



17<sup>th</sup> April 2020

## **NSW INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE 2019-20 BUSHFIRE SEASON**

The Mosman Parks & Bushland Association was founded in 1964 when bushland at Bradleys Head was threatened with destruction. Our objectives remain the protection and preservation of parks, bushland and open space in Mosman for the benefit of present and future generations of residents and visitors. Many association members are actively involved in volunteer bush regeneration projects in the Mosman Local Government area and in the Sydney Harbour National Park with NPWS.

The Association was a founding member of the Nature Conservation Council and has a history of taking an interest in fire, bushfire control and bushfire legislation. Committee members have attended the NCC's Bushfire Conferences and we strongly opposed the 10/50 Vegetation Clearing Code of Practice. Introduced in 2014, self-assessment allowed clearing which overrode Council controls and was shockingly abused in Mosman where 140 trees were lost – not through fear of bushfire, but mainly to enhance views.

Mosman was fortunate to have escaped the fires of 2019-20 and their devastating immediate after-effects, but residents and our members experienced some of the effects and were involved during the season, nevertheless.

- Bush regeneration activities had to be abandoned when smoke haze induced breathing difficulties and sore eyes.
- During July 2019, clearing occurred in one of Mosman's bushland areas in preparation for a hazard reduction burn. Ironically on the day of the scheduled burn it rained, and the burn had to be postponed indefinitely because of the early arrival of summer.
- One of our members who volunteered on fire trucks was not involved directly in a fire himself, but observed of those he met who *were*, "They will be affected for the rest of their lives by what they have been through".
- On a positive note there are two Community Fire Units in Mosman managed by Fire and Rescue NSW which include some of our members. Fortunately, action was not required during the bushfire season, but their value lay in encouraging fire preparedness and watchfulness.

**Our comments to the Independent Inquiry support the recommendations made by the NCC**, particularly the environmental recommendations that affect Urban Bushland and its interface with residential areas. There will be knock-on effects from the devastating losses to plant and animal species and ecological communities across the state. Mosman Parks & Bushland has attempted to play a part in fauna

conservation by installing nesting boxes in various Mosman reserves and was pleased to have received a grant from the State Government for this project.

### **Inquiry Terms of Reference 1**

#### **Causes of and factors contributing to the fires of 2019/20 including the role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity**

We are not sufficiently expert to comment on the direct causes such as lighting, arson and human activity, but we support the information and recommendations of the NCC.

**The Contributing factors of weather, drought and climate change:** Naturally occurring synoptic weather cycles producing warm, dry conditions and contributing to lightning strikes, are exacerbated by anthropogenic climate change. The global increase in temperatures is acknowledged by the Commonwealth Government's National Environmental Science Program as having produced more dangerous conditions for bushfires. Rising greenhouse gas emissions will further exacerbate this trend.

We support the NCC's recommendations that planning for bushfire risk management in NSW should recognise that climate change is a major driver of increased bushfire danger and that governments should commit to meeting the climate change mitigation strategies and targets of the Paris Agreement.

**Fuel loads:** It is popularly believed that mismanagement of fuel loads by NPWS is a contributing factor to bushfires. NCC figures demonstrate that NPWS is meeting state targets for fuel reduction and is more successful than private landholders in doing so. The NCC's figures also show that hazard reduction burns are not effective in catastrophic fire conditions if they are performed more than a year in advance of the fire.

MPBA supports NCC's recommendation that Asset Protection Zones, including those for private property, should be the focus for reducing fuel loads rather than broad area hazard reduction burns in natural areas far from built areas. Funding is needed for resources to support reduction of fuel on private property.

### **Inquiry Term of Reference 2**

#### **The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW**

##### **An inventory of environmental assets**

Bushfire Risk Management Plans should include an inventory of environmental assets including mapping of the locations of threatened species and endangered ecological communities. This is essential for future planning given the likelihood of severe bushfires increasing with climate change. Guidance for recovery post fire should be included in the plans. Weed management pre and post fire should also be included in the planning.

##### **Assessment and Planning of development on Bush Fire Prone lands**

Urban sub-division and large scale development should not occur on Bush Fire Prone land which has a high conservation value.

Vegetation clearing under the 10/50 Code previously mentioned, is too complex for self-assessment. Local Councils and the RFS should review its effectiveness in mitigating bush fires.

#### **Logging in State Forests and National Parks**

Members of the public have been shocked recently to see logging in State Forests so soon after the devastating destruction of habitat by the fires. A Moratorium on logging is needed until post fire surveys have been conducted, assessing the needs of habitat for native species. NSW Regional Forest Agreements should be reassessed in view of the need to conserve native species.

Calls for salvage logging of state forests and national parks should be resisted as they would hinder regeneration of burnt areas and destroy potential habitat.

**Bush Fire Regional Management Plans and support for Aboriginal planning and management activities.** The NCC has been proactive in its encouragement of traditional land management involving cultural burning. MPBA believes that Aboriginal knowledge should be respected and that it has a role to play in fire management practices.

**Ecological Burns** are also supported for research into the role of fire in specific ecological outcomes.

#### **Inquiry Term of Reference 3**

#### **Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment**

The MPBA's comments are limited to our concerns for the protection and recovery of the environment after a fire.

- The value of backburning during the recent fires is questioned, particularly where environmental assets such as rainforest or species habitat has been destroyed.
- The value of Community Engagement, especially communities on the urban bushland fringe where the risk of fire is high but bushland conservation is important, has particular relevance to Mosman residents living close to bushland areas. Fire and Rescue NSW holds valuable education sessions with members of the Mosman Community Fire Units.
- Recovery of the environment after the 2019/20 fires: Huge tracts of land have been affected by the 2019/20 fires, including rainforest, wet sclerophyll and heathland ecosystems. Devastating numbers of native animals have died, including koalas and threatened species, but the full extent or percentages are not known. Threatened plants are also seriously implicated.
- Recovery will be slow and will need ecological expertise and funding to protect areas vulnerable to expected future bushfires. Recovery efforts should concentrate on threatened species and communities, recognising that repeated fire incidents constitute a key threatening process. Appropriate measures will be needed to control animal pests and weeds. Large trees

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affected by the fires should not be felled until assessed by experts for their level of hazard v. their environmental value.

Although the cataclysmic events of the 2019/20 bushfire season, have not, as far as we know, directly impacted the natural species of Mosman, an urban area such as Mosman, can play a part in the conservation of biodiversity within the larger system, and that larger system can, in turn, benefit the biodiversity of the smaller area.

The Mosman Parks & Bushland Association's comments are made in the hope that the Inquiry will recommend:

1. Acknowledgement that climate change was the exacerbating factor in the conditions which created the fires of 2019/20.
2. Urgent action to mitigate the effects of climate change on NSW and to meet our Paris Agreement on the emission of greenhouse gases
3. Planning for future fire events, made inevitable by global warming, by implementing the recommendations of the NCC and making conservation of the natural environment a key part of that planning
4. Urgent action and funding for the rescue of remaining threatened species and ecological communities and for their protection from future fire events.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments.



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