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BUSH FIRES.

1. Introductory.

The successful implementing of the Bush Fires Act of 1937 is of vital importance to settlers, workers and travellers through all parts of the State, particularly in the South-West and Southern Agricultural areas, where inflammable crops, grass and undergrowth provide suitable conditions for the rapid spread and development of fires during the summer months. It is very desirable that all concerned with the progressive development of the State should become familiar with the provisions of the Act, and the following summary of its essential features is accompanied by short notes on the practical measures for fire prevention and suppression which are being successfully used by Fire Control organisations throughout the State. Valuable work is being done, and a wider knowledge of and appreciation of the problems involved in the campaign against annual bush fire damage must result in these efforts receiving wholehearted support.

2. Summary of Legislation.

(a) Bush Fire Prevention.

(i) *Periods during which all Burning is Prohibited.*—The lighting of fires in the bush during certain months of the year is prohibited in every Road Board District throughout the State. These periods vary slightly in different localities, and settlers are urged to acquaint themselves with the times between which all fire lighting in their districts is illegal.

To meet cases of extreme emergency, a limited amount of burning may be carried out during these prohibited periods. These cases have been definitely named and are set out in the Bush Fires Act.

Permission to burn paddocks for the collection of clover burr may also be obtained from specially authorised officers, subject to the observance of certain specified conditions which are defined in the Act. They concern mainly the placing of a limit on the extent of country to be burnt, the provision of adequate fire-breaks, the raking of debris from the base of each standing tree in the area to be burnt, the inspection of the area by the officer issuing the permit, and the delivery of four days' notice of intention to burn to all adjoining landholders, and to the local Forest Officer, if such burning is to take place within two miles of State Forest. Furthermore, the burning can be carried out only between four o'clock in the afternoon and midnight of the day for which the permit is issued, and the owner or occupier of the area to be burnt is required to provide at least three men to be constantly in attendance at the fire (Section 9).

(ii) *Conditions Applying to Burning between October and April (Section 10).*—In addition to the operation of prohibited periods, further restrictions apply to all burning between the months of October and April in successive years. Between the 1st October and the beginning of the prohibited period and from the close of the prohibited period to the 30th April, no burning may be done on any land unless the owner or occupier complies with certain provisions. These concern mainly the giving of notice containing full particulars of the locality of the bush to be burnt to owners and occupiers of all adjacent lands, to bush fire control officers, and to forest officers when within two miles of a State Forest. It is neces-

sary also for a break to be ploughed or cleared of all scrub, stubble and inflammable material for a width of at least ten feet throughout the whole length of every side of the area to be burnt, and at least three men must be constantly in attendance at the fire from the time it is lighted until it is extinguished.

(iii) *Liability for Damages (Section 10).*—Although burning may be permitted under certain circumstances during the summer months, the person carrying out the burning is liable for any damage sustained by any other person in consequence of such burning operations.

(iv) *Fire Protected Areas. (Section 7).*—Portions of the State have been declared "Fire Protected Areas," within the boundaries of which it is unlawful to set fire to the bush without permission at any time of the year. Subject to certain conditions regarding the preparation of breaks, the number of men to be kept in attendance, etc. (clearly set out in the Bush Fire Regulations), permission to burn may be granted by a local Forest Officer or other officer acting with the authority of the Minister for Lands.

At the present time only two fire-protected districts have been declared, *viz.*, Mundaring and Collie.

(b) *Bush Fire Suppression.*

(i) *Occupier to Extinguish Fires. (Section 11).*—Whenever a fire is discovered or reported to be burning on any land during the prohibited period it is necessary for the occupier of that land, on becoming aware of the fire, to take all possible measures to extinguish it. This he must do at his own expense, whether he is responsible for the lighting of the fire or not. If assistance be required, the local Bush Fire Control Officer should be notified, if means are available to do so, without leaving the fire unattended.

