

Sparking change for women

Women are currently underrepresented in DBCA fire and leadership roles. However, the department has developed a bold new action plan, which aims to increase the number of women in fire management as part of a whole-of-department approach to improve equity and diversity across its workforce.

by Meg Porter, Katie MacWilliams and Rhianna King





As few as twenty years ago, it would have been rare to see a woman on the back of a fire truck, hauling a water hose as it moves past a wall of flames. Fifty years ago, it would have been unheard of. Nor have women historically been involved in planning or carrying out prescribed burns. But, kitted out in regulation ‘personal protective equipment’ and standing in front of a blackened, smoking landscape, Parks and Wildlife Service Wellington District conservation officer Emma Atkinson can’t hide her enthusiasm as she describes how much she enjoys the variety of her job. Surveying for populations of rare flora or tracking quokkas one day, and fighting a fire or planning a prescribed burn the next, Emma is one of a growing number of women who are keen to contribute to fire management, in all areas of the operation.

DREAM JOB

When asked to sum up her job in one word, Emma’s face is transformed by a huge and infectious smile.

“Does the smile say it all?” she asks.

“It’s pretty awesome.”

Emma is one of between 800 and 900 DBCA staff who play a role in Parks and Wildlife Service fulfilling its responsibility of managing fire in forests, parks, nature reserves and other Parks and Wildlife Service-managed lands. The department achieves this through managing fuel loads by prescribed burning and other mitigation activities; responding to bushfires; and undertaking research into fire behaviour and effects.

Emma has been involved in fire management for most of the six years that she’s been with the department. She spent

Main Prescribed burning is carried out around the State to manage fuel loads.

Inset far left Jessica Newman, Vicky Reynen and Emma Atkinson are some of the 800 to 900 DBCA staff who are involved in fire management.

Inset below left Aimee Gomm.

Photos – DBCA

two summers 'working on the back of a truck', which provided her with first-hand experience into what it's like at the fire front and enabled her to build relationships with people working in the field. She then became a shadow officer, during which time she accompanied a number of personnel in a variety of roles and had the opportunity to learn from their experience by watching on the job. Now, she works in a fire line leadership position as a sector commander and is responsible for up to 15 crew, five trucks and one machine during prescribed burns and is a first arriving officer during bushfires.

Emma credits the training she's received and the opportunities she's had to learn from others for her success in fire management and hopes to progress into an operations officer role.

"The skills and knowledge I've learnt and picked up have been based on the people I've worked with – the overseers who have years and years of experience and officers who have been with the department for many years," she said.

"It's been so valuable to spend time with these people and learn from them."

THE NEED FOR ACTION

While Emma has achieved success in her fire-related career, and there has



Above The department is supporting women to assume frontline roles.

Below Allison Donovan (centre) with Jessica Correia Henriques and Jessica Greenfield.
Photos – DBCA

been a slight increase in the number of women in fire roles in the department in the past 20 years, females are still underrepresented in fire management and fire line positions. And of the positions that are held by women, there is a bias in the types of roles they occupy. Currently, 83 per cent of fire management positions, 95 per cent of frontline fire fighter positions and 96 per cent of fire duty officer positions are held by men, while women occupy the majority of administrative-type roles, such as management support and resources.

In order to address this imbalance, and as part of its department-wide *Workforce and Diversity Plan*, which sets the strategic agenda for achieving current and future workforce needs, DBCA assembled a Gender Diversity in Fire Working Group in 2018. This group, which is made

up of representatives from across the department, was charged with developing a *Women in Fire Management Action Plan* to support women and improve gender diversity in fire management over the next three years.

ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS

Shortly after its inception, the group distributed a survey to department staff to gain insight into what issues, perceptions, biases and barriers were contributing to women being underrepresented in



Champion of Change

Parks and Wildlife Service Moora District manager and 'Champion of Change' Allison Donovan began her career with the department in 2001 as part of the Graduate Recruit Development Program, where she received training in all aspects of fire management. For the next five years, she was based in Collie and contributed to the department's bushfire suppression operations, primarily in catering and non-operational support roles. In 2005, Allison transferred to Walpole as the parks and visitor services coordinator and, in 2010, became the Frankland District manager. Shortly after that, she became a district duty officer, charged with coordinating the department's response to local fires on a roster basis. She credits the mentoring she received from other more experienced staff for her successful transition into the role.

Allison says she never felt she was treated different during her career for being a woman, but recognises that unconscious biases exist throughout the whole workforce. As part of her role in the Gender Diversity in Fire Working Group she has challenged her own unconscious biases and is committing to ensuring that roles and positions are allocated based on merit and not on a preconceived notion of what constitutes 'male' and 'female' roles. She also hopes women will put themselves forward for roles that were traditionally held by men.

It is the department's aim that through the implementation of the Women in Fire Management Action Plan 2019-22:

- equal opportunities will exist for those who are suitable to progress their career in fire management
- there is an increased awareness and use of flexible working arrangements in fire management
- 'Champions of Change' – staff who have made a commitment to build a positive workplace culture – are visible at all levels of the agency
- staff are empowered to counter negative behaviours that hinder achieving gender diversity in fire management
- there is an increase in the number of women applying for and being successfully appointed to fire management positions
- there is increased participation of women in fire management roles across the agency
- there is a balance of gender representation at meetings and forums.



Above Women currently hold just five per cent of frontline fire fighter positions.

Left The department is committed to ensuring mentoring opportunities are available for all its staff.

Photos – DBCA

Hear about the Women in Fire Management Action Plan

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fire management. More than 400 staff members responded to the survey, of whom half were women. The survey revealed that 72 per cent of women in operational roles felt they had faced barriers in taking on fire leadership roles. And nearly two thirds of responding women who are not currently involved in fire management said they would like to be, but cited family and personal commitments, that it wasn't a requirement of their current duties, and concerns about how it would impact their everyday jobs as hurdles to becoming involved.

The group then held two workshops to discuss the survey findings and leverage off the collective experience of the more than 50 attending participants, to develop strategies for inclusion in the plan. Six areas were identified for improving gender diversity in fire management: building an inclusive workforce; flexible work arrangements; building confidence; staying connected; continual improvement; and recruitment.

DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN

The working group then developed the *Women in Fire Management Action Plan 2019–22*, which identifies key actions to address the six areas, and sets out clear targets to aspire to and timeframes in which they are achieved.

By achieving these actions, the department is optimistic that, by 2024, women will hold 30 per cent of Public Service Award positions (up from 17 per cent in 2019), which are typically assistant fire operations officers, operations officers, district fire coordinators and regional fire leaders; 20 per cent of Australian Workers' Union positions (up from five per cent in 2019), which are typically conservation employee and overseer positions; and 10 per cent of fire leadership positions (up from zero in 2019). The progress of the plan will be evaluated each year and a comprehensive overview will be carried out at the end of three years.

While it's true that the development of the action plan is designed to increase participation of women in fire management, the outcomes will benefit everyone, within the department and the wider community. This initiative is based on the premise that equality and diversity do not only relate to matters gender, but on having a diverse representation of skills, ideas and approaches from all staff. Achieving a broader range of diversity will assist in improving organisational productivity, performance and capability.

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