

One step ahead

Quick results for the Hotspots Fire Project

By Lana Andrews, Jessica Wells, John Allen and Jamie Bertram.
Photos by NSW RFS and Jamie Bertram

Throughout 2011/12 the Hotspots Fire Project was very active in the Corindi Valley, on the State's Mid North Coast, with dramatic results in the 2012/13 fire season.



In August and again in October 2012, fires burned in the Corindi Valley but both were significantly contained due to excellent preparatory work by the NSW RFS and local landowners as part of the Hotspots Fire Project.

The Upper Sherwood Creek Fire, in late August 2012 was contained at 113 hectares when tracks identified during a Hotspots program were used to contain the bush fire and minimise the spread onto neighbouring properties.

The Plum Pudding Fire in the Conglomerate State Forest took off on 20 October 2012. The fire burned for nine days in the State Forest and had the potential to destroy life and property as well as damaging threatened species' habitats and rainforest. The fire was contained to only 1,000 hectares due to the response of local volunteers as well as

the excellent hazard reduction treatments on the properties on the perimeter of the fire.

The Corindi Hotspots Program in 2011/12 resulted in very good on-ground risk management outcomes improving both protection to the community as well as improving biodiversity values.

The Corindi Valley

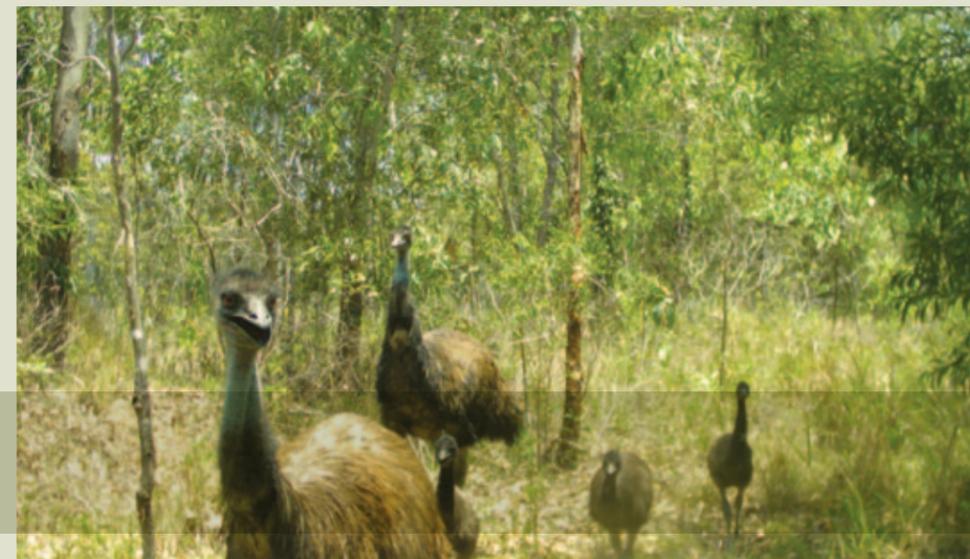
The Corindi Valley sits between Coffs Harbour and Yamba on the NSW Mid North Coast. It is within the traditional lands of the Gumbaynggirr people and the dominant land uses are grazing, horticulture, forestry and lifestyle farms. Landholders are drawn to the Corindi Valley for many reasons – beautiful forests, great beaches, productive farmland, fabulous views and a secluded and quiet lifestyle – and they live with bush fire risk every day.

Extreme Risk

The Corindi Valley is identified as Extreme Risk in the Mid North Coast Bush Fire Risk Management Plan. It has a history of significant high-intensity bush fires where losses of houses, structures, and horticultural assets have been significant.

With this history of frequent high intensity bush fires, the NSW RFS, Nature Conservation Council of NSW and several partner agencies, worked together to deliver community engagement and hazard reduction activities in the Corindi Valley throughout 2011/12 under the banner of the Hotspots Fire Project.

One of the main goals of Hotspots Fire Project is to work with landholders to help them understand their level of risk, and the biodiversity and cultural values in their local area.



TOP: Local landholders work together with neighbours and representatives from other agencies to create a fire management plan for their property.

LEFT: An important family sighting: monitoring cameras detect a family of coastal emus at a Hotspots burn site.

The Hotspots Fire Project is a State-wide, interagency program which uses a collaborative approach to managing fire for biodiversity and risk. It was established in 2005 and is delivered by the NSW RFS and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW. The NSW RFS are a key project partner providing staff, volunteers and resources to the program.