Should the occupier of any land on which a fire is burning during the prohibited period neglect or fail to take adequate measures to extinguish the fire, the Bush Fire Control Officer of any local authority, or the Forest Officer employed in connection with any adjacent State Forest, may enter upon the property and take the necessary steps to control and extinguish the fire. Whenever these measures are necessitated through the failure of the occupier to take adequate precautions or to inform the local Bush Fire Control Officer that assistance was necessary, any expense incurred shall be a debt owing by the occupier to the local authority or to the Conservator of Forests, as the case may be, and shall be recoverable in any court of competent jurisdiction.

(ii) *Local Authority may require Breaks to be Prepared. (Section 17).*—When the local Roads Board or Municipal Council considers it essential that breaks be cleared for preventing the outbreak of a bush fire, or for preventing the extension of any fire which may occur, that body may direct the owner or occupier of any land to prepare breaks as required on his property. Notification in writing, together with particulars of the desired breaks, and the time before which the work must be completed, should be served on the owner or occupier. In the event of this person neglecting or failing to provide suitable breaks within the specified time, the Bush Fire Control Officer or other officer of the local authority may be directed to prepare the breaks, and the costs or expenses incurred thereby recovered as a debt due from the owner or occupier of the land.

A penalty of twenty pounds fine may also be inflicted upon any such defaulter.

This provision will most commonly be enforced as a preventive measure at the commencement of the fire danger season, although the occasion may arise during

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the summer months when the rapid preparation of breaks in private property would assist in the early suppression of dangerous fires.

The responsibility for extinguishing fires is definitely that of the owner or occupier of any land on which a fire is burning, whether he caused it to be lighted or not.

(iii) *Powers of Forest Officers requiring Assistance.* (Forests Act, Section 47).—Whenever a fire occurs in or adjacent to any State Forest or Timber Reserve, a forest officer has the necessary authority to call upon any person residing or working within a radius of five miles from the outbreak to assist in extinguishing the fire.

Assistance from settlers and bush workers in this direction has always been freely given so that no difficulty has ever been experienced in augmenting, where necessary, the small gangs of trained workers maintained by the Forests Department.

(c) *Miscellaneous Sections concerning Fire Suppression.*

(i) *Inquests on Fires* (Section 29).—Section 29 provides that an inquest on any fire may be held by a Coroner when requested in writing to do so by the local authority or any bona fide resident in the district who has suffered damage from such bush fire. Any forest officer may make similar application when the fire has originated or extended within two miles of a State Forest.

(ii) *Damage by Fire to Dividing Fences* (Section 28).—In connection with the obligation of land holders with respect to dividing fences between properties, it is not compulsory under the Act for breaks to be cleared along all boundary fences. If, however, one of any two adjoining owners clears the land on his side of the fence for a space of at least ten feet, and the other adjoining owner does not clear the land on his side, and by reason of this latter's default the dividing fence is destroyed by a bush fire, the defaulting owner can be made to pay the cost of replacing the fence so destroyed. This damage must be repaired within one month. Failing this the occupier who has cleared the land on his side of the fence may repair or re-erect the fence and claim the cost as a debt owing to him by the defaulting occupier. The fact that such an owner was not responsible for the lighting of the fire does not release him from obligations under this section of the Act.

(iii). *Immunity of Fire Controllers from Damages Claims* (section 39).—Any person acting with the authority of the local authority, bush fire brigade or any forest officer, shall not be liable to claims for damages, injury or loss resulting from any action taken in good faith to control and extinguish any bush fire. Nor shall any person required by the Act to take control and charge of fire fighting operations be deemed liable to any such claims for damages.

(d) *Bush Fire Control Officers.*

(i). *Appointment of Fire Control Officers* (Section 19).—These appointments made by the local authorities must be approved by the Minister, notified in the *Government Gazette*, and advertised in a newspaper circulating in the district. Very wide powers have been vested in these officers, who will not be liable for damages, loss or injury caused by the exercise or performance in good faith of any of these powers.

