

WESTON CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

- Your Local Voice -

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Established 1991

Minutes

Bushfire Preparedness Meeting 7.45pm 24 November 2004

Welcome

The WCCC Chairperson, Mr Jeff Carl welcomed the guest speakers, the Committee and residents. Mr Carl advised that the topic of the meeting was Bushfire Preparedness and the guest speakers were from a range of agencies working in bushfire management. David Prince, Chief Fire Officer, ACT Fire Brigade is on the agenda but had taken ill earlier in the day and is unable to attend. A replacement speaker was not able to be arranged at short notice.

The speakers are:

- Peter Macdonald, Emergency Services Authority (ESA)
- Steve Ayling, Director, Operational Support ESA
- Liam Fogarty, Manager, Fire Management Unit, Dept of Urban Services
- Tony Bartlett, Director, ACT Forests
- Geoff Wells, Director, Environment ACT

Mr Carl advised attendees that there were copies of the agenda available [attached] and to note questions for the Q&A session after all speakers.

Mr Carl indicated that the new Officer in Charge at the Woden Police Station, which covers Weston Creek, was here to introduce himself to residents. Mr Carl handed over to Sgt Stephen Cooke.

Apologies

Jacqui Burke MLA, Barbara Campbell, Gary Caitcheon, Mike Hettinger, Karen MacDonald MLA, Tanya Mark, Brendan Smith MLA

Australian Federal Police.

Sgt Cooke thanked Mr Carl for the opportunity to introduce himself and advised he would minimise his interruption to the busy agenda. Sgt Cooke advised residents that his major concern at this time was end-of-year parties. The concern is students at risk through alcohol and drug use at parties, gate-crashing of parties and drunk & disorderly conduct.

The police had visited all schools in the district and briefed Principals on educating students about the risks and the need to have a responsible person, parent or older sibling on the premises.

In addition the police are improving their approach to the serious issue of gate-crashing. The AFP would prefer to be advised of the event and the phone number of the responsible person. This would enable them to be aware of the event, those attending and importantly be able to gain accurate information on gate -crashing.

Sgt Cooke asked for any questions and none were forthcoming. Sgt Cooke thanked Mr Carl.

Peter Macdonald - Emergency Services Authority (ESA)

Peter Macdonald from the ESA noted apologies from the Commissioner Peter Dunn AO and Chief Fire Officer David Prince.

Mr Macdonald advised the meeting that the *Emergencies Act 2004* came into place on 1 July 2004 to establish the ESA. The Act established the ACT Ambulance Service, ACT Fire Brigade, ACT Rural Fire Service and the ACT SES, the aim being to modernise the framework for the management of emergencies in the ACT. The ESA is responsible for responding to all civil emergencies in the ACT, including bushfires, floods and chemical spills, etc.

The Act also clarified the command and control arrangements. The Authority is established as a Department in its own right and reports direct to a Minister. In addition the Act established a State of Alert and State of Emergency.

Recently the ESA had improved its radio communication with a new Trunk Radio Network. Also there are 4 new heavy-duty urban tankers with off road capability being delivered. The ESA is putting community service announcements to air as well a supplement that went in *The Canberra Times* in October.

Other initiatives are improving relations with NSW authorities through an MOU. Re-visiting the evacuation guidelines so that they are consistent with the national fire fighting agency's approach is also being addressed.

The ESA has a full agenda of work and Steve Ayling will now cover the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan.

Steve Ayling - Emergency Services Authority (ESA)

Steve advised the meeting that the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan was in the community for open consultation. The community was encouraged to read and comment on the

Plan. The aim was to work with stakeholders in a partnership arrangement. The draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan has an all-hazards approach with the aim being to protect life, property and the environment. The Plan adopts the principle of being prepared for the worst and ensuring that the four responsible ACT agencies work together. Major fires don't know boundaries and work is also being progressed with NSW on the Plan. There is the need to align efforts with the resources which can be used.

The draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan is revolutionary in its approach as well as being innovative. This has made it somewhat difficult to use models from other jurisdictions.

There will be two versions of the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan, version 1 which will come into force in December 2004 supports this fire season and aims to impart confidence into the community. Version 2 which will be implemented in mid-2005 will project 5 to 10 years into the future.

