



Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee

MEETING MINUTES

Meeting:	No. 107 Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee (BFCC)
Location:	Via MS Teams and Berrigan Meeting Room, NSW RFS, 4 Murray Rose Avenue, Sydney Olympic Park NSW 2127
Date and time:	12 October 2023 – 1030
Members:	Commissioner Rob Rogers AFSM, NSW Rural Fire Service (Chair) Mr Scott Donohoe, Fire and Rescue NSW (<i>Representing DC Megan Stiffler FRNSW</i>) Deputy Commissioner Peter Thurtell APM, NSW Police Force Dr Atticus Fleming AM, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Mr Scott Vale, NSW Department of Planning, Industry & Environment – Crown Lands (<i>Representing Mr George Schneider</i>) Dr Ross Dickson, Forestry Corporation of NSW Dr Leigh Pilkington, NSW Department of Primary Industries Mr Greg Mullins AO AFSM, representing the Minister for the Environment Mr Robert Conroy, Nature Conservation Council of NSW Mr Garry Grant, NSW Farmers Mr Simon Davis, NSW Reconstruction Authority (<i>Representing Mr Dominic Lane</i>) Cr Julie Griffiths, Local Government NSW Cr Giacomo Arnott, Local Government NSW Superintendent Liz Ferris AFSM, NSW Rural Fire Service Association Mr Kim de Govrik, NSW Public Service Association Mr Scott Campbell, NSW Rural Fire Service Association
Attendees:	Deputy Commissioner Peter McKechnie AFSM, NSW Rural Fire Service Assistant Commissioner Ben Millington, NSW Rural Service Assistant Commissioner Stuart Midgley AFSM, NSW Rural Fire Service (<i>Representing DC Stewart</i>) Dr Simon Heemstra, NSW Rural Fire Service Ms Jane Hollier, NSW Rural Fire Service (<i>Representing Ms Renee Armstrong</i>) Ms Rebel Talbert, Forestry Corporation of NSW Ms Naomi Stephens, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service Mr Shaun McBride, Local Government NSW Ms Sarah Stone, NSW Aboriginal Land Council (<i>Representing Mr Yuseph Deen</i>) Ms Teresa Stambe, NSW Rural Fire Service
Apologies:	Ms Tanya Koeneman, NSW Department of Primary Industries (Cultural Burning) Deputy Commissioner Kyle Stewart APM, NSW Rural Fire Service Ms Renee Armstrong, NSW Rural Fire Service Mr Dominic Lane, NSW Reconstruction Authority (formerly Resilience NSW) Deputy Commissioner Megan Stiffler, Fire and Rescue NSW Ms Kate Woods, NSW Rural Fire Service
Non-attendees	Mr Leighton Drury, Fire Brigade Employees Union
Minutes by:	Committees, NSW Rural Fire Service

1 Welcome and Apologies

The Chair opened Meeting 107 and noted apologies received. The Chair welcomed newly-appointed member Mr Greg Mullins to his first meeting, acknowledging his significant experience and the valuable contribution he would make to the Committee.

The Chair declared the meeting open at 1030.

2 Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were declared.

3 Acceptance of Minutes

The minutes of BFCC Meeting 106, held on 27 July 2023, were tabled and accepted.

Decision 107.1 The Committee resolved to endorse the minutes of Meeting 106, held on 27 July 2023 for signature by the Chair.

4 Open Action Items

The Action Items were tabled and all actions discussed. The Action Items have been updated in accordance with the discussions (refer to Table 1).

Decision 107.2 The Committee resolved to note the Open Action Items.

5. Correspondence

The Correspondence Register was tabled and noted.

Decision 107.3 The Committee resolved to note the Correspondence Register.

6 Standing Items

6.1 Operations Co-ordination Plan update

AC Millington provided an update on the progress of the revised plan endorsed in the previous meeting. Eighty-four per cent of committees had submitted their revised templates by the target completion date of 30 September, with some delays attributed to operational activities, such as in the Snowy Monaro region. The revised templates would be reviewed and submitted to the Commissioner for approval. The BFCC policy also was being revised to align with the changes. The plans and revised policy would be circulated for endorsement either out of session or at the next BFCC meeting.

Cr Arnott raised concerns from the Midwestern Council regarding the Home Rule Fire. Council queried whether the BFRMP needed to be reviewed as it had not identified the area burnt as having any particular risks or mitigation factors but a number of houses had been lost. The Chair advised the RFS would seek clarification from the Council as it had been reported an abandoned house and three sheds had been destroyed. DC McKechnie asked Cr Arnott to provide a Council contact so the District Manager could discuss the matter with Council.

Action 107.1 AC Millington to circulate the revised Operations Co-ordination Plans and revised BFCC Policy for endorsement out of session.

Action 107.2 Cr Arnott to provide DC McKechnie with contact details for Midwestern Council.

Decision 107.4 The Committee resolved to note the Operations Co-ordination Plans report.