(ii). *Powers of Bush Fire Control Officers* (Section 20).—Special powers have been conferred on Bush Fire Control Officers to cope with any serious out-

break of fire. Any appropriate powers of the Chief Officer of Fire Brigades may be exercised by them insofar as they may be necessary or expedient for extinguishing a bush fire which is already burning or for preventing its extension. They may enter upon any land or building, whether private property or not, cause fences to be pulled down or removed, fire breaks to be ploughed or cleared, water to be used other than that for use at a school or an occupier's domestic supply and take any other fire extinguishing material from any source whatever on any land whether private property or not. They should take charge and give directions to any bush fire brigade and do all things which they consider necessary for the extinguishment and control of any bush fire, or the prevention of its spread or extension. To this end they may employ any person or use the voluntary services of any person to assist them, subject to their directions in the exercise of any of the foregoing powers.

Bush Fire Control Officers can accomplish valuable work during Spring and Autumn months by assisting farmers and settlers plan their breaks and prevention measures to be adopted before the commencement of the fire season. Assistance in the form of types of break considered most suitable, width of ploughing, clearing or pre-burning, the relative advantages of ploughing, grading or hand chipping of breaks in different types of country and numerous other items of practical importance should help considerably in establishing and maintaining prevention schemes which should go far towards eliminating the necessity for costly and dangerous fire fighting in summer months.

(iii). *Powers to be Vested in Forest Officers* (Section 27).—Should any fire, however, be burning in or on any State Forest or Crown lands, these powers and authorities will be vested in and exercisable by any Forest Officer who may be present, and, during this period, this authority shall not be assumed by any bush fire control officer except with the approval of the Forest Officer.

(iv) *Duties of Fire Control Officers on Outbreak of Fire* (Section 21).—On the outbreak of a bush fire, it is necessary for the local Bush Fire Control Officer to inform an officer or member of every bush fire brigade registered in the district, to proceed to the scene of the fire with any fire extinguishing appliances and equipment available, and to take charge of all operations for the suppression and control of the fire.

(e) *Bush Fire Brigades.*

(i) *Formation and Establishment* (Section 23).—A local Bush Fire Brigade may be established in any centre and may arise from a voluntary association of interested persons, or may be established by the local authority. In either case, the local authority is empowered to devote portion of its revenue to equipping and maintaining any such organisation which must be registered with the Minister for Lands before official recognition may be given it.

The Bush Fire Control Officer of any local authority shall have control and charge of all operations at the scene of the fire, and members of all bush fire brigades shall be subject to, and act under, his orders and directions, except in the case of a fire burning on State Forest or Crown lands, when control of such operations will be assumed by the local Forest Officer. (Section 27.)

(ii) *Regulations for Management of Bush Fire Brigades.*—Any bush fire brigade formed for the purpose of controlling and suppressing outbreaks of fire, should be governed by rules and regulations suitable for its efficient management

and development. Such Constitution or Regulations could with advantage be moulded on those of older brigades, in which provision for the following is made:—

1. Name.
2. Objects.
3. Membership.
4. Fees.
5. Financial year.
6. Meetings.
7. Quorum.
8. Office bearers—(a) Administrative,
(b) Field.
9. Audits.
10. Duties of Officers.
11. Additional Rules and Regulations.
12. Amendment.

Further details of the full constitution of Bush Fire Brigades in the Eastern States may be made available on enquiry to the Forests Department.

3. Road Boards and Fire Control.

During recent years much valuable progress towards the reduction in number and extent of uncontrolled bush fires has been made by many Road Board Authorities in the South-West. Such Boards have conducted a vigorous campaign towards the elimination of all fires during the prohibited periods and to this end have displayed warning notices regarding the Bush Fires Act at vantage points within their districts, reduced road clearing activities during the summer months, stopped all burning by Board employees, not only during the prohibited period but during early and late spells of dangerous weather, and generally taken every possible precaution against the outbreak of fire. The benefits of such measures are obvious and they are being adopted by a greater number of Boards each year.