Residents are encouraged to comment on the draft Plan by the deadline of 3rd December. Contact details are on the Plan. In the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan there is a grid for the ACT which ensures all areas have a unique sector. These sector coordinates will be used in announcements of emergencies and residents are encouraged to remember which sector they live in. Copies of the grid will be in the 2005 Canberra telephone book and it was also published in a supplement in *The Canberra Times* in October 2004.

The Bushfire Abatement Zone is not a stop line; it will not stop fires, but is an area of joint operational planning and responsibility between the Urban and Rural Fire Brigades. It is a control line to assist in fire management. There will be inspections and audits of government and leased land in the area. Generally the western boundary is the Murrumbidgee River. There will also be abatement zones around Uriarra Village, Pierces Creek Settlement and the Tidbinbilla Tracking Station.

The draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan is taking an ACT-wide view of the issues and is a risk management approach to all ACT assets. The Plan looks at the big picture to identify locations which are more at risk.

Mr Ayling encouraged all residents to read and respond to the ESA on the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan.

Liam Fogarty – Dept of Urban Services (DUS)

Liam provided an overview of DUS fire management. The Fire Management Unit in DUS was established 12 months ago and has the role of improving coordination between the various land managers in the ACT Government. There has been a lot of change in how DUS and the land managers work with ESA. The Fire Management Unit resolves on-the-ground interaction issues.

The level below the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan is Bushfire Operational Plans and these are in the legislation. This will link activities across a range of landscapes. Large fires are landscape events and there is the need to take a much wider and inclusive landscape approach to fire management. The Bushfire Operational Plans will be rolling over several years and revisited each 2 years. A major focus of the Bushfire Operational Plans is fuel reduction. The process in developing the Bushfire Operational Plans is-

- Risk assessment
- Classify urban edge vulnerability
- Establish fuel management zones
- Undertake assessment of fuel load
- Establish work priorities.

The urban edge vulnerability classification assists land managers in their management of the urban edge. The fuel management zones aim to reduce fuel load but do take into account land use such as conservation, water catchment etc. An example is Black Mountain which is managed according to its vulnerability. There is 400 kms of urban edge to be managed and this approach assists in prioritising work effort.

Mr Fogarty introduced Tony Bartlett from ACT Forests.

Tony Bartlett – ACT Forests

Tony advised the meeting that ACT Forests were 2/3 of the way through the fire debris clean-up after the January 2003 fires. There has been a lot of fire management work and 30 days of burning windrows has been achieved using a helicopter for lighting the windrows.

ACT Forests have engaged a Fire Management Officer, Tony Memen, and the work on rehabilitation will result in the replanting of forests which will be undertaken in a different way and have forests which will be different. Mr Bartlett introduced Tony Memen.

Mr Memem provided an overview of the work which has been undertaken and planned for Kowen Forest on the eastern side of the ATC because it is a good example of how work will be progressed in the Stromlo Forest. The plantings will improve access for fire suppression and both the native and plantation areas will have designated protection zones. There will be a cycle of 4 to 8 years for fuel load reduction. The aim at Kowen Forest is to avoid crown fires and this will be the approach at Stromlo. The fire protection zone will be 100metres. Other management approaches will include temporal harvesting of forests as well as rescheduling harvests within a forest.

To date 5000 ha has been cleared and burnt for replanting. The plan for 04/05 is for 1500 ha to be cleared and this target will probably be exceeded. The target for 05/06 is 1000ha.

The road access will be upgraded in Stromlo, Uriarra and Pierces Creek forests. Additional efforts have been made to improve road access to the water points in the forest area and the water points will be more clearly marked and identified on maps of the area.

The replanting of Stromlo Forest will take into account strategic fuel breaks to protect the assets of Duffy. The concept of grazing at Bluett's and on Narrabundah Hill is being canvassed.

Stromlo fire management strategies are focussing on the long term.

Geoff Wells - Environment ACT

Geoff advised the meeting that Environment ACT manages the ACT Parks and Conservation Service and they are land managers for 54% of the ACT. Fire management is extremely important as there are 12 distinct units of the Canberra Nature Park network in the ACT. These nature parks have as their neighbours residential housing.

