

COMMUNIQUE

The State Bushfire Advisory Council (SBAC) met at the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) offices in Kensington on 7 December 2020 for its fourth and final meeting for 2020.

SBAC membership changes

The SBAC has recently had a number of changes to its membership approved by Government which included the addition of a new Community position representing Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Interests. Ms Irene Stainton has been appointed in this position.

Irene is an Aboriginal Affairs Consultant at INPEX and has been a member of their Aboriginal Affairs team since 2009. Irene serves as the Chairperson of the Western Australian Museum's Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee, a position she has held for 25 years, and is also a trustee of the museum. She also chairs the Aboriginal Advisory Committee of the National Trust of Western Australia. Irene has extensive knowledge in heritage and culture and was the first Aboriginal person to become Registrar of Aboriginal Sites in Western Australia, prior to being appointed Chairperson of the Aboriginal Cultural Material Committee in the Aboriginal Affairs Department.

Bush Fire Risk Treatment Standards

The SBAC was provided an overview of the newly released Bush Fire Risk Treatment Standards, which came into effect on 7th November 2020.

These are the first Standards to be issued under the Bush Fires Act 1954 which clarify the circumstances in which owners or occupiers of land in bushfire prone areas can manage vegetation around buildings for fire prevention purposes, without fear of breaching State or local laws. This allows for the creation of a defensible space, by providing separation between flammable vegetation and the building surface, providing firefighters access to a safer area from which to defend the building.

The intent of the Standards is reflected in the Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements Report which recommends that Australian, state and territory governments review assessment and approval processes relating to vegetation management to ensure clarity around the requirements and scope for landholders to undertake bushfire hazard reduction activities and to minimise the time taken to undertake assessments and obtain approvals.

A detailed communications strategy been enacted by DFES to support the public release of the Standards. A detailed information guide is currently available from the DFES website. <https://www.dfes.wa.gov.au/bushfire/prepare/#vegetation>

The SBAC noted the release of the new Bush Fire Risk Treatment Standards 2020.

State Bushfire Management Policy

The small working group consisting of DFES, DBCA and DPLH representatives presented a redraft of the Visions and Principles document that will be used to inform the development of the policy and associated documents. The creation of the policy will be an iterative step process with members and their constituents before broader consultation is undertaken on a more complete set of the policy and associated documents. SBAC members have been requested to seek feedback from their constituents and provide feedback to obrm@dfes.wa.gov.au by end of the month.

Planned Burn Terminology

The SBAC received a briefing on the work underway to agree common terminology for planned burning activities in WA.

DFES and DBCA have jointly commissioned market research to inform decision making regarding consistent messaging when communicating with the public about planned burning activities. The report is currently being finalised and a DFES/DBCA working group will determine recommendations for progression.

There is potential for recommendations arising from this work to be progressed for SBAC consideration in the future.

Australian Fire Danger Rating System

In June 2014 the development of a new national fire danger rating system was identified as a national priority. The new system will be based upon current science that greatly improves the ability to predict fire behaviour and potential consequence, and outcomes from extensive social research recommending a simplified system that incorporates clear action-orientated messaging. Following the development of a feasibility study, research prototype and Social Research component the project is currently in phase 3 which consists of the system build, design of the AFDRS framework and jurisdictional implementation. DFES is coordinating the work required to implement the AFDRS in WA with key agencies including BOM, DBCA and WALGA. To facilitate this, a new subcommittee of the Interagency Bushfire Operations Committee was established, with the first meeting held in September. Consultation has been conducted with representatives from governments, local governments, associations, utilities and Industry to determine change management implications associated with the new system. A Jurisdiction Implementation Plan and Stakeholder Analysis has been conducted to inform change impact planning and future consultation requirements.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements recommended that state and territory governments expediate the development and implementation of the AFDRS and highlighted the importance of education to ensure the public understands the new rating system. On the 24th November the AFDRS program board released a briefing note providing background information to assist state and jurisdictional representatives to inform jurisdictional responses to the findings of the Royal Commission.

AFDRS is expected to be rolled out across Australia in 2022. A link to the AFAC AFDRS is provided for further information: <https://www.afac.com.au/initiative/afdrs>

The SBAC noted the significance of the new AFDRS and the AFDRS Program Boards Briefing Note on outcomes of the Royal Commission.

Planning in Bush Fire Prone Areas Policy

Presentation by Department of Planning Lands and Heritage representatives provided a background to the reforms stemming from a review of the map and policy by Tony Buti MLA.

The CSIRO has been engaged to assist with the development of a new methodology and map of bushfire prone areas in Western Australian with a better integration of science to inform the potential bushfire intensity and guide the determination of hazard classes.

It is anticipated that the requirements of the revised SPP 3.7 and Guidelines will better reflect the level of hazard identified within the Map. It is anticipated that an urban built up area, would potentially achieve a lower hazard level, and could potentially trigger a “deemed to comply” policy pathway. Whereas a heavily vegetated area in the southwest of WA would receive a higher hazard rating, which would trigger a more detailed risk based policy response, including consideration of the broader landscape context, with additional consideration of risk mitigation measures, including access.

A revised Map and policy framework for the entire State are intended for release for public consultation in mid 2021 and is likely to be finalised late 2021.

Biodiversity Act update

DBCA advised their interim approach for ensuring all stakeholders are able to continue with appropriately targeted bushfire mitigation activities in WA, whilst still following all necessary existing processes.

DBCA are developing a streamlined and consistent method to achieve a balance between protecting the State’s biodiversity and ensuring essential fire mitigation works can be undertaken without undue administrative requirements. To meet this requirement DBCA will implement a revised approach for the administration of this aspect of the Biodiversity Conservation Act prior to spring 2021.

SBAC Meetings

The next SBAC meeting is scheduled for 8 March 2021.

For SBAC related information or enquiries, please email RuralFire@dfes.wa.gov.au