4. Fire Prevention on the Farm.

(i) *General Fire Prevention.*—The use of fire may be necessary at certain periods for the burning of felled timber, stubble or bush pastures, etc., but no fire should be lighted unless adequate control measures have been planned in advance. Fire at any other time, particularly during the prohibited burning season, is likely to lead to serious loss of feed, stock, machinery, buildings, homesteads, and if unfavourable weather conditions suddenly develop may lead even to loss of human life.

The only satisfactory method of avoiding such dangers is to adopt suitable measures for the prevention of outbreaks and measures for dealing with them should they occur.

(ii) *Preparation of Fire Breaks.*—The preparation of satisfactory cleared or ploughed breaks around all cultivated areas or ringbarked paddocks laid down to pasture is perhaps the most important step to adopt in any scheme of fire prevention.

Careful consideration at the outset has always proved immensely valuable and the planning of firebreaks with respect to location, width, length, type of ploughing or preparation, etc., cannot be over emphasised. All farmers know the sources of greatest danger to their own properties, and the earliest breaks should be so prepared to intercept or cut off fires arising from these quarters.

(iii) *Types of Breaks Commonly Prepared.*—The type of break and width, extent and thoroughness of the ploughing in its preparation will be governed

primarily by the inflammability of the crop, scrub or undergrowth, and other factors affecting the rate of spread and development of any fire which may occur under the most dangerous climatic conditions. Where conditions are likely to be severe, it may be desirable to prepare a burnt break, up to three chains in width and preferably between two ploughed lines: this is a common prevention measure in scrub country. Where conditions are less severe, two ploughed lines six to fifteen feet in width and spaced at a half chain to one chain apart may be prepared and the intervening area may or may not be burnt. A greater degree of safety is assured if this strip be burnt prior to the prohibited period, but sometimes, in grass country, this is not possible. Where reliance is to be placed on one ploughed line only, it is desirable that such ploughing be as wide as practicable, commonly twenty to thirty feet. Where the degree of danger is at all high, a certain element of risk is always taken with single plough lines of this nature. Variations in break preparation will be governed to a certain extent by the type and intensity of agricultural development in any locality, but in all cases as few risks as possible should be taken and breaks should be ploughed frequently and ploughed clean.

The fundamental requirement of any successful plan of Fire Prevention is to plan well ahead those breaks which are to be prepared and to prepare them early.

(iv) *Use of Ploughs and Graders in Break Preparation.*—For the preparation of firebreaks on the farm a plough is commonly used, and this in rocky or stony places is frequently supplemented by a spade or mattock. Great success has attended the use of road graders in fire line construction, from the aspect of both efficiency and economy. These implements have been acquired by most Road Boards in recent years, and these bodies would be well advised to consider the preparation of fire breaks along roads and around reserves prior to the commencement of the bush fire danger season.

(v) *Value of Trees in Fire Protection.*—Belts of trees as shelter for stock in the summer months are commonly established in the older settled areas and following their frequent use all grass and herbage is so closely cropped as to expose the bare mineral soil. This may serve as an effective barrier to fire in grass country and suitable location of these belts may go far towards the protection of fences and stock in certain circumstances. General experience has shown that stock killed by fire have invariably congregated against fences from which no escape was possible, and if only suitable areas of shade trees had been provided, losses in such directions might have been greatly reduced.

A certain fire danger may be associated with these timber belts in their early years but once the tree crowns have developed and the lower limbs pruned definite advantages may be anticipated from their establishment.

(vi) *Removal of Inflammable Material from around Buildings, Sheds, etc.*—No consideration of fire prevention on the farm would be complete without reference to the necessity for removing all grass and debris from around buildings, stables, dwelling houses, etc. well before the hot summer months begin, and to arrange for its disposal in suitable weather when there will be no possibility of the fires escaping, and before the prohibited burning season commences. Any such burning during the prohibited season must be carried out subject to the very definite conditions prescribed in the Bush Fires Act.

(vii) *Fire Fighting Equipment.*—In addition to Fire Prevention measures already outlined, it is very necessary that equipment and appliances suitable for suppressing fires once they have started be maintained in good working order and stored in easily accessible places.

