



Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee (BFCC)

MINUTES

Meeting:	No. 109 Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee (BFCC)
Location:	Berrigan Meeting Room, NSW RFS, 4 Murray Rose Avenue, Sydney Olympic Park NSW 2127 and via MS TEAMS
Date and time:	Thursday, 16 May 2024 – 1030 - 1230
Members:	Commissioner Rob Rogers AFSM, RFS (Chair) Dr Atticus Fleming AM, NSW National Parks, and Wildlife Service Mr George Schneider, Department of Planning, Housing, and Infrastructure (DPHI) – Crown Lands Dr Ross Dickson, Forestry Corporation of NSW Dr Leigh Pilkington, NSW Department of Primary Industries Mr Robert Conroy, Nature Conservation Council of NSW Mr Garry Grant, NSW Farmers Cr Julie Griffiths, Local Government NSW Mr Scott Campbell, NSW Rural Fire Service Association Mr Kim de Govrik, NSW Public Service Association
Other Attendees:	Superintendent Joshua Trevillion, NSW Police Force (<i>Representing DC Peter Thurtell APM</i>) Deputy Commissioner Peter McKechnie AFSM, RFS Deputy Commissioner Kyle Stewart APM, RFS Ms Debbie Andreatta, A/Executive Director Technology, Finance & Legal, RFS Dr Simon Heemstra, Director Community Risk, RFS Ms Laura Wythes, A/Director State Operations, RFS Assistant Commissioner Stuart Midgley AFSM, RFS Ms Renee Armstrong, Director, Office of the Commissioner, RFS Mr Matthew White, Manager Operational Platforms, RFS Mr Paul Best, Supervisor Fire Trail Implementation, RFS Superintendent Scott Donohoe, Fire & Rescue NSW Ms Sarah Stone, NSW Aboriginal Land Council (<i>Representing Mr Yuseph Deen</i>)
Observers:	Ms Rebel Talbert, Forestry Corporation of NSW Mr Cameron Chaffey, NSW National Parks, and Wildlife Service Ms Naomi Stephens, NSW National Parks, and Wildlife Service
Apologies:	Deputy Commissioner Megan Stiffler, Fire and Rescue NSW Deputy Commissioner Peter Thurtell APM, NSW Police Force Mr Greg Mullins AO AFSM, representing the Minister for the Environment Cr Giacomo Arnott, Local Government NSW Superintendent Liz Ferris AFSM, NSW Rural Fire Service Association Ms Melissa O'Halloran

Members not in attendance:	Mr Leighton Drury, Fire Brigade Employees Union
	Ms Natalie Rotumah, Native Title Services (NTS) Corp
Secretariat	Ms Kate Woods, Manager Committees and Ministerial Services, RFS
	Ms Teresa Stambe, Committees, RFS
Minutes by:	Committees, RFS

1 Acknowledgement of Country, Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed all to Meeting 109 and noted apologies from DC Thurtell, DC Stiffler, Superintendent Ferris, Mr Mullins and Cr Arnott. The Chair welcomed Cr Randall from the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, who was attending as an observer.

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 108, held on 19 March 2024, were tabled, and accepted.

Decision 109.1 The Committee resolved to endorse the minutes of Meeting 108, held on 19 March 2024, for signature by the Chair.

4 Open Action Items

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

Decision 109.2 The Committee resolved to note the Open Action Items.

5 Correspondence

The Correspondence Register was tabled and noted.

Decision 109.3 The Committee resolved to note the Correspondence Register.

6 Report on status of Bush Fire Protection for Existing Development (BPED) Guide

Dr Heemstra provided an update on the progress of the BPED Guide. Revisions had been made based on input from the RFS Working Group and feedback from Crown Lands. The RFS Legal team would conduct a review of the guide. The aim was to finalise the document in coming months for release alongside the Hazard Compliance Handbook.

Ms Stephens questioned the timeline for agencies to review the document for review and endorsement as it was important for NPWS to provide input. The Chair clarified that the document was owned by the RFS and not the BFCC. It would, however, be shared with agencies for feedback.

Action 109.1 The Bushfire Protection for Existing Development (BPED) Guide to be shared with agencies for feedback.

Decision 109.3 The Committee resolved to note the status of the Bush Fire Protection for Existing Development Guide.

7 Report on status of the implementation of the FAFT treatment register

Mr Best provided presentation on Fire Trails Implementation.

Mr Best outlined the significant progress made in upgrading and maintaining fire trails across various districts and agencies.

With Fire Access and Fire Trail Plans (FAFT) approved, ongoing efforts are focused on high priority trails as identified by the annual treatment register. A new focus on functional maintenance would ensure existing trails remained accessible, with \$1.1 million allocated to maintain 600km of trails.

Mr Best acknowledged inconsistencies in application across districts and the need for alignment among fire trail officers. Work was under way to address these challenges, including through improved field data collection and the use of consistent digital records to replace manual processes.

Mr Conroy raised concerns about standard symbology and inconsistencies in mapping non-vehicular tracks. Mr Best noted that symbols were in development and the next generation of FAFT Plans would aim to provide clear guidelines for marking non-vehicular tracks, improving overall accuracy and functionality.

