

CONSERVATION COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

POLICY NO : 50 *FIRE IN THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT*

ADOPTED : JANUARY 1996

BACKGROUND

Naturally caused fires have always been part of the Australian environment, and Australia's flora, fauna and ecosystems have adaptations that allow them to survive, and in some cases benefit from, natural fire regimes, with frequencies ranging up to several centuries.

The vegetation over most of the continent was also subjected to many thousands of years of burning by Aboriginal people, which, over time, may have altered many ecosystems. However, reliable information about Aboriginal burning is generally scarce.

Judging from the evidence of, for example, fire scars in tree trunks and changes in the composition of plant and animal species, it is apparent that European settlement in Western Australia, begun in 1829, has drastically changed both the natural and Aboriginal fire regimes and in much of the State has greatly increased the frequency and extent of intense fires.

Faced with the destructive impacts of unwanted fires (wildfires) in natural areas, land managers in Western Australia have implemented a program of deliberate pre-emptive burning to reduce the amount of flammable vegetation and thereby the extent and intensity of wildfires. This burning is called 'prescribed', 'controlled', 'hazard reduction' or 'fuel reduction' burning. A more accurate name is 'pre-emptive' burning.*

For example, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) practises pre-emptive burning throughout much of the land it manages. It conducts pre-emptive burns every five to seven years in the jarrah forest and every six to eight years in the karri forest, including the forest in conservation reserves. It also regularly burns heathlands wetlands in both State forest and conservation reserves.

CALM says that pre-emptive burning is essential to protect life and property and, in the South West, the timber in State forest, especially pine plantations and immature post-logging regrowth.

In the South West, like CALM, many volunteer bush fire brigades, country shires and other land managers practise frequent regular pre-emptive burning, mainly in Spring. This is the worst possible time for most native flora and fauna.

Many pre-emptive burns become very hot, and some escape and burn larger areas than intended. Escaped pre-emptive burns have destroyed property and burnt out pasture and crops as well as bushland, and pre-emptive burns have even resulted in the death of people.

Most native flora and fauna and natural ecosystems are not adapted to the current fire regime and are rapidly being altered and degraded by it, probably irreversibly.

There is evidence that pre-emptive burns actually increase the amount of flammable material because they promote the growth of weeds and native plants that respond prolifically to fire and interrupt the processes that decompose plant material lying on the ground.

For reasons of economy, in many instances very large areas are lit from aircraft and burnt in a single fire. These burns leave most native fauna no chance to escape. Fauna that does survive may have no food, no shelter from predators and nowhere to live.

Pre-emptive burns release considerable quantities of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and cause serious air pollution. This makes them a significant health hazard.

There is considerable scientific evidence which shows that under the current fire regime, many natural ecosystems do not have time to recover from one pre-emptive burn before the next occurs. However, while some effort is being made to reduce the size of burns and decrease their frequency in order to protect biodiversity, the public is still being offered no option for fire protection and management other than frequent, regular, extensive pre-emptive burning.

POLICY

The Conservation Council believes that the environmental, financial and health costs of WA's current fire protection and management in natural areas, which rely almost entirely on frequent, regular, extensive pre-emptive burning, are too high. Instead, the Council believes that fire protection and management in natural areas should rely on:

1. Formulating and enforcing regulations to minimise the human causes of unwanted fires (wildfires) and imposing heavy penalties for breaches. As a matter of urgency, research must be conducted into the reasons for arson and the findings incorporated into fire protection and management policies and practices.
2. Responding to wildfires very rapidly, as soon as they start.
3. Improving wildfire detection, emergency communication systems, firefighting equipment and mobilisation procedures, and providing the funds necessary to fully resource them.
4. Improving liaison between firefighting agencies, including developing a formal code of cooperation between firefighters, to achieve the objective of putting out fires very rapidly, as soon as they start.
5. Having well-trained, well-equipped fire suppression units patrolling high fire-risk areas in the South-West throughout the fire season, to deter arson and detect and put out wildfires as soon as they start.
6. Controlling the expansion of urban development and settlement into fire-prone areas.
7. Encouraging land-occupiers to build and maintain their homes so that they are as fire-proof as feasible, and their surrounds are effective fire-buffers.

8. Placing strategic buffers around vulnerable towns, settlements and property in need of protection from wildfire. In the buffers, the amount of flammable vegetation must be minimised, preferably by mechanical means (slashing, mowing, raking, pruning, thinning) or, as a last resort, by burning.
9. Educating the whole community, especially land managers and firefighters, about the serious ecological damage now being caused by fire, including pre-emptive burning, in natural areas.
10. Educating the whole community about what to do in case of wildfire.
11. Keeping people out of fire-prone natural areas during periods of high fire hazard.
12. Developing fire protection and management plans for all natural areas and incorporating them into an overall fire management plan for each region. The plans will aim to protect sensitive areas from wildfire and to have a wide range of age for post-fire regeneration
13. Not burning natural areas when they are not adjacent to populated areas or property in need of protection from wildfire except for demonstrated ecological reasons.
14. Conducting research into Aboriginal burning and, where appropriate, incorporating the findings into fire protection and management policies and practices.
15. Investigating and evaluating the effectiveness and impacts of current pre-emptive burning and of ecologically sustainable alternatives to pre-emptive burning, and incorporating the findings into fire protection and management policies and practices.
16. Establishing a large number of sizeable 'no planned burn' control areas in all ecosystem types to investigate the long-term effects of 'no burn' management on natural ecosystems and ground fuel levels, and incorporating the findings into fire protection and management policies and practices.
17. Investigating the use of methods other than burning to assist regeneration in forest after it has been logged.

*Since the expression 'prescribed burning' covers several types of legal, planned burning (e.g., the burns conducted after logging to reduce logging debris and assist regeneration, the so-called 'regeneration burns'), a better name for burning conducted to reduce the extent and intensity of wildfires is 'pre-emptive burning'.