

Email: SBMPhaveyoursay@act.gov.au

Dear Emergency Services Agency,

Submission to Draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP)

I am pleased to provide this response to the ACT government's draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP) version 4, 2019.

I commend the plan's response to key and complex issues faced by the ever growing and changing ACT community. This submission also looks at the completed 15 year fire management strategy and considers how policy has evolved over time.

With Climate Change and community focused approaches to management as well public inclusion and accessibility at the forefront of this Plan, this draft certainly builds on earlier policy and operational initiatives.

The ACT has an increasingly diverse and multicultural community with varying levels of knowledge of climate change, bushfire risk and English speaking ability.

This complexity should be actively addressed in the Plan with community driven approaches to risk awareness, prevention and emergency responses, especially in at-risk and in new urban edge – high density areas.

Bushfires in a Changing Climate

I note the emphasis on climate change impacts and associated bushfire risk, which has been elevated in this draft report. This reflects the concern the ACT Government has expressed about the climate emergency we are facing.

Bushfire seasons will be extended (as has already occurred) and the severity of these fires will increase, creating new challenges. Changes in management strategies have been clearly outlined for the public, with good use of infographics to engage the community with the complexity of the issues.

Commissioner: Professor Kate Auty (Professorial Fellow, University of Melbourne)
GPO Box 158 Canberra ACT 2601

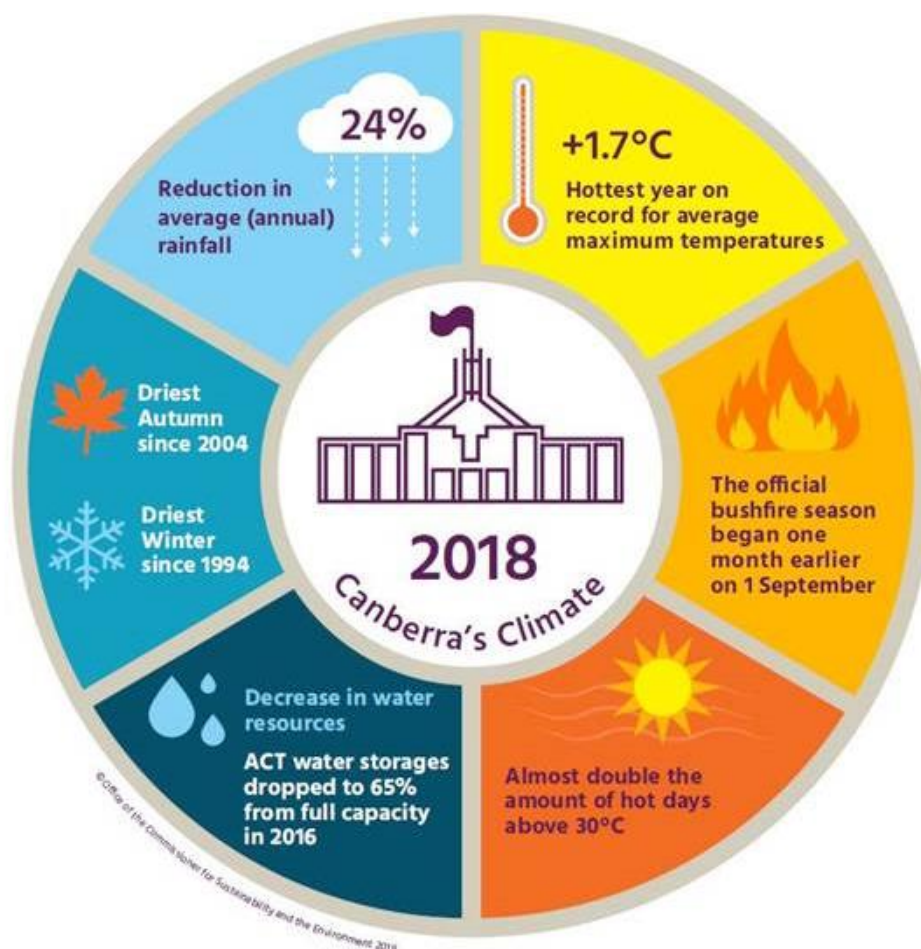
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This Office is independent of, but funded by, the ACT Government.



Below is an example of an infographic produced by my Office that is updated annually, providing the community with the most accurate and current information relating to climate change impacts in the ACT.



Communicating information with ESRI

The use of the ESRI Story Map in the Regional Fire Management Plan (RFMP) 2019 – 2028 on the public domain of the Yoursay webpage¹ presents a useful and informative guide to the public about fire related issues and growth area concerns.

The continued use and development of Story Maps will ensure ongoing community engagement and should be produced for as broad an audience as possible. Using this tool is recommended for communicating the SBMP to the community. As a priority this mapping tool should be easy to locate, contain minimal text, and provide an intuitive display.

It is apparent that ESRI Story Map tools have wide application. All staff within my Office have received training in and are producing ESRI Story Maps to better communicate spatial data with an engaging narrative to the community. Several Story Maps have been produced by my Office in the

¹ <https://www.yoursay.act.gov.au/bushfire-management-plan>

last 12 months with over 2000 unique views. These have engaged a wide demographic, including being part of high school and university curriculum.

