

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE
HON DR JUDY EDWARDS MLA
TO OPEN THE FIRE SYMPOSIUM
TECHNOLOGY PARK FUNCTION CENTRE
BRODIE HALL DRIVE BENTLEY
8.50 AM TUESDAY 16 APRIL 2002

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: To be confirmed

Thank you, Neil (Burrows, Director of Science, Department of Conservation and Land Management) for your introduction.

I'd particularly like to welcome our speakers from the United States – Dr Michael Huston from Oakridge National Laboratory and Professor Stephen Pyne of Arizona State University.

I also would like to welcome speakers from interstate including Dr David Bowman from the Northern Territory University, Phil Cheney from the CSIRO's bush fire behaviour and management unit in Canberra, Dr Grant Wardell-Johnson of the University of Queensland, Dr Gordon Friend of Parks, Flora and Fauna, Victoria, Dr David Horton, an environmental consultant from New South Wales and Professor Ian Noble of the Carbon Accounting Co-operative Research Centre in Canberra.

And of course, welcome to our speakers from Western Australia and to all of you who have registered to take part in this forum.

This symposium had its genesis back in 1999 when Neil Burrows and his colleagues in the Department planned a two-day scientific conference, hoping for an audience of around 50 people.

It attracted considerable interest, not the least from members of the broader volunteer conservation movement. Consequently, the organisers revisited the program and decided to extend it to three days to allow wider community involvement.

Their efforts have been well rewarded with more than 300 people registered to attend this forum. Mind you, that is not particularly surprising to me given the number of letters on bush fire management related matters that I have received in the past 14 months or so!

I'd like to publicly acknowledge the efforts of Neil Burrows, Glenda Lindsey and the other members of the Department's Science Division who have pulled this all together. I certainly believe it will make a very valuable contribution to creating a greater awareness and understanding of the role of fire in our natural environment.

There is no doubt that of all the activities land management agencies carry out, fire is perhaps the most contentious. Indeed, one only has to look back to the Christmas-New Year period when fires raged across New South Wales for almost three weeks.

It was only a few days after the first fires broke out that fire management and effects became the focus of media coverage and public discussion. A similar pattern emerged during the 1994 wildfires in that State.

Consequently, agencies such as the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service – and even the Rural Fire Service Commissioner – found themselves sidetracked from the main task at hand having to take an almost defensive approach in the face of mounting criticism of their fire preparedness and prevention policies and strategies.

~~While it is important that these issues are aired, there is a time and place and the middle of a swag of raging bushfires certainly isn't the time, especially as the emphasis should be on suppression.~~

Fire management is a complex scientific and social issue. In the past 20 years or so, there has been a significant change in respect to fire management – a change that has seen issues such as biodiversity conservation, urban air quality and global warming become focal points of discussion. That is not to downplay the important role fire management has to play in protection of life and property and community assets.

Consequently, developing appropriate fire management objectives and strategies must combine public values and technical expertise that result in outcomes that benefit our natural environment and in particular the people who live and work in it.

Since the 1970s, nature conservation values have gained wide public acceptance. With the coining of the term ‘biodiversity’ in the late 1980s, such values and concerns became truly mainstream.

Today, the community wants to know the impact of fire management – including prescribed fire – on biodiversity conservation as well as reducing the threat and hazard of inevitable summer wildfires.

This interest raises several questions. For example:

- ❖ Is there a clear verdict from scientific study of impacts of various fire regimes on biodiversity including micro-organisms and soil properties?
- ❖ Is a ‘natural’ fire regime most appropriate to use? Can we – or should we – let nature take its course?
- ❖ Do we adopt a regime that applied before the arrival of Aboriginal people, the practices adopted by Aboriginal people, a blend of both, or do we adopt a new regime?

This symposium is the first in a three-part process that will help come up with the answers to questions such as these.

The second part of this process is the public release today of an internal review of the Department of Conservation and Land Management’s fire operations in the southern forest regions.

This review was carried out by Chris Muller, who is the Department's Pilbara Region Manager based in Karratha. Chris will be known to many of you, but for those who don't know him, he is an extremely experienced land and fire manager who is the prime architect of the Wildfire Threat Analysis.

I understand that Analysis will be the subject of discussion on Thursday.

The review covers a wide range of issues including fire research, legal aspects, conservation of biodiversity and other values, fire fighter safety, wildfire response as well as fire management plans and staffing matters. It certainly reflects the Department's new direction in terms of its key responsibilities in conserving the State's biodiversity and the nature of WA.

I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly acknowledge Chris for his report. It makes a very forthright and positive contribution to improving the community's understanding of fire management and the Department's role. The report will be widely available over the Department's NatureBase website.

This brings me to the third part of the process. I will be asking the Environment Protection Authority to undertake a public review of the Department's fire management policy and operations.

I expect draft Terms of Reference for that review to be prepared as a priority and circulated to key stakeholders for their comment. I would like the review process under way by the middle of this year and finalised within the following 12 months.

If there is one thing of which we can be sure, it is that every year we will have wildfires in Western Australia. Our climate and flammable bushland ensures that fire has, and will continue to be, an important part of our natural environment. After all, fire is as much a part of our environment as sun, wind and rain.

We also know that every summer, many thousands of men and women – the majority of them volunteers – are called on to save homes and properties and community assets from the ravages of these fires.

In Western Australia, especially in the south-west, we have a detection and response system that is second to none. And we are continually working towards improving the training and preparedness of fire crews so that we meet the objectives of minimising the impact of wildfires on our communities.

However, the undeniable fact is that no matter how prepared we are with resources, there will be those really hot, windy dry days – those 'blow up' days – when forest fires will be uncontrollable, and protection of life and property will be paramount.

And herein lies a particular challenge for us all. While we all may accept there is a divergence of thought in relation to fire in the environment, fire ecologists and fire managers must work together more closely to create a greater understanding of bushfire behaviour and its impacts.

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After all, few would disagree that the single greatest protection our front line fire fighting troops can have, is a sound understanding of fire behaviour. Without that understanding, we run the risk of more frequent and more damaging wildfires with a potentially devastating impact on our towns and communities and the surrounding environment and all its values.

Thank you for the invitation to be here. This symposium is officially open.