6.2 Bush Fire Risk Management Plans (BFRMPs)

The Status of Bush Fire Risk Management Plans was tabled and taken as read.

Dr Heemstra discussed the progress of BFRMP development. The Hunter Valley plan had now been approved and the Sutherland, Coffs Harbour and Hunter Hills plans were on public exhibition.

Mr Conroy noted the value of the information provided on submissions during consultation on BFRMPs, asking that this information be provided to the committee in the future as more plans were finalised to enable the success

of the consultation process to be assessed. The Chair agreed a report would be provided once sufficient plans had been finalised to provide meaningful data.

Action 107.3 A report to be provided to the Committee on community input to BFRMPs once a sufficient number of plans have been finalised to provide meaningful data.

Decision 107.5 The Committee resolved to note the status of the Bush Fire Risk Management Plans.

6.3 Status of Fire Access and Fire Trail (FAFT) Plans

The Status of Fire Access and Fire Trail (FAFT) Plans was tabled and taken as read.

Decision 107.6 The Committee resolved to note the FAFT Plans Report.

7 Standing Advisory Sub-Committee (SAS) Progress Report

The Standing Advisory Sub-Committee (SAS) Progress Report was tabled and taken as read.

DC McKechnie noted Agenda Item 10, which related to Annexure F of BFCC Policy 1/2023 – Bush Fire Risk Management. If endorsed by the Committee, this would mark the completion of an extensive piece of work.

The draft BFMC Handbook review would be distributed to agencies out of session. DC McKechnie sought BFCC endorsement for the working group established by SAS to review the BFMC Handbook to continue work to address training requirements for BFMC members. This was supported to ensure the BFMC members had a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities and information systems. Mr Conroy noted the NCC would like to be involved in the development of training packages.

Decision 107.8 The Committee endorsed continuing work by the BFMC Handbook review working group to address BFMC training requirements.

Decision 107.7 The Committee resolved to note the Standing Advisory Sub-committee Report.

8 Hazard Reduction Report

The Hazard Reduction Report was tabled and taken as read.

AC Midgley spoke to the report, noting 44,000 hectares of work had been recorded as completed with reporting yet to be finalised in the Guardian system. A 50% completion rate was attributed to a significant carryover of proposed work. The Chair thanked fire services and land management agencies for their collaboration in achieving good progress, with the priority on continuing this work when conditions permitted. He reminded agencies to close Guardian records so that reporting data remained up to date, noting he was confident a number of recent large burns had taken the area treated to more than 50,000 hectares.

Mr Conroy noted some districts had performed exceptionally well in meeting hazard reduction targets but others were falling behind, possibly due to weather-related conditions and he had hoped to see more work on Asset Protection Zones, which was not so weather-dependent. The Chair advised efforts were being made to support regions that were lagging behind others.

Mr Conroy asked whether 445 fire permits issued on the Far North Coast were for sugar cane burning. The Chair advised permits were counted as hazard reduction burns only if their primary purpose was hazard reduction. The Chair also noted there was interest in streamlining the permit application process for regions where sugar cane burning was common to make it more efficient for applicants. It was noted the online permit system through Guardian was a tool for managing permits more effectively in the future.

The Chair acknowledged NPWS for its proactive approach in continuing to carry out hazard reduction whenever possible, including three burns during the past week.

A copy of the Hazard Reduction Presentation is to be circulated with the draft meeting minutes.

Action 107.4 Secretariat to circulate hazard reduction presentation with the meeting minutes.

Decision 107.9 The Committee resolved to note the Hazard Reduction Report.

9 NSW RFS Fire Trail Standards

The progress of the review of the NSW RFS Fire Trail Standards was tabled and taken as read

Dr Heemstra noted the Standards Review group had met in August and undertaken a comprehensive review of the Fire Trail Standards, with feedback from various agencies resulting in pragmatic solutions to make the standards more practical. The edits would be finalised and presented for approval out of session. Once approved, they would be circulated.

Mr Campbell raised concerns about some agencies wanting a reduction in the number of turning bays and a narrowing of some of the trails. Dr Heemstra advised there had been discussions around passing bays and turning bays, with a 250 metre distance between passing bays agreed, where possible in the landscape. Mr Campbell noted it would be a concern if the proposed reductions were driven by cost savings.

Action 107.5 Dr Heemstra to finalise Fire Trail Standards and send approved standards out of session.

Decision 107.10 The Committee resolved to note the progress of the review of the NSW RFS Fire Trail Standards.

10 Review of BFCC Policy 1/2023 – Bush Fire Risk Management

The Review of BFCC Policy 1/2023 – Bush Fire Risk Management was tabled and taken as read.

DC McKechnie noted this was the last part of the referred items for SAS and with the Co-ordinating Committee approval the review could be closed.