All OCSE Story Maps can be found at this link: www.envcomm.act.gov.au/storymaps

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation is critical to inform ongoing operations and improve policy.

I note the intent to use data sets and performance indicators to improve adaptive management strategies. The continued critical evaluation of these strategies is crucial to sustainable management practices.

While not outlined in the draft it is my understanding that the use of residual risk assessments and predictive modelling are, and should be, at the forefront of future management planning for the ACT.

Predictive modelling is a technique already used in other jurisdictions as part of adaptive management strategies. Examples of this include the use of Phoenix RapidFire² currently used by the Victorian Government, and Spark³ which is currently in development at CSIRO.

I commend the Victorian methodologies to the ACT Government and am pleased that it is intended that these will be incorporated into the SBMP. The Victoria State Government – East Central Fire Management Plan 2018⁴, outlines very clearly and in great detail how these technologies can be used to assist in bushfire management.

Community Concerns

“You can’t compare fire management for Lower Cotter Catchment and Namadgi National Park. Not one size fits all. Firstly, because of the geographic location, being the proximity to the reservoir and the community. Secondly, because they are totally different environments. Namadgi is a pristine piece of wilderness, an environmental asset that responds well to fire. Lower Cotter is a vulnerable recovering landscape.” Dominic Lane, Commissioner, Emergency Services Agency quoted in The Heroic and the Dammed – Lower Cotter Catchment Restoration Evaluation⁵

² <https://firepredictionsservices.com.au/>

³ <https://research.csiro.au/spark/>

⁴ http://www.delwp.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/318849/DELWP0016F_BMP15_EastCentral_web_v2.pdf

⁵ https://www.envcomm.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1315753/The-Heroic-and-the-Dammed-Lower-Cotter-Catchment-Restoration-Evaluation.pdf

As highlighted in the most recent report from my Office, The Heroic and the Dammed - Lower Cotter Restoration Evaluation 2018,⁶ the level of arson as a result of dumping and incendiaryism, particularly of cars, in and around the Lower Cotter Catchment is disturbing. It is recommended that this should be addressed.

Excerpt from the Heroic and the Dammed Restoration Evaluation 2018, pages 120-121

The specific risks associated with burnt out cars in the lower Cotter Catchment indicate that further reform is needed to ensure the timely removal of abandoned vehicles.

While government may incur some upfront costs by amending the legislation to allow the timely impoundment of abandoned vehicles by ACT authorities, the benefits of supporting such intervention are clear. These benefits include:

- Reduced risk of arson,
- Reduced risk of subsequent uncontrolled bushfires,
- Avoided or reduced cost to catchment recovery initiatives,
- Avoided adverse impacts to water quality and water security,
- Reduced bushfire risk to national park and residential areas, and
- Reduced risk to public safety.

The sheer number of arson-burnouts in the catchment invites the conclusion that it is only a matter of time before some or all of these risks eventuate, notwithstanding the efforts of the service involved in mitigating the impacts of this criminal and foolhardy activity.

While I note attention has been given to arson in the draft SBMP and support outlined for law enforcement, the ESA, and youth awareness programs, I would observe that engaging with young people should be elevated in importance.

Young people aged from 15 – 19 are the most likely age group to commit arson related offences.⁷ As our youth become harder to reach, the severity, scope and quantity of youth programs addressing the risks of arson to the general community needs to be considered and actioned.

Community Focus

The Increased focus on land use planning as a preventative strategy and the inclusion of such initiatives in the planned objectives is a noted improvement to the SBMP.

⁶ <https://www.envcomm.act.gov.au/investigations/the-heroic-and-the-dammed-lower-cotter-catchment-restoration-evaluation>

⁷ <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-crime-data/spotlight-arson-offences>

The ACT is one of the fastest growing regions in the country and high density housing is on the rise, especially on the “urban edge”. The risks associated with this growth need to be carefully monitored and assessed.

Understanding how bushfires behave in and around their immediate landscape, and potentially, housing and shopping precincts, better equips the public to deal and prepare for these disasters if and when they occur. It is important to ensure that the community and emergency response volunteers and employees are well informed.

I note the potential adverse effects of the current management strategies, particularly prescribed hazard-reduction burning, are to be mitigated as a function of the proposed draft Plan. I also note how the draft Plan commits to ensuring the community is to be made aware of these issues. However, social, economic and cultural community complexity should again be actively considered.

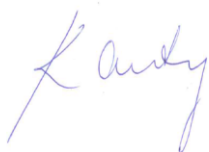
I recognise and support the concern for, and commitment to, volunteers, who will be exposed to projected climatic change conditions. I commend the actions which are proposed and intended to ensure safety is paramount and which are also intended to create enthusiasm and efficiency around volunteering. Promoting balance in this is a complicated task and it is clear this is well understood in the planning processes outlined in the draft Plan.

The cooperation between ACT and NSW agencies and the ongoing support for community and volunteer organisations in regional NSW is also noted. This is a critical issue under climate change scenarios and it is essential that cross-border responses and management are promoted.

My Office will be taking a keen interest in this matter in relation to recommendations from the Lower Cotter Catchment Restoration Evaluation and production of the forthcoming 2019 State of Environment Report.

Please don't hesitate to contact my Office on 6207 2626 if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely



Professor Kate Auty
Commissioner for Sustainability
and the Environment

25 June 2019

