
COMMUNIQUE

The State Bushfire Advisory Council (SBAC) met online via MS Teams on 8 June 2020.

Royal Commission Process Summary

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Bushfires Royal Commission) which was initiated on 20 February 2020 in response to the 2019/20 summer bushfires on the east coast of Australia. The Minister for Emergency Services is the lead Minister for Western Australia. The Bushfires Royal Commission has sought input through a suite of approaches being public submissions, legal notices to agencies, background and issues papers and public hearings. The delivery of the Royal Commission recommendations in late August 2020 have put pressure on agencies responding to legal notices.

The first notice to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) queried broad themes around protection priorities, critical infrastructure, risk assessments, neighbourhood safer places, hazardous reduction activities, indigenous input and involvement, firefighting equipment, technology and data and environmental impacts. The first notice also included opportunities for improvement which was an opportunity to provide some commentary from a DFES and whole of state perspective.

The second notice followed shortly after, exploring the emergency management framework; coordination of responses; resource sharing; road access; emergency warnings; dissemination of information to emergency services and the community; defence and Australian Defence Force assistance; aerial resources; evacuation centres and safer places; and disaster recovery arrangements.

Background and issues papers do not require a response; however issues papers invite comment. The first issues paper considered constitutional frameworks and declarations of State of Emergencies, the second explored health arrangements and third, local governments and natural disasters. All responses to issues papers are being developed as whole of government response.

Public hearings are available on webcast through the Bushfires Royal Commission website. The first block of hearings drew on Commonwealth agencies and were held in late May and early June. The second block of hearings commenced on 16 June 2020 and third will commence on 29 June 2020. Western Australian witnesses are expected to be called in the second and third block of hearings. The Bushfires Royal Commission will provide their recommendations to the Governor General by 31 August 2020.

The Bushfires Royal Commission website is at: <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/>

State Bushfire Management Policy

The former State Bushfire Coordinating Committee (SBCC), predecessor to the SBAC, began the development of a State Bushfire Management Policy to guide the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery (PPRR) elements. A bushfire management policy will guide a framework and outcomes for the PPRR focus whether it be training, government funding or inter-agency collaboration. The ability to report on the delivery of outcomes will support a common understanding of bushfire management in WA and guide investment decisions and measures to manage bushfire.

The SBAC will recommence work on the policy, bringing a contemporary view into the development of the draft policy as a result of the broad membership of the SBAC.

Update on Consolidated Emergency Services Act

Work is progressing on a new Consolidated Emergency Services Act to replace the *Fire Brigades Act 1942*, *Bush Fires Act 1954* and the *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1998*. The consultation work to date has been over four stages. The first stage received a total of 227 submissions. The second stage comprised of eleven expert panel workshops with a total of 233 participants. The third stage was the release of the Concept Paper and received more than 5300 comments from 200 individuals, groups and organisations. The fourth stage involved targeted consultation for the development of the Decision Paper.

Parliamentary Council's Office (PCO) is currently drafting the Bill. Once PCO has drafted the Bill, Cabinet approval will be sought to release it for public consultation for a period of approximately three months. This will enable the opportunity to make any further refinements that may be required as a result of the public consultation before the Bill is drafted to be entered into Parliament for debate.

Recommendation four from the Coronial Report into the November 2015 Esperance fires recommended that the new Act be given a higher drafting priority. Depending on Government's response to all the recommendations from the inquest this may or may not impact on the timeframe of the new legislation. Once the Bill is introduced to Parliament, consultation work will focus on creating supporting regulations to accompany it. The entire process will take several years to complete.

STAYING INFORMED

- Updates on the progress of the new consolidated emergency services legislation can be found on the following website: <https://dfes.wa.gov.au/legislationreview>
- Interested individuals can subscribe to receive updates on this website.

Operational impacts of water deficiency declarations

There have been numerous water deficiencies declared across the Great Southern of Western Australia (WA). This includes areas within the Shires of Jerramungup, Ravensthorpe and Esperance. Scarcity of water sources within the rural landscape is a prime consideration in planning for bushfire response across WA. Rainfall deficits within the South West Land Division (SWLD) has been more pronounced over recent years. Fortunately, East Jerramungup and West Ravensthorpe have not experienced significant fire events this year. Accordingly, the existing water shortage has not hampered on ground fire operations within these local governments. However, lengthy fire operations within the Shires of Esperance and Gnowangerup have impacted local government and some farm dam water supplies and contributed towards both local governments applying for water deficiency declarations.

The DFES regions regularly place contracted water tankers on “standby” for high risk weather events during the bushfire season. A successful strategy employed during February 2020 was DFES’s placement of large capacity water tankers on “standby” in Albany, Ravensthorpe and Gnowangerup ahead of a severe fire weather forecast, acknowledging the deficiencies in water availability in the region. The Albany and Gnowangerup based tankers were subsequently dispatched to the Katanning bushfire, supported by locally based contactors and farmer water tankers.

It is acknowledged there is some collaborative work undertaken through local government bushfire committee networks such as the Regional and District Operational Area Committee’s (ROAC’s and DOAC’s) to adapt firefighting techniques for drier conditions. The regional water deficiencies have also become a priority consideration for the Local Government Grant Scheme Committee and the suite of investment options the funds can support to address this issue.

Investment in Mitigation

The extension of the Royalties for Regions funding will continue for another four years with Government announcing an additional \$15 million on 22 May 2020, to complement the existing ongoing funding for mitigation work through the Emergency Services Levy. These programs have been positive for delivering on the ground, local level, bushfire mitigation work developed through the Bushfire Risk Management Planning Program. At the next meeting the Council will investigate options for additional support to coordinate and maximise bushfire mitigation projects.

SBAC Meetings

The next SBAC meeting is scheduled for 7 September 2020.

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