEQ and other areas. These fire frequencies need to be considered with some caveats, ie, to consider the importance of variability in fire frequency, extent and seasonality. The examination of fire frequencies and variability are extensively covered in Watson (2001a) and Tran and Wild (2000) both SEQFABC publications, which are included in this submission for your consideration.

In relation to the impact of bushfires on human life, property and the economy; we take a balanced holistic approach. In the document, the Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit, we help landowners identify what risks they have, how they can mitigate such risks and to consider the fire frequencies that can be applied for biodiversity outcomes. The end result is a fire management plan that the individual landowner submits to the local rural fire brigade, which is annually updated. This plan contains information on assets (built environment and natural), water sources etc. and other crucial information required during any fire event. The plan, once completed is a useful tool to approach adjoining neighbours to facilitate a collaborative effort to reduce risk and be prepared for the fire season. The Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit is attached for your consideration.

Relevant SEQFABC document for referral
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Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit (SEQFABC 2001)

Ecological Guidelines (Watson 2001)

Strategic Fire Management Manual (Tran and Peacock 2002)

**The impacts of fire mitigation strategies, such as hazard reduction, on the environment, human life, property and the economy;**

This topic has been discussed in some detail above. It is accepted that mitigation strategies **are** needed, and that hazard reduction burning can be very effective. But it cannot be applied in isolation. Other strategies of careful planning, adequate infrastructure preparation, and increasing community awareness need to be used if we are to come to terms with managing the risk.

We strongly believe that not enough is known about the effect of mitigation strategies (particularly HR burning) on the environment. We would encourage and are willing to participate in research projects to answer this question. We acknowledge that there is a lot of published and anecdotal information about the detrimental (ecological) effects of HR burning on the landscape, particularly indiscriminate large-scale burning. If we are clever with **where** and **when** hazard reduction strategies are implemented, then the aims of reducing risk and maintaining biodiversity can be met.

From our experience, the community is generally unaware of the issues surrounding HR burning and are too easily influenced by the extreme elements of the community, either for or against HR burning. Our message to the community is that if a balanced

approach is taken to fire mitigation, a balanced outcome will be achieved. Again, communication and consultation are essential.

Relevant SEQFABC document for referral
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Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit (SEQFABC 2001)

Ecological Guidelines (Watson 2001)

Operational Fire Management Manual (Tran 2002)

Strategic Fire Management Manual (Tran and Peacock 2002)

**The adequacy of infrastructure and human resources for fire mitigation purposes;**

An increasing emphasis on aerial suppression of bushfires will not alleviate the issues and are very costly and often inappropriate. We need to place more emphasis, and dollars, on long-term, landscape strategies which reduce risk, keep fire agencies well resourced and trained, and increase community awareness.

*Effective allocation of resources* must be given to those areas under the highest risk. We believe that pre-disaster mitigation is required, and to achieve this, (effective) monitoring is needed. Monitoring of the available potential fuel load can be used as a means to determine these higher risk areas, and mitigation efforts to reduce the risk can be directed to those areas. A SEQFABC product that would help is the Fire Monitoring Manual.

Relevant SEQFABC document for referral
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Fire Monitoring Manual (SEQFABC 2003)

Operational Fire Management Manual (Tran 2002)

Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit (SEQFABC 2001)

**The use of existing fire fighting resources, including an examination of the efficiency of resource use and co-operation between agencies and between jurisdictions;**

In SEQ, we are fortunate to have good coordination and collaboration between most land management agencies. The consortium has provided a means of establishing new links between various organisations as well as individuals and has ‘value-added’ to existing collaborations. It is fair to say, that in SEQ (and Queensland for that matter) that the Rural Fire Service, being a volunteer organisation is not adequately resourced or funded.

**The identification of best practice national measures, cooperation and standards that can be undertaken by all levels of government, industry and the community, and the economic, social and environmental costs and benefits of such measures.**

We strongly believe that our structure and approach to the bushfire issue in southeast Queensland represents best practice. The consortium membership comes from a range of local government authorities and State government agencies, industry and the community, and satisfies everyone’s needs and get across our key messages. As Watson (2001b) describes:

“The cross-disciplinary nature of the Consortium is undoubtedly a major strength, giving us ready access to a wide range of expertise. The mix of local

and state government agencies and community groups ensures our approach to fire management acknowledges the needs of all stakeholders.

The project also benefits from the existence and nature of local networks. These networks have allowed us to concentrate on resourcing those already working with landholders, rather than trying to reach individual landholders directly. Initiatives such as Landcare, catchment coordination, Bushcare and Land for Wildlife have been instrumental in developing networks and encouraging ethics which encompass cooperation, openness to information, and respect for the bush and its inhabitants. We have made an effort to connect with local networks, but they have also come to us.

Perhaps the largest factor in the success of the project has been the fact that we are remarkably unhampered by political considerations. This may be partly a by-product of the Consortium's nature. The group includes representation from two levels of government and from the community, and thus does not belong exclusively to any particular interest group, agency or government. We may also gain some benefit from the fact that in Queensland cross-agency cooperation with respect to local fire management planning is not mandated by legislation. Similarly, landholders may be encouraged to consider how best to manage their bushland for fire, but are not required to adopt a particular course (other than ensuring they have a valid permit if they wish to conduct a burn). We are therefore able to present our input in a non-threatening, educational framework."

We also believe this approach can be applied successfully elsewhere in the community. We were recently declared the State winner of the Emergency Management Australia's "Safer Community Award" which highlighted the balanced approach that we have taken and recognises the significant role we have played to increased awareness, facilitate research and offer good advice on fire management and risk mitigation issues.

Relevant SEQFABC document for referral
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Literature review (Tran and Wild 2000)  
Individual Property Fire Management Planning Kit (SEQFABC 2001)  
Ecological Guidelines (Watson 2001)  
Operational Fire Management Manual (Tran 2002)  
Strategic Fire Management Manual (Tran and Peacock 2002)

If you have any queries in regards to our submission, please contact me.

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## References

- Tran, C. and Wild, C.H. 2000. *A Review of Current Knowledge and Literature to Assist in Determining Ecologically Sustainable Fire Regimes for the Southeast Queensland Region*. Report to the Southeast Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Consortium. 106pp.
- Watson, P. 2001a. *The Role and Use of Fire for Biodiversity Conservation in South-east Queensland: Fire Management Guidelines Derived from Ecological Research*. Report to the Southeast Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Consortium. 49pp.
- Watson, P. 2001b. The Southeast Queensland Fire and Biodiversity Consortium: a case study in interagency cooperation and community education. In *Bushfire 2001. Proceedings of the Australasian Bushfire Conference*, 3-6 July 2001, Christchurch, New Zealand. Pp 205–211.