Strong messages from the 2003 fires have assisted in the management of fuel load and the work of DUS has helped reduce the fuel load. The Bushfire Operational Plan for Environment ACT has between 250 and 300 specific actions. This plan will be externally audited by the ESA.

Nature parks have grown in value to the Canberra community however there are still some concerns, especially Farrer Ridge and Wanniasa. The aim is to make the urban edge safer and remove fuel. Some wattles, too close to houses have been removed and another high fuel load contributor, the stringybark and blue gums, were removed from Oakey Hill near Lyons. The aim is to have low ground fuel close to houses.

Bushfire prevention action on Cooleman Ridge will consist of rock removal and grading adjacent to the houses which is aimed at creating an area which can be accessed by slashers. An alternate was grazing however a vocal community prevented that approach and other options are being considered. Grazing may be tried in limited trials so as to measure the effect. Another option is to change the grass type to reduce the fuel load.

In larger areas like the Namadgi National Park, there is more time to react and consider options to deal with a fire. That area also needs consideration of management of its conservation values.

Interestingly there are other emergencies which Environment ACT deals with and one at present is locusts which have been reported locally. These are not yet at the stage of swarming and not in plague proportions. ESA will be called upon to intervene if they reach swarm numbers.

Mr Carl thanked the speakers and opened the meeting for Questions and Answers.

Q&A

- Mr Carl led with the first question. The grass on Cooleman Ridge is 1.7m high, what is the fire abatement method for this hazard? Mr Wells indicated the grass was not a fire hazard. Some attendees at the meeting reacted negatively to the statement and some vigorous exchanges followed. Mr Ayling from ESA intervened and gave an undertaking that the Ridge would be inspected tomorrow by Officers from ESA and ACT Fire Brigade to determine the fire hazard. If the hazard warrants, a work plan will be developed with Environment ACT and implemented as a matter of priority.

[Editorial note: Information gained at a CERG meeting (25/11/04) is that ESA and ACT Fire Brigade Officers inspected Cooleman Ridge on 25 November and determined it had a high fire hazard. A work plan is being developed with Environment ACT for priority implementation].

- A resident asked of the resources available to the ESA, will they be ready on time? Mr Ayling responded advising that the resources provided are linked to the risk being managed. There will need to be planning to look ahead at the work required and shape future budgets to that work program. Tony Bartlett added that ACT Forests are looking at the 10 year horizon of the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan and budgeting for the 2 year cycle of the Bushfire Operational Plans.
- An attendee noted that the apart from ACT Forests showing maps and plans of what they have done and their future work plans all other speakers have spoken on Legislation, MOU's, plans and consultation. There seems to be remarkably little work undertaken to the direct benefit of residents. Mr Ayling responded that the work involved in establishing the ESA was both fundamental and time consuming.
- A resident commented on the lack of Community Fire Units in Weston Creek and Chapman in particular. There are two units established but only half the people have uniforms and one unit does not have any hoses. Mr Ayling advised that it was unfortunate that David Prince, the Chief Fire Officer was not in attendance and the concerns would be relayed to him.
- Ms McGinn queried the assertion that the rocks could be removed from Cooleman Ridge, perhaps not as it was all rock. Also Red Hill was grazed for many years with no obvious impacts because it was not over-grazed? Mr Wells advised that the proposal was to, where possible; create a strip of land which could be accessed by slashers. These need not be very wide but needed to be an appropriate width for a fire break. As for grazing there are many views on the impact on the ecology of grazing in areas adjacent to the urban edge and cattle on Cooleman Ridge may not reduce the long term fuel load.
- A resident commented that the only plan with any action is ACT Forests; they have an opportunity and are moving forward to make an improvement on the historical approach of the past. As regards resources for fire fighting, there appeared no shortage of resources from a range of organisations at the fire front. It was lack of information. It appears that management of the resources is what is needed and this is not the current focus.
- A question to Steve Ayling, there was mention of the new radio system, has there been training on this? Yes there has been pre-rollout training and testing. While now in use crews are reporting black spots with poor reception so that these can be dealt with. The system will be integrated into the command and control systems of the 4 services contributing to provide fire management.
- A resident commented that the draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan had copped a bit of flack. People don't appreciate the need of the planning process to find out what has happened so as to contribute to managing the future. Is there over-planning? The planning work may be the easy part, doing the work is the hard part. We need evidence that the plan is working.

