

Bushfire preparedness: Key opportunity areas in regards to bushfire management across south east Australia

John O'Donnell, October 2023

There are many opportunity areas for improved bushfire management and protection across SE Australia, including:

Prescribed burning, adaptive management and resilient landscapes:

1. Much greater use of small aircraft and drones for prescribed burning to increase rates and areas of prescribed burning well above 1 % of forests per year up to 8 %.
2. WA 8 % forest prescribed burning per year in the SW (60 years of research data). Set minimum standards for prescribed burning for each state, need around 8% of prescribed burning of forests per year.
3. Increase cultural burning across landscapes.
4. Mild burning across landscapes to address eucalypt decline and reduce bushfire risks with dense understories associated with eucalypt decline.
5. Mosaic burning over large areas as scattered annual fires and potential for this technique for areas away from communities, creating a mosaic of burning histories. Use of WA and AWC knowledge would assist.
6. Reduction in extremely long fire intervals for prescribed burning up to 30 years, that often delay prescribed burning programs increases prescribed burning intensity and bushfire intensity.
7. Better utilise time, resources, drones, alliances, innovation and other measures to increase prescribed burning extent. Get over excuses for reduced prescribed burning programs, using longer fire seasons and smaller windows of opportunity for conducting safe and effective hazard reduction burns, and get on with programs.
8. US approaches for resilient fire landscapes considered for Australia, including low intensity burning and thinning.
9. Return of grazing to greater areas of state lands to reduce fuel loads.

Bushfires and bushfire management:

10. Change the focus from suppression to mitigation and suppression, refer Productivity Commission findings, noting mitigation funding at the time amounted to only three per cent of what is spent on post-disaster recovery.
11. Improved fire fighter safety and community safety.
12. Greater community protection focus/ fire adapted communities focus. The ongoing risks and potential impact of bushfires on communities, critical infrastructure and properties for SE Australia remains extremely high, likely less for SW Australia and much of northern Australia.
13. Excessive intense bushfires continuing, increasing areas of dense regrowth and future bushfires and not learning the lessons from large areas of intense bushfires. This is extremely evident in the data from the 2019/ 20 bushfires.
14. Improved consideration and action in regards to all the contributory factors to the 2019/ 20 bushfires.
15. Bushfire risk management plans focussed on individual towns/ cities with greater community participation, with plans and mitigation updated annually.
16. Greater use of mitigation performance auditing, including by the Commonwealth of state bushfire planning, mitigation and suppression.
17. Review of research and research directions and funding to improve forest resilience across landscapes, community and fire fighter safety and sensible fire intervals.
18. Further consideration of extent of subsidisation by the Commonwealth funding to states for major bushfires where SE Australian states undertake miniscule areas of prescribed burning, not meeting minimum standards.
19. Sound listening effectively to skilled bushfire personnel, including many retired personnel with the street smarts prepared to give up their time to safeguard Australia.