Ms Talbert queried the timing of the Guardian integration for the works plans. AC Midgley advised accessing the plan and creating the work plan links in Guardian would not be in place until June 2024. The Chair advised this would need to be done manually until this time to ensure the old and new data was captured. Ms O'Halloran mentioned efforts had been made to work with the Guardian team to find a solution for incorporating the new treatments in the existing model of Guardian. There would be some manual data entry required but it would allow reporting against the new work plans. The Chair stated the ultimate goal was to create a system where all data was linked to aims, objectives and strategies, allowing for the evaluation of whether responsibilities had been effectively met. Ms Talbert queried if a guidance document could be provided to BFMCs to bridge the gap before the system changes. The Chair commented that clear communication to BFMCs outlining timeframes, expectations and reporting would address the issue from an agency point of view.

Ms Stephens noted there was a need to access annual work plans from a central location so that they could be integrated with agency systems and programs. AC Midgley advised that the release of Guardian 2 should create the layer to do this.

Mr Conroy acknowledged the quality of the consultation process and the effectiveness of the feedback and response mechanisms providing comments on whether the feedback was supported or not.

Action 107.6 A guidance document be provided to BFMCs to bridge the gap before the Guardian system changes

Decision 107.11 The Committee resolved to adopt the BFCC Policy 1/2023 – Bush Fire Risk Management – Annexure F – Reporting and Monitoring.

11 General Business

Fire Fighting Activity

The Chair acknowledged good outcomes during recent fire activity, recognising the efforts of RFS, FRNSW and National Parks firefighters. Two properties were lost during the Bega Valley fire, despite the potential for greater destruction. The Chair noted the challenges of raising awareness about the fire season without causing panic, especially in communities still recovering from past fire events.

School closures

The Chair raised the issue of school closures during extreme fire danger ratings. Fire behaviour indices exceeding 75 trigger a school closure, which can have a significant impact on communities and the safety of children. The Chair advised the RFS would focus over the next 12 months on working with schools in high-risk areas to make them more self-sustainable and safer for students during elevated fire conditions.

Communication between combat agencies

Mr de Govrik asked if there were an update on work to improve communication between combat agencies as recommended in the NSW Bushfire Inquiry. The Chair noted increasing ESO channels was part of a national project that was also specifically addressing cross-border communication. The Telco Authority has carriage of the project.

Mr Mullins queried if there was an issue with the spectrum and the desire for bandwidth to share video. The Chair clarified that it was the connectivity between the different technologies that was the challenge. Progress had been made in Queensland but Victoria had some challenges. DC McKechnie confirmed 22 ESO channels were shared between FRNSW and the RFS. The Chair noted there was a cultural challenge in having all agencies operating on a common channel because it would require them to leave their existing channels. Mature discussion was needed to address the issue effectively.

Mr Donohoe noted good progress had been made and there were similarities with bandwidth and the use of fire ground channels at tactical and task level.

CASA height restrictions

Mr Mullins queried CASA height restrictions imposed on aircraft. The Chair advised the restrictions were put in place by Coulson (not CASA) to provide a buffer in case of emergencies, with no performance issues reported. He noted the ATSB report on the 2019/20 LAT crash had changed the way agencies, particularly the RFS, viewed and absorbed risk.

Plan of Operations

Cr Griffiths commended agencies for the clear and precise Plan of Operations documentation and acknowledged the excellent work put in by the agencies. AC Millington to pass on congratulations to the team.

Seasonal Outlook

Mr Mullins raised concerns about the seasonal outlook for the upcoming summer. The Chair noted two major areas of concern were bushland that did not burn in the 2019/20 season, especially around Sydney, and extensive grasslands. He was concerned about firefighters who had not experienced large grass fire seasons and the potential danger of grass fires being underestimated. The importance of preparedness was reiterated.

Recommendations from the NSW Bushfire Inquiry

Noting a number of the Inquiry recommendations referred to the BFCC, Mr Conroy asked for a report to the next meeting on completed recommendations.

Bush Fire Protection for Existing Development Mr Conroy noted he had received questions from NCC members about the status of the policy document for bush fire protection for existing developments. The Chair advised he believed this had been contained within the update to Planning for Bush Fire Protection. Mr Vale advised a draft guideline had been in place for six or seven years but had not been formally adopted. Crown Lands had built a tool and developed a special system completing around 22,000 assessments using the draft guideline. Mr Vale offered to provide a demonstration at the next meeting.

Aerial Fire Trail Inspection

Mr Vale reported that DPIE/Crown Lands had recently completed an aerial fire trail inspection of 702 fire trails. The flight path for the inspection covered 15,000km. Approximately 185 fire trails were found to be non-accessible. The Chair noted this information would be passed on to BFMCs.

Action 107.7 Mr Vale to present the BPED bush fire protection guideline tool and system used by DPE at the next Co-ordinating Committee meeting.

Action 107.8 NSW Bushfire Inquiry recommendations to be reported at next BFCC meeting.

Decision 107.12 The Committee resolved to note the matters of general business raised by members.

The Chair declared the meeting closed at 1141.