Mr Schneider enquired about detailed data of fire trail certification, including on private and other land holdings. Mr Best noted gathering such data would be a manual process but undertook to provide it at the next BFCC meeting.

Mr Schneider also raised concerns about the adequacy of the \$1.1 million maintenance budget for 600km of trails. Mr Best clarified that the maintenance budget covered minor works like vegetation clearance and minor surface repairs, not full upgrades, with the latter costing significantly more per kilometre. The Chair agreed with the concerns about maintenance funding and encouraged all agencies to advocate to Treasury for adequate funding to ensure the sustainability of upgraded fire trails.

Action 109.2 RFS to confirm the status of developed symbols.

Action 109.3 Mr Best to provide data on fire trail certifications by land tenure to the next BFCC meeting.

Decision 109.3 The Committee resolved to note the status of the implementation of the FAFT Treatment Register.

8 Report on the changes to Fire Trail Standards and data management practices

Dr Heemstra noted the new Fire Trail Standards had been gazetted on 1 December 2023. Regular consultation with landowners had occurred through the reference group. Forestry Corporation had raised issues regarding the consideration of fire roads, which would be discussed within the

reference group. A table outlining changes to the standards had been included to assist in clarifying the changes made.

Decision 109.3 The Committee resolved to note the changes to fire trail standards and data management practices.

9 Coronial Report into 2019/20 bush fires

Ms Andreatta noted the NSW Coroner had handed down her findings and recommendations at the end of March. The RFS was examining the 28 recommendations directed to it and would compile a comprehensive report for the Attorney General by the September deadline. Several recommendations relating to aviation had already been implemented due to their alignment with findings from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau report into the 2020 Large Air Tanker crash and others would have significant resource implications. The Chair recognised the importance of addressing agency concerns and interests and invited members of the BFCC to voice any relevant issues related to the recommendations in order to ensure that all agency perspectives were considered in the Government's response to the Coroner. Agency concerns should be addressed to the Chair and copied to Ms Andreatta.

The Chair advised that the RFS was seeking official advice on releasing the University of Wollongong (UoW) study report on backburning, which had been part of the brief of evidence to the Coroner. In the interim, Dr Heemstra presented a high level summary of the research. The findings indicated that approximately half of the back burns undertaken in 2019/20 had effectively reduced the fire impact, while a third had no impact due to various reasons such as the fire not reaching them or other suppression methods intervening. A small percentage of back burns either slowed the fire or had no impact, with a minor proportion worsening the fire situation.

Dr Heemstra also discussed ongoing efforts to improve back burning practices, including the development of new operational guidelines, improved data recording in the ICON system and the implementation policies for independent reviews of strategic back burns. The presentation is attached to the minutes.

Action 109.4 Release of the UoW backburning study report to the Committee, pending formal approval.

Decision 109.3 The Committee resolved to note the update on the NSW Coroner's Report on the 2019/20 bush fire season.

Decision 109.4 The Committee resolved to note the presentation on the UoW backburning research report.

10 Bush Fire Risk Management – Have Your Say Analysis

Dr Heemstra discussed the innovative use of "Have Your Say" surveys as part of the community engagement process in the development of next generation Bush Fire Risk Management Plans. The surveys had been implemented by 28 Bush Fire Risk Management Committees (BFMCs) to date. It was noted that AI technology had been used to analyse open text responses providing insights into community concerns.

Key findings highlighted distinct concerns across different regions, such as vulnerable populations and environmental conservation in the North East, evacuation procedures and communication in the Blue Mountains and evacuation procedures and vegetation management on the Far South Coast. The analysis highlighted that there was widespread perception of high bush fire risk within communities and this would aid BFMCs in tailoring local engagement and plans.

The Chair noted the importance of ongoing updates on survey results to inform future policy and community education strategies. The continuous feedback ensured ongoing improvement and relevance in risk management planning which was a key focus for BFCC.

Decision 109.5 The Committee resolved to note the BFRMP Have Your Say Survey Analysis.

11 Report on Guardian 2 development

Mr White gave a presentation on Guardian Phase 2. The presentation is attached to the minutes.

The discussion included how Guardian 2 would integrate with existing systems and the involvement of multiple agencies. The system aimed to improve data capture, specifically for permits and fire notifications, addressing historical challenges in rural areas.

Members raised questions about the involvement of other agencies, the usability of the system and future plans for further development and integration. It was noted that Guardian Phase 2 development had been informed by feedback and experience with the current operational Guardian system since 2021. Phase 2 would ensure a more efficient and integrated approach to fire management and reporting across different agencies.

Action 109.5 A report on Guardian Phase 2 Change Management and Annual Works Plan implementation to be provided to SAS.

Decision 109.6 The Committee resolved to note the update on Guardian Phase 2 project.

12 Standing Items

12.1 Operations Co-ordination Plans update

The report on Operations Co-ordination Plans was tabled and taken as read. Ms Wythes confirmed all current Operations Co-ordination Plans had been endorsed for implementation.

Decision 109.7 The Committee resolved to note the Operations Co-ordination Plans report.