Water properly applied is the most effective agent which can be used in fire fighting. Orchard sprays or special fire fighting sprays have been found particularly suitable. Semi-rotary pumps and water tanks of various sizes mounted on horse-drawn or motor vehicles are very useful.

Where such are not available, beaters of leather, canvas and bag have been successfully used, while rakes, axes and shovels are also essential. Water bags for the conveyance of drinking water to fire fighters are a most essential item and on no account should they be overlooked.

Such equipment as may be available should be stored in suitable places and handy to motor transport if possible, for speed in getting to the scene of the fire with men and equipment is one of the most important factors in Fire Suppression.

5. The Forests Department and Fire Control in the South-West.

The Forests Department is continually extending its fire prevention and protection plans to embrace all State Forest in the South-West. During the spring and autumn months of each year thousands of miles of firebreak belts and bad hazards are systematically burnt by specially equipped and trained gangs of workmen. This controlled burning is so regulated to burn out dirty swamps, heavy accumulations of leaf litter, debris, etc., throughout the forest, where fires are not only likely to start but where highly inflammable conditions occur. Along the more commonly used roads, water-courses, bush locomotive lines, and other important hazards the scrub and ground litter are constantly burnt up. The lop and top and other debris following milling and sleeper cutting operations in the forest is disposed of in a similar manner.

The assistance and co-operation of all settlers is constantly sought in removing any accumulation of inflammable material on private property in the vicinity of State Forests in the South-West. By doing this not only is the possibility of damage to their own properties reduced, but a source of danger to their neighbours and the whole countryside, is removed.

There are many ways in which this co-operation may be arranged to the mutual benefit of both the Department and the private property owner, to whom will be made available both the knowledge and experience of trained workmen and additional man-power to help in the burning of breaks or other prevention measures. Consultation with local officers of the Department concerning any proposals for burning operations on locations adjoining or in the proximity of State Forests is recommended, as advice and assistance concerning control measures necessary is constantly available. The cultivation of adequate firebreaks around crops and pasture paddocks and the preparation in advance of breaks around any areas of scrub or clearing which it is desired to burn should go far towards minimising the dangers associated with uncontrolled bush fires. A careful study of local weather conditions before deciding to light up any scrub or clearing fires will be found well worth while. In this connection attention may be drawn to the Fire Hazard Forecast for the South-West transmitted each morning and evening during the summer months by the National Broadcasting Station 6WN, in which the weather conditions to be anticipated throughout the day with regard to the spread of fire are indicated.

The efficiency of the Department's Fire Control Organisation depends to a large extent on the early detection of fires by lookout towers, and the efficiency of these is seriously reduced by drift-smoke, which develops after the opening of the burning season, when numerous clearing or scrub fires are lit up simultaneously by a number of landholders. Any movement designed to obviate the formation

of this heavy drift-smoke is greatly appreciated, and it is suggested that a rotation of burning operations be arranged by neighbouring farmers to avoid the development of heavy smoke haze conditions.

From 20 major lookout stations manned continuously throughout the summer months and from a number of subsidiary points brought into use during abnormally hot and dry weather, a constant watch is maintained over forest areas for the first signs of smoke to appear. Naturally much of the settled area in the South-West is visible from these stations and most fires occurring in private property are detected and accurately located within a few minutes of their starting. Telephonic communication is maintained between the lookout station, local offices, working parties in the field, and many settlers in and around forest areas, so that no time is lost in making known the occurrence of any fire. The Forests Department maintains an extensive suppression organisation of selected and trained men provided with suitable equipment to cope with outbreaks of fire on State Forests and Crown lands. At certain times these forces may be made available to suppress fires on nearby private property, but it cannot be expected that they attend fires at great distances from their headquarters, thereby leaving unguarded and unprotected extensive areas of valuable forest land. Whenever possible the greatest assistance to settlers will be given by departmental employees, in the provision of both man power and equipment, but the forces maintained for controlling fires in State Forests cannot be seriously depleted to render outside assistance during dangerous periods. Every possible help will be given where practicable to assist in these difficult problems facing all settlers, who are urged, however, to avoid as far as possible the necessity for calling on outside assistance by taking adequate precautionary measures before the hot months of the summer begin.

