

Sb 200



**SHIRE OF MANJIMUP**

**SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO THE INCIDENCE AND IMPACT OF  
BUSHFIRES**

**Background**

The Shire of Manjimup comprises 6894 square kilometers making it the largest Municipal area in the South West Region of Western Australia. Eighty four percent (84%) of the Shire comprises of State Forest, National Parks, Reserves and Crown Land.

The 2001 Census population of the Shire was 10030 people broken down into 5811 people living in urban areas and 4219 people living in rural areas. The main industries consist of tourism, agriculture, horticulture, native and plantation timber production and processing, viticulture and aquaculture.

Diversity within the Shire's economy, population dispersal and environment presents the most significant fire threat. The combination of dense forest and vegetation, undulating terrain and three to four months of summer drought often leads to fire threats to life and property. It is often secluded freehold property surrounded by dense forest and vegetation most at risk, however potential clearly exists where major residential areas could be threatened under the right conditions.

Bushfire control and prevention is an essential community service coordinated by the Shire of Manjimup. A total of twenty nine (29) Volunteer Bushfire Brigades exist under the control of the Shire. In addition the Shire has a close working relationship with the Department of Conservation and Land Management as well as private sector fire control personnel such as from native timber harvesting and plantation timber management and this often involves multi agency fire operations

**Prescribed / Planned Burning**

The Department of Conservation and Land Management manage a significant portion of land (State Forest and National Park) within the Shire of Manjimup. They conduct a prescribed burning program whereby they strategically burn areas of land in a controlled manner on a rotational basis. The Shire also routinely burns land under our control as well other land under the control of other State Government agencies upon request. In the advent of wildfire this practice significantly aids the suppression and control by not allowing the wildfire to escalate significantly.

Recently, political pressure has reduced the ability of fire authorities to carry out prescribed burning. Issues such as smoke pollution and perceived environmental consequences of prescribed burning programs which is driven by some community groups has forced the State Government to restrict and condition prescribed burning practices. As has recently been witnessed from wildfire events in the Eastern States

of Australia and wildfire events in the United States of America, excluding controlled burning in areas that pose a significant fire threat allows the accumulation of fuel loadings which ultimately have devastating consequences as has been seen in recent examples where significant life and property have been lost.

### **Recommendation**

- 1. That Government establish prescribed burning guidelines to identify best practice and provide encouragement for land managers to undertake regular planned burning of land that poses a significant fire risk.**
- 2. That prescribed burning is completed in an environmentally sustainable manner that protects the biodiversity of an area in accordance with acceptable established best practice.**
- 3. That Government allow appropriate prescribed burning to occur when seasonal conditions permit regardless of short term smoke issues that result.**
- 4. That resources are provided by Government to land managers to complete adequate prescribed burning programs.**

### Communications

Communication within isolated areas is a serious issue that needs to be considered. Communication networks have been established throughout Australia however the effectiveness of some of these systems in some regions is questionable. It must be noted that this issue has arisen on many occasions within the Shire of Manjimup whereby the safety of fire crews has been jeopardised due the lack of appropriate communications in certain locations. Due to topographical features, Satellite telephones and VHF/UHF radio communication networks are ineffective whilst mobile telephone networks simply do not have appropriate coverage. Mobile telephone networks are seen as the solution to the communications issue where the radio communication networks fail.

The primary reason why mobile telephone networks are deficient in areas such as the Shire of Manjimup is that it is not financially beneficial for companies to establish those networks because there would simply not be enough people using the system to make it viable.

The safety benefits of improved mobile telephone network coverage are enormous and would significantly reduce the potential for loss of fire fighters life as well as allowing much more effective wildfire control and suppression. In addition to this, the response time to wildfires could be greatly enhanced by providing a paging system to fire fighters thus allowing a quicker the response to a wildfire situation to minimise impacts before the wildfire becomes established.

### **Recommendation**

- 1. That Government provide adequate mobile telephone communication networks throughout areas which have a high potential for devastating wildfire.**

## Resources

Equipment resources are an issue when trying to protect vast amounts of land. The cost of purchasing and maintaining equipment to an appropriate standard is becoming an ever increasing financial burden. Whilst it is obvious that the cost of equipment prevents required resource allocation, additional funding to appropriate equipment resources is still required.

Presently in the Shire of Manjimup (and presumably throughout Western Australia) an informal arrangement exists between various fire agencies whereby on most occasions resources will be allocated to assist another agency to suppress or control wildfire. A clear example of this is the ability of the Shire of Manjimup to utilise the Department of Conservation and Land Management's Water Bomber Aircraft if required and at no cost.

Whilst informal equipment resource sharing arrangements tend to achieve a desirable result it is often the case that confusion occurs as to the hierarchy of control in multi fire agency operations. A formal agreement should be reached between all fire agencies to resolve this issue.

## **Recommendation**

- 1. That additional equipment resources are provided to areas which have increased potential for devastating wildfire.**
- 2. That an agreement is reached between the various fire agencies for wildfire suppression and control.**

## Volunteer Bushfire Brigade Members

The Shire of Manjimup has twenty nine (29) Volunteer Bushfire Brigades comprising of approximately 400 active and non active members. There are several identified issues in recruiting and also retaining Volunteer Bushfire Brigade members which are most likely not just limited to the Shire of Manjimup.

Recruiting new Volunteer Bushfire Brigade members and retaining Volunteer Bushfire Brigade members is becoming increasingly difficult for the following reasons;

- Ageing populations and unsustainable populations in rural areas due to economic, educational and social reasons.
- Frustrations at the perceived lack of equipment resources.
- Limited recognition for volunteer work completed.
- Volunteer work is unpaid and often incurs a financial loss to the volunteer if completed during ordinary working hours.

- An increasing need to undertake training in their own time.
- Concern for their own safety during fire suppression and control especially since the recent deaths of Volunteer Bushfire Brigade members in the Eastern States of Australia.

### **Recommendation**

1. **That a representative working group is established to resolve matters specific to Volunteer Bushfire Brigade members and report directly to the Government.**