

## **Inquiry into the State's preparedness for this year's fire season**

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### **Introduction**

For the last 34 years I have lived with my wife Barb on a sloping, 1000 m<sup>2</sup> residential property on the northern side of the Canning River Valley in the picturesque Kelmscott hills. The area has been exposed to numerous bushfire events over that time and was severely impacted by the disastrous February 2011 Kelmscott hills bushfire, with 11 houses destroyed within 200 metres of our place.

Our house fortuitously survived the initial passage of the fire thanks to the shielding effect of a perimeter of deciduous trees. The house would nonetheless have burned to the ground in the hours thereafter from ongoing ember attack and spot fires had it not been for the persistent efforts of a capable resident and his son who stayed to defend their own property. Having accomplished that task, they then occupied themselves for the next 12 hours by dampening down spot fires around other houses in the street.

More than 5 years ago it was apparent to us that this valley and much of the peri-urban environment of the Perth Hills was a fire disaster waiting to happen - and remains so to this day. The 2005 Pickering Brook fire demonstrated to us that sooner or later Perth would experience a hot fire of a scale that is normally only seen in Victoria, NSW and Tasmania. We began to make serious preparations for the inevitable by removing dangerous eucalypts and other volatile native vegetation from within a 20 metre radius of the house. Without that action our house would not have been defensible in the subsequent 2011 Kelmscott fire.

Following the fire, I made a determined effort to learn more about hazard reduction and fire prevention in the peri-urban landscape. Using my site evaluation and land capability skills as a town planner and urban designer, I closely examined the post-fire landscape, road and site planning and the effect of proximity of buildings to various types and patterns of vegetation.

I studied literature from here and the Eastern States, including relevant sections of the final reports of the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission and all of the appended Witness Statements. One of those witnesses in Victoria referred me to landmark research that was commissioned by the Bushfire CRC for the VBRC titled, "Bushfire Penetration into Urban Areas in Australia: A Spatial Analysis", undertaken by Chen & McAneney from Monash University.

I also re-familiarised myself with FESA publications and related Government policies, including the very useful "Planning for Bushfire Protection Guidelines", prepared jointly by FESA and the WAPC.

With that background I prepared a submission to the Keelty Perth Hills Bushfire Review and compiled a follow-up *Powerpoint* presentation.

The essence of my submissions to Government thus far has been that we need to adopt a landscape-wide, strategic planning approach to managing the bushfire hazard in peri-urban areas.

My experience and knowledge of the Kelmscott-Roleystone fire area is that nothing has materially changed in the physical composition of the landscape that would result in a lower incidence of damage in the likely event of another fire. Arguably, the outcome of another fire could be worse given the resilient regrowth of native vegetation and the number of unmanaged properties that have been left behind as a consequence of the February 2011 fire.

The remainder of this submission addresses item (i) from the advertised Terms of Reference.

## **Response to the Terms of Reference**

- i) The implementation of recommendations flowing from inquiries and reviews of recent bushfires in Western Australia

### *Recommendation 3 from the 2011 Kelmscott-Roleystone Fire Report*

*(The State Government transfer responsibility for declaring bushfire prone areas from local government to the WAPC. The WAPC should urgently assess those areas that should be declared bushfire prone.)*

According to the Bushfire Review Stakeholder Briefing of 18th July 2012, Recommendation 3 is still under active investigation.

I am at a loss to understand why it is taking so long to declare the whole of the Perth hills Bushfire Prone. It is obvious that this needs to be done and should have been acted on with a greater sense of urgency.

What we have seen since February 2011 is that on numerous properties in the fire zone work has proceeded with rebuilding or substantial insurance repairs that would not comply with the applicable AS 3959 building provisions that would flow from the area being declared Bushfire Prone.

Similarly, we have witnessed many gardens being replanted with highly flammable species of vegetation that should under no circumstances be located within the Building Protection Zones of those properties.

I appreciate that the implementation committee is working on the Fire-Prone Area issue, but it needs to be appreciated that the delay in implementing this recommendation has already put many properties at an avoidable level of risk to bushfire attack. In a drying climate with an escalating risk of bushfires, Western Australia should have followed the Victorian lead and declared the whole State Bushfire Prone immediately following the release of the Keelty Report.

In our case, we were told by our insurance company that we could not qualify for any reduction in our property insurance premium if we installed water tanks, a fire pump and an external sprinkler system because the insurance industry risk maps did not show our area as being fire-prone. We spent the money on independent power, water and fire protection measures anyway but we notice that virtually no one else around here has done the same.

Clearly, in the absence of the area being declared Fire-Prone, there is no financial incentive for property owners to invest in the sort of independent fire protection measures recommended by Mick Keelty and as a consequence, most property owners have ignored the advice.

*Recommendation 4 from the 2011 Kelmscott-Roleystone Fire Report*

*(The State Government give legislative effect to the Planning for Bush Fire Protection Guidelines)*

My own assessment of the document is that because it is founded on AS3959 methodology, it is easily the best available tool to guide the retro-fitting and adaptation of existing peri-urban areas to achieve higher standards of bushfire resilience.

Consistent with most town planning policies, the document was originally intended as a control mechanism for new development. It would have far greater application if it could be deployed in community bushfire awareness and education strategies such as the Bushfire Ready program.

From my experience, getting property owners to work out the BAL of their own property unleashes a much greater awareness of risk and hazard across property boundaries and the BAL exercise should be included in the agenda of every Bushfire Ready group.

If you apply the PFBFPG methodology to the proximity of native vegetation to just about every peri-urban community in the South West of WA you quickly discover that very few properties at the interface have an adequate separation from highly volatile bushland.

As unpalatable as it may be, tackling the issue of separation from volatile (primarily native) vegetation is fundamental to the goal of reducing risk. The Inquiry should

refer to the findings of Chen & McAneney (2010, Bushfire CRC) on Bushfire Penetration into Urban Areas in support of this point.

*Recommendation 8 from the 2011 Kelmscott-Roleystone Fire Report*

*(Local governments to include information on bushfire risk and preparedness with rates notices)*

In our case we received our usual generic bushfire information package from the City of Armadale. The problem with generic advice is that no one thinks it applies to them.

FESA and Local Government needs to empower local communities with detailed, location specific information on hazards and risks and work with those communities to prepare plausible landscape wide remediation measures that will achieve enduring, high amenity, low fire risk outcomes.

The February 2012 Monash University Review of Recent Australian Disaster Inquiries report clearly highlights the importance of fire agencies sharing detailed, location specific information on hazards and risk with all stakeholders, including at risk communities. This is fundamental to the concept of 'shared responsibility' and getting people to understand the actual consequences of inaction.

To facilitate this pro-active change in approach, FESA needs to act on the findings and recommendations of numerous fire enquiries around Australia, including the 2011 "Perth Hills Fire Review" and freely share the outcomes from its Bushfire Threat Analysis (BFTA) mapping with all fire protection stakeholders, including the affected communities.

The BFTA mapping or similarly explicit graphic material should be included with every local government rates notice in fire prone areas.

*Recommendation 18 from the 2011 Kelmscott-Roleystone Fire Report*

*(WALGA explore the feasibility of local governments utilising aerial and satellite imagery to monitor firebreaks and fuel loads on private property.)*

This recommendation makes sense and while the implementation committee is examining the best long term methodology, it is suggested that affected local governments harness existing aerial technology such as "nearmap" to keep an updated eye on problem areas.