6. What to do on the Outbreak of Fire.

Notification of any fire during the prohibited period, whether burning on private property or not, should be sent immediately to the local Fire Control Officer or Fire Fighting Organisation and to neighbouring settlers from whom assistance might reasonably be expected.

Every available man on becoming aware of the occurrence of fire which might threaten neighbouring property should proceed to the outbreak as quickly as possible, taking with him any fire-fighting appliances which he may have. At the scene of the fire he should place himself under the charge of the Fire Control Officer, Forest Officer or other person assuming for the time being control of operations designed to check and suppress the fire. The first arrival at the fire should make a rapid but careful inspection of the rate of spread and development of the fire, the direction it has taken and will continue to take, the condition and extent of country immediately in advance of the flames, and the location of the most dangerous areas in which the fire will burn most vigorously and do most damage. This information should be supplied to the Fire Control Officer immediately on his arrival to assist in the rapid preparation of plans for suppressing the fire. (

7. Practical Fire-fighting.

All phases of practical fire-fighting may be considered as measures designed firstly to extinguish the flames and prevent the spread of fire, and secondly to leave the fire safe so that no further outbreaks will occur.

The extinguishment of the flames in the shortest possible time requires the appreciation of the fact that it is the "head fire" travelling before the breeze which must be brought under control before the progress of the fire may be checked. The "side fires" move comparatively slowly and the "tail fire" burning back against the

breeze moves very slowly. Wherever possible the initial attack must be made on the head fire to arrest its progress; and wherever direct action against this part is not possible attention should be directed to the side fires as close to the head as possible with a view to pinching it out gradually or forcing it towards less dangerous and less inflammable areas.

Methods of extinguishing the flames are either direct or indirect on the face of the fire itself. Direct methods are those employing water or beaters on the flames, actually quenching them or beating them out with bushes, leather or canvas beaters, etc. Indirect methods are those in which inflammable material is removed from the path of the fire by the rapid preparation of breaks, either by hand with rakes, shovels, mattocks or other tools or by ploughs and graders. The intervening land between the fire and these breaks or earlier formed breaks or roads may be burnt out, commonly known as "backfiring," in advance of the fire, or the fire may be allowed to burn up to them. Certain dangers and difficulties are associated with either method and it is frequently found that after a short while the back fire assumes similar proportions to the oncoming fire and becomes very difficult to keep under control. The method of backfiring should seldom be used in the day time and then only by experienced workers. Permitting the fire to burn out to ploughed or raked breaks is also a dangerous procedure, for seldom will a fire travelling before even a light breeze stay at such a simple barrier. The fire will, however, receive a serious check and permit fire fighters to approach the face of fire and extinguish it before it again assumes large proportions.

A combination of direct and indirect methods is commonly employed for bringing the flames under control in the shortest possible time.

The next important operation requires attention to the extinguished edge and other potential sources of danger in order that no further outbreaks may occur after the departure of the fire fighters. Requirements in this direction will vary with many factors, such as country and topography, whether the fire was in grass, scrub or forest country, the time of the day, local weather conditions, the number of men available for patrol, the number of trees and logs alight and numerous other sources of danger which must be considered and action taken on the spot. The point to remember, however, is that the fire must not start up again or further fire fighting will be necessary on the following or subsequent days and most of the earlier work will have gone for nothing.

A further discussion of fire suppression measures is not proposed at this juncture, as a detailed consideration of these would be beyond the scope of this booklet. The essential point to remember, however, is that once the flames have been stopped the fire should not be left until everything necessary has been done to prevent further outbreaks. The common error made by most fire fighters is to leave the apparently extinguished fire in an unsafe condition.