HOTSPOTS FIRE PROJECT

Case Study: Getting on track with fire planning

What an achievement… 80 meetings, 2500 people, 18 months.

A new way of doing things

In NSW's Central West, landholders like Graham Brown reckon the key to successful fire management planning is to work together.

The winds of change

Graham Brown knows what it feels like to have a property in the line of fire. His property near Orange was burnt out in 1985. Like many others, Graham has a healthy respect for fire and takes an active interest in fire management planning. Until recently, individual property owners like Graham were mostly isolated in their efforts to protect their patch. Unfortunately, as those living near Goobang National Park can attest, fires cross boundaries and disregard tenure. The fires of summer 2001-02 jumped containment lines and burnt out 30,000 hectares, taking seven weeks to contain. While sometimes even the best planning cannot prevent such an event, it was time for a more coordinated approach to fire management across the landscape.

The Goobang fires coincided with a review of existing bushfire risk management planning for the region. The existing plan had largely been developed behind closed doors. It was generally perceived as having little relevance for land-holders, and as a document, was not easy to use. Seeing the opportunity for a better way of doing things, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service decided to go back to basics and ensure everyone was involved from the start. So for the first time, all land managers across the Canobolas zone were asked to come to the planning table.

This planning process, driven by the Rural Fire Service, involved private landholders, rural fire brigades, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forests NSW, local government in Orange, Cabonne, Cowra and Blayney, the Lands Department, the Nature Conservation Council, and the NSW Farmers Association. The goal was a plan for fire management that would protect life and assets as well as natural and cultural heritage across the broader landscape, irrespective of tenure. The resulting bush fire risk management plan would be referred to as the "Canobolas Plan."

For Graham, landholder input into the Canobolas Plan was critical. The new plan needed to incorporate areas that local people considered to be at risk, what they valued as assets, their ideas on what should be done to manage that risk and their knowledge of local fire history and fire paths.

Having represented farmers on the NSW Farmers Association for over ten years, Graham felt it had been a long time coming but was glad that all land managers could finally be involved. These days Graham represents landholders on the Canobolas Bush Fire Management Committee: a group committed to making sure the Canobolas Plan is carried out in the most effective way.

THE CANOBOLAS PLAN IN BRIEF

What it is: A map-based, bush fire risk management plan that provides a tenure blind, whole of landscape approach to bushfire management. The plan divides the landscape into different zones, allocates risk and then identifies a range of treatment options within each zone. Applying fire may not be the only treatment option.

Who it covers: The Canobolas zone includes the local government areas of Orange, Cabonne, Cowra, and Blayney Shires. The area covers 19,977km^2 including 310km^2 of state forest and 354 km^2 of national park. The plan covers private property, national park, state forest and crown land.

Community input: Information relating to the location of assets and fire history helps the Rural Fire Service with future planning. To remain up to date, changes to fire history are recorded annually and the plan is reviewed every 5 years. Talk to your local brigade about the next review for your local area.

The Canobolas difference

The approach taken for the development of the Canobolas Plan was a little different to any undertaken before, for a couple of reasons.

First, the Canobolas Plan saw the landscape as a whole, regardless of property boundaries or tenure. Working with fire naturally lends itself to this approach. This means government agencies, landholders and brigades are now working off the same plan.

Secondly, landholder involvement in identifying areas for asset protection, areas of risk, different fire management priorities and appropriate treatment options means the plan is 'by everyone, for everyone'.

Nature Conservation Council of NSW
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This project has been assisted by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust.

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Collaboration comes together

Like many others, Graham was initially concerned about how community consultation would be conducted and how it would be received. He imagined just being told what was going to happen with no real opportunity for landholders to contribute.

In the end, he was pleased with how it was handled. He credits David Hoadley from the Rural Fire Service and Alex Green from the National Parks and Wildlife Service with much of the success. Their approach was to keep it simple. They used topographic maps and aerial photographs so that landholders could identify their properties and help with the planning process right there and then. They brought clarity and confidence to the community by giving clear information and asking the right questions. For Graham, it was good to see landholders "become a living part of the plan".

Over 18 months the Rural Fire Service involved 2500 people in more than 80 meetings throughout the Canobolas zone, mostly through local brigades. With over 1530 brigade members, including 950 active volunteers, this was a significant achievement.

To plan across the broader landscape, the input and experience of other land managers was also needed. The National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forests NSW and local governments came on board to help develop the Canobolas Plan by sharing their valuable skills and experience.

Graham is quick to point out that fire management planning in the Canobolas zone is far from over: "the plan is a living document – it records changes to fire history annually – so it needs to be kept up to date." He encourages fellow landholders to help in planning future hazard reduction burns by letting the Rural Fire Service know where and when fires occur. This helps determine risk, priorities and resource allocation for the benefit of all.

Keeping up to date with fire history helps with future planning.

Many feel the collaboration which took place in developing the Canobolas Plan should be seen as a model for the state.

While fire planning will always be a controversial topic and Graham knows tricky issues will inevitably arise along the way, he feels that this time they are on the right track.

WHAT LAND MANAGERS CAN DO

Have your say when your local bush fire risk management plan comes up for review.

Stay informed. Talk with others and share your knowledge, observations and concerns. Seek advice from your local Rural Fire Service and other fire and vegetation experts.

Assist the Rural Fire Service in the planning of future hazard reduction burns by providing records of fire events and areas burnt.

Consider undertaking fire management planning in collaboration with your neighbours and local brigades to try to minimise the likelihood or impact of a devastating wildfire (recognising that sometimes even the best planning may not be enough to avert such a fire).

Acknowledgements

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Reading

Green, A. and Hoadley, D. (2004) 'Central West Bush Fire Management Project. Community consultation for local ownership of risk management planning' in *Bushfire in a Changing Environment*, proceedings of the 2004 NCC Conference on Ecologically Sustainable Bushfire Management, pp 81-89.

Further Information

The Hotspots Fire Project is funded by the New South Wales Government through its Environmental Trust. For further information contact the Project Coordinator on (02) 9279 2466, email hotspots@nccnsw.org.au or visit www.hotspotsfireproject.org.au.

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