WA Forest Alliance's 16-point strategy for wildfire preparedness and response in Western Australia

March 2011

Objective: Ecologically sustainable fire management that protects people, valuable property and the natural environment

Strategic, integrated fire planning and research

1. Conduct a professional, independent, consultative fire-risk management audit/assessment for south-west WA identifying the key values, threats, options, costs, benefits and trade-offs, and on the basis of this work, prepare an integrated fire management plan for the region;
2. Conduct more research into the impacts of prescribed burning and wildfires on native flora, fauna and ecosystems and the role of fire in the natural environment;
3. In both cases above, fully factor in climate change, i.e., declining rainfall, rising temperatures, increased extreme weather events, increased 'dry lightning'.

Discussion: No such assessment or plan exists - only the Department of Environment and Conservation's prescribed burning plans and whatever the Fire and Emergency Services Authority has. Without such a strategic, integrated approach, we cannot develop ecologically sustainable fire management nor a prescribed burning program that achieves genuine fuel reduction rather than actually increasing 'fuel loads'.

Community fire preparedness

4. Invest in early detection and rapid response fire-fighting systems to detect and fight fires as soon as they start;
5. Identify fire-prone areas and implement proper land-use planning to prevent building in those areas;
6. Reduce flammable vegetation in targeted areas, including those surrounding infrastructure and housing as well as fire-sensitive environmental assets;
7. Implement strict building standards for dwellings in high fire-risk areas;
8. Maintain power lines in good condition and move towards placing those in high fire-risk areas underground;
9. Prepare households in high fire-risk areas to be ready for wildfires by developing rapid communication systems, fire shelters, escape routes and strategies, and refuge areas;
10. Increase efforts to stop arson through research, education and strong laws that treat people who light fires that threaten bushland in the same way as those whose fire-lighting threatens human life and property.

Discussion: It is folly to focus so heavily on 'reducing fuels' so as to possibly make it easier to fight wildfires in the hope of protecting people and property in fire-prone areas. To maximize firefighter and public safety and the likelihood of success, the focus should instead be on (a) preventing fires from starting; (b) stopping fires before they become large intense and inherently dangerous wildfires; and (c) make communities/ households/people much less vulnerable to fire.

Looking after our environment and maintaining its fire retardant qualities

11. Recognise that healthy natural ecosystems have in-built fire-retarding qualities, e.g. moisture and canopy that naturally limit the timing, intensity and size of fires, and manage to make best use of these qualities;
12. In remote areas and conservation reserves, protect native flora, fauna and ecosystems through scientifically-based fire management;
13. Protect native forests by stopping logging so as to decrease the likelihood and severity of wildfires;
14. Develop and implement weed management plans for prescribed burns and wildfires to prevent and control weed invasion of forest and bushland, which often follows fire and increases the fire hazard;
15. Keep back-burns to a minimum as they can burn larger areas than the wildfires they are intended to contain;
16. In the face of climate change, reduce the use of/reliance on management practices that exacerbate the problems, including prescribed burning.