- An attendee asked if the pines on the Tuggeranong Parkway were planted or self-seeded. Tony Bartlett advised that they were planted after the 2001 fires to manage erosion and they are not a fire hazard.
- Ms McGinn asked of the ‘fingers of green’ on the slides which were shown which appear to delve deeply into the suburbs from the urban edge. Who is maintaining these? Mr Wells indicated that these are the responsibility of Canberra Urban Parks and Places (CUPPs). They clear mow and slash as needed in their works programme.
- A resident asked of the fire hazard nature of Narrabundah Hill behind Duffy given that there are substantial shredded pines from the clearing work and high grass levels. Tony Bartlett replied that he had had a meeting with adjacent landholders that afternoon on how to manage the grass level, it was a meeting not a plan. Two issues are of concern – firstly is that it is nearly impossible to maintain the fences, someone keeps damaging them and secondly the rural leaseholders don’t have enough cattle to control their own grass levels far else be willing to put them on ACT Forests land, with cut fences. It is a definite concern which needs a solution. The solution has been aerial spraying in some areas of the Molonglo Valley which has been approved. It also needs to be recognised that some of the land of concern is controlled by the National Capital Authority (NCA).
- A resident who walks near Warragamba Ave asked of the holes drilled in the soil in the forests’ land? Tony Bartlett advised that these were prepared last winter for planting but with drought conditions continuing in 2004 it was decided not to plant the seedlings as such a high proportion would probably not survive.
- Salvation Jane grows rapidly after fire and affects horses, does it affect cattle? No, not cattle but at present there is no stock on Cooleman Ridge.
- Ms Brinton asked of the supply of slashers to undertake all the work necessary. Do these belong to CUPPs or are they contractors’? Mr Wells indicated that CUPPs have some of there own and do use contractors machines as needed.

A resident indicated that he was making a statement not posing a question. There are a range of agencies here tonight and we thank you for your time. However it appears that many agencies are trying to manage the environment and the community often does not understand the boundaries of jurisdiction. In addition it would be helpful if the community understood their own responsibilities. To allow this we need to be given the right information.

Mr Ayling did respond indicating that the agencies are working as a team on operational plans and working with the community on a cooperative approach to planning. It is a partnership between the agencies and the community to get the best outcomes.

Mr Carl called an end to the questions and thanked the speakers for their attendance. The speakers would be available for informal questions after the meeting. Mr Carl called for a brief other business.

Other Business

Mr Sutherland requested that it be minuted that the residents appreciated the quick response to the removal of the graffiti on the fences in Hindmarsh Drive following the WCCC meeting recently on vandalism and graffiti. In addition he wished it to have recorded the community's thanks for the improved underpass lighting in the vicinity of Coleman Court.

Mr Carl called for additional other business, as there was none forthcoming he wished all seasons greetings and a happy new year, and closed the meeting and thanked the guest speakers and residents for their attendance.

Meeting closed 9.50pm
Next Regular Meeting
Wednesday 23rd February 2005

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Established 1991

AGENDA

Bushfire Preparedness

WCCC Meeting at
7.45pm Wednesday 24th November 2004

Auditorium
Canberra Raiders Sports Club
(Formerly Royals Football Club)
Liardet Street, Weston

Introduction and Welcome

7.45pm Jeff Carl, Chairperson WCCC

The Bushfire Season – outlook and scenarios for the summer

7.55pm Peter Macdonald, Emergency Services Authority

Preparedness of the Emergency Services Authority – what we have done

8.00pm David Prince, Chief Fire Officer, ACT Fire Brigade

8.15pm Steve Ayling, Director Operational Support *Strategic Bushfire Management Plan*
ESA *Strategic Bushfire Management Plan*

ACT Department of Urban Services – how prepared are they?

8.40pm Liam Fogarty, Manager, Fire Management Unit

ACT Forests – How have they been managed to prepare for the summer

Tony Bartlett – Director

Environment ACT – Cooleman Ridge and Grasslands

Geoff Wells

9.00pm Questions and Answers

9.45pm Close

A short *other business* will be held if deemed necessary

Speakers can be contacted by calling

Canberra Connect on 132281