12.2 Bush Fire Risk Management Plans (BFRMPs)

The report on Bush Fire Risk Management Plans was tabled and taken as read. Dr Heemstra noted seven BFRMPs had been approved. It was expected that a significant number of plans would reach final approval shortly, aligning with the new policy framework.

Decision 109.8 The Committee resolved to note the status of the Bush Fire Risk Management Plans report.

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

The Status of Fire Access and Fire Trail Plans report was tabled and taken as read.

Dr Heemstra referred to the final stages of the Guardian Phase 2 program for management and support of FAFT planning, with a pilot using the new process to be conducted in the next six months.

Decision 109.9 The Committee resolved to note the FAFT Plans Report.

13 Standing Advisory Sub-Committee (SAS) Progress Report

The Standing Advisory Sub-Committee Progress Report was tabled and taken as read. DC McKechnie noted ongoing work with the NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSW RA) regarding Section 44 Payment and Reimbursement and Make Safe Provisions.

The Chair informed the Committee he had raised these matters during a recent meeting with the new A/Chief Executive Officer of NSW RA, noting a commitment to work through and resolve issues collaboratively.

Decision 109.10 The Committee resolved to note the Standing Advisory Sub-Committee Progress Report.

13.1 Operations Co-ordination Plans Policy

DC McKechnie spoke to the report, noting a collaborative effort among multiple agencies in developing approved operations plans and a new policy framework. Stakeholder feedback, particularly from the NPWS and NCC, had been incorporated but an additional suggested amendment from the Forestry Corporation regarding paragraph 3.4 of the proposed policy would be incorporated into the final document.

The Committee endorsed the policy with the recommended amendment, specifying that “Class 2 will be made by the relevant fire service in consultation with the relevant BFMC Fire Classification Group”.

Ms Stephens asked about a possible review of Annexure C - minimum impact suppression guidelines to better protect environmental and cultural values, potentially before the 2025/26 fire season. Mr Conroy proposed reformatting the appendix to focus more on the values to be protected rather than the tactics employed.

The Committee discussed the feasibility of conducting a full review before the 2025/26 season and the fact that the guidelines were to assist Incident Management teams to ensure they took those values into account, balanced against the operational requirements to combat a fire.

The Chair asked Mr Fleming, as the NPWS Committee member, if he wished to put forward a formal motion seeking a review of Annexure C. Upon his concurrence, the Committee agreed to refer the matter to SAS for further assessment.

The Chair asked Ms Stephens to provide information on the issues that NPWS sought to address.

Action 109.6 Paragraph 3.4 of the draft Operations Co-ordination Plans Policy for the management of Bush Fire Operations to be amended and the finalised policy issued.

Action 109.7 The feasibility of undertaking a full review of Appendix C of the Operations Co-ordination Plans Policy before the 2025/26 bush fire season to be referred to the SAS for consideration.

Action 109.8 Ms Stephens to provide information via SAS on the issues that NPWS is seeking to address in a review of Appendix C.

Decision 109.11 The Committee resolved to endorse the draft policy for the Management of Bush Fire Operations.

14 Hazard Reduction Report

AC Midgley spoke to the report, acknowledging that agencies were again facing delays in conducting hazard reduction work due to recent wet weather conditions. Despite the efforts being made to conduct this work, it was unlikely agencies would be able to catch up by the end of June.

The figures were reported as at the end of April, with significant progress since made, bringing the total hectares treated close to 100,000 hectares. AC Midgley noted a lag in reporting due to data processing.

The Chair acknowledged and thanked agencies for the amount of work they had managed to carry out despite the conditions. He noted that while there were still opportunities for hazard reduction in some areas, a backlog in work remained and agencies would have to keep trying to carry out work wherever possible.

Mr Fleming agreed with the importance of maximising efforts to counter potential future criticism.

Decision 109.12 The Committee resolved to note the Hazard Reduction Report.

15 General Business

The Chair addressed concerns raised by Mr Mullins, who was absent from the meeting.

Mr Mullins queried the role of the BFCC in overseeing the implementation of recommendations from the NSW Bushfire Inquiry. The Chair notes that the Bushfire Inquiry had addressed specific recommendations to a number of agencies, which were charged with responsibility for carrying these out. He noted that progress reports on the implementation of recommendations were published quarterly.

Mr Mullins raised concerns about the BPED issue, which was prompted by DPHI presentation regarding Maybrook Manor. The Chair clarified that the BPED document was not a Co-ordinating Committee document and feedback had been provided to DPHI. Mr Schneider advised he had not had any updates. Mr Mullins would be invited to raise the issue again at the next meeting. The Chair noted that there may be differing views on what constituted appropriate mitigation works and a final decision would be made through the established processes.

Mr Mullins asked why the UoW research into back burning had not been provided following the release of the Coroner's report. The Chair referred to Dr Heemstra's earlier presentation.

Decision 109.13 The Committee resolved to note the matters of general business raised by members.

The next meeting of the BFCC is to be held as follows:

Date	Time	Location
Thursday, 25 July 2024	1030 - 1230	Berrigan Room L3, RFS HQ and via MS Teams

The Chair declared the meeting closed at 1210.