So far, across NSW the Hotspots Fire Project has delivered 109 workshops to 1,493 landholders developing 640 fire management plans covering over 140,000 hectares.

In the Corindi Valley in 2011/12 the Hotspots program kickstarted the following mitigation activities:

- Two Hotspots workshops attended by 33 landholders from diverse backgrounds
- 22 Fire Management Plans covering 1,677 hectares
- 12 Hazard Reduction Certificate Applications
- Six hazard reduction burns, with RFS assistance at four burns
- Five APZ mechanical works
- A monitoring program for the endangered North Coast Emu
- Firewise training and Bush Fire Survival Plans completed

Following on from the community engagement work during Hotspots, a Community Protection Plan has been initiated for the Red Rock community which is located in the Corindi area.

Hotspots ran two workshops with landholders in 2012, covering information on risk and biodiversity, as well as developing a fire management plan and information on how to plan and conduct a small prescribed burn.

"Knowing that there are treatments that can be done to minimise the loss of assets is a great thing," said one Corindi participant.

"We believe the program is a sensible approach," wrote another participant, "we are able to have a well maintained property to protect us against the threat of fire."

As a result of the program, several Hazard Reduction Certificate (HRC) applications were received by the NSW RFS Mid North Coast Customer

Service Centre. This resulted in an increase in hazard reduction activities in the area, many of which were carried out with assistance from State Mitigation Support Services (SMSS).

When the fires at Upper Sherwood Creek Fire in August and Plum Pudding Fire in October took off, the Hotspots work was put to the test. The results underscored the importance of preparation and community engagement in the work of the protecting the community from bush fire.

Quicker response

The relationships between landholders and firefighting agencies established through Hotspots led to a rapid response to the bush fire attack.

Local community able to make better decisions

Throughout both fires the local community were able to make better decisions and take responsibility, working together with their neighbours and the fire agencies.

Fire prevention

Perhaps most importantly, the reduction of hazard and preparation of the land had made the fires less dangerous and less likely to spread.

Hazard reduction work in the area around Murphy's Road helped contain the Plum Pudding Fire in October. Prior to this fire, all the residents along Murphy's Road had some type of treatment put in place on their properties. Treatments ranged from extensions to APZs (Asset Protection Zones) around dwellings and along fence lines, to control line identification for future treatment. All the properties along this road were well prepared for the impact from fire due to the amount of treatment that had occurred.

The Upper Sherwood Creek Fire, which started on 27 August 2012 burnt an area of 113 hectares. Approximately 30 hectares of that was on one Hotspots participants' property. Prior to the fire, NSW RFS staff had undertaken a property assessment following on from the Hotspots workshop, and internal tracks had been identified to be used for future control lines for a planned burn. These tracks were used to contain the bush fire and minimise the spread onto neighbouring properties.

Managing fire for biodiversity

Maintaining and improving biodiversity is one of the key aims of the Hotspots Fire Project and in Corindi the endangered North Coast Emu was of concern.

The North Coast Emu is an endangered population whose habitat stretches from Corindi, north of Coffs Harbour, west to Main Camp, south of Casino and north to Evans Head. Many of the Hotspots prescribed burns are within areas identified as Emu

habitat with landholders keen to encourage the birds onto their land. Monitoring cameras were set up at one such site to determine if the birds utilised the site post fire. The cameras confirmed a family of North Coast Emus, two adults and three juveniles passing through the burn area. The recent breeding activity was a welcome sign in an area where the Emus are on the decline.

Building trust within the community

The Corindi Hotspots Program has resulted in greater community trust between the NSW RFS, other public land managers and the local community.

The benefits that have flowed into the local community from the Hotspots Program have been significant. Plans are for the work to continue in 2013/14.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to NSW RFS staff and volunteers, the Nature Conservation Council of

NSW, National Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Corporation for delivery of the Corindi Hotspots Program.

Thanks to Yarrawarra Aboriginal Cultural Centre for hosting the Hotspots Program.

We would also like to thank our project partners for their ongoing commitment to the Hotspots Program.

Further information

Visit www.hotspotsfireproject.org.au or contact the Hotspots Fire Project on 02 8741 5555 (NSW RFS), email hotspots@rfs.nsw.gov.au or 02 9516 0359 (Nature Conservation Council of NSW), email info@hotspotsfireproject.org.au

BELOW LEFT TOP: RFS members assisting landholders create Property Fire Management Plans. BELOW LEFT LOWER: On the second day of the Hotspots workshop participants observed a hazard reduction burn. BELOW: Hotspots facilitator John Allen shows landholders some of their local species

