Bushfire Mitigation Summit Summary

Context
The Bushfire Mitigation Summit, an election commitment made by the Premier, the Hon. Mark McGowan MLA, in the lead up to the State election, was held on Friday 23 June in Mandurah. The purpose of the Summit was to guide future strategies to mitigate bushfires in Western Australia.

The Summit provided a forum to hear stakeholders’ views on a range of bushfire management issues including the delivery of rural fire management.

The Summit was independently facilitated and provided an opportunity to have a wide range of stakeholders sit down together, discuss lessons learnt from previous bushfires, and develop ideas on a way forward towards achievable outcomes on bushfire mitigation.

A wide range of ideas and issues were discussed, nevertheless the common theme was a desire to work together to reach the best possible outcomes to protect communities from bushfires.

Discussion Themes

Workshop 1 - Prescribed Burning
There was significant support for prescribed burning and it was recognised that further improvements can be made. Some of these suggested improvements are outlined below.

Effective Use of Human Resources
Human resources could be used more effectively to manage fuel loads. This could include more involvement of volunteers, indigenous communities, non-frontline State Government agencies and even ‘neighbourhood watch’ type groups.

Accredited training would be important when introducing new individuals and groups to undertake prescribed burning. Improved collaboration, particularly between paid and volunteer staff, was suggested as another way to improve the effectiveness of prescribed burning. It was suggested that mobilisation and flexibility of resources could be improved so that if unable to prescribe burn in one area resources could be used in an area where it can be undertaken. To facilitate this, permits and applications could be made simpler.

Improving Knowledge
Improving knowledge around prescribed burning is another way to make improvements. One suggestion was that there should be a better understanding of the impacts of prescribed burning, such as improved smoke weather modelling. This would be of assistance to grape growers who are particularly affected by smoke. Other proposals were establishing a centre of excellence in fuel reduction; improved spatial land use information; further use of
bushfire science and historical data; analysing and evaluating outcomes of previous burns; and expanding the Bushfire Risk Management Planning program to better understand the State’s risk profile.

FUNDING

There were discussions around the need for additional and more stable funding sources to ensure sufficient prescribed burning takes place. Two proposals were to review use of the Emergency Services Levy to channel more money into prescribed burning and undertake cost-benefit analyses to better understand the benefits of prescribed burning.

PRESCRIBED BURNING TARGETS

There was significant support for prescribed burning targets. However, these targets currently only apply to the former Department of Parks and Wildlife and there is a potential that these could be extended to other agencies. There was concern that some assets, such as plantations, vineyards and other industries, are undervalued in determining priorities. It was suggested that targets and priorities could be developed through the Bushfire Risk Management Planning process.

OTHER FORMS OF MITIGATION

It was recognised that there are other forms of mitigation than prescribed burning. For example, there was some support for mechanical fuel load reduction.

WORKSHOP 2 - BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT

Current and future bushfire management was discussed with general discussion regarding an increased effort in preventative mitigation over response-based activities. There was strong support for the Bushfire Risk Management Planning process though it was suggested that it needs secure funding and more effective resourcing. Other aspects of bushfire management discussed are outlined below.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND CAPABILITY

Building bushfire management capacity within WA was seen as positive. A unified approach to training to improve consistency of capability across agencies and volunteers was proposed. Creating and capturing learnings through a centre of excellence in WA would also build capability for future events. Further, capacity could also be increased by making private sector resources available to manage bushfires. An all-agency register of available assets and resources was seen as beneficial.

FIRE GROUND EXPERIENCE

Better recognition and utilisation of local knowledge and those with specific bushfire experience was highlighted as a way to use past experiences and learnings. Those with local bushfire knowledge could also be used in incident management teams and participate in the delivery of training.

Improving fire ground communications was seen as important. Issues discussed were ways to further improve communications between State government agencies, as well as between agencies and local governments. Suggestions included a unified approach to training, joint exercising and short-term secondments. Less use of cell phones was seen as a way to improve fire ground communications.

BUSHFIRE MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT

Suggestions to improve bushfire management included transparency in the Emergency Services Levy process; addressing culture issues within the services; greater recognition of volunteers and their efforts; collaborative and competency-based training; review of fatigue management; and using a risk-based approach on the ground.

RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Workshop participants were asked to comment on how a Rural Fire Service could operate. There was acknowledgment that it is difficult to debate the merits of a Rural Fire Service until a preferred model is defined. The opinions and options reflected by stakeholders can be categorised by the following:

• A Rural Fire Service operating within DFES, as the hazard management agency for fire;
• A Rural Fire Service operating within DFES with total autonomy, including budget (e.g. a Deputy Commissioner of Rural Fire Services that reports to the Commissioner);
• A dedicated Rural Fire Service established in a cost-effective way which operates independent of a career fire service; and
• Explore all options to transfer the management of all bushfire brigades under one umbrella – DFES or other.
Workshop 3 - Bushfire Mitigation

While bushfire mitigation was supported, it was recognised that there are number of funding/resourcing issues and other barriers preventing it from being a higher priority. These points and other key issues raised during the workshop are outlined below.

Mitigation Resourcing

Reportable and transparent allocation of funding for the development of mitigation strategies was seen as a requirement. One suggestion was to increase and secure the funding for the Bushfire Risk Management Planning program and expand the program to include more local governments. Current grants-based funding was seen as unsustainable and a longer-term funding program is needed which allows for longer-term strategic plans and goals. It was proposed that investing in mitigation up front would save money over the long-term. It was also thought that the review of the Emergency Services Levy may give an opportunity to redirect grants towards mitigation activities.

It was felt that mitigation activities require a greater flexibility of resources such that they can be moved around the State where and when required.

Site-specific risk

There is a need that landowners understand their site specific bushfire risk. This could be achieved through targeted community education and awareness programs focused on bushfire risk and mitigation. Improved enforcement by State and local government was seen as important. Increasing local governments’ and landowners’ understanding of bushfire prone mapping would also provide benefit as would greater clarity of who owns the risk and how to manage it effectively.

Potential Barriers

Barriers to ensuring mitigation is a higher priority were discussed and include the cost of undertaking mitigation activities; conflicting State and Commonwealth legislation; conflicts between local government strategic plans, community aspirations and bushfire mitigation; cultural issues within agencies; and the disparity between biodiversity and the need for bushfire risk management. Binding the crown so that State government agencies undertake their responsibilities was also proposed.

Future actions

It was suggested that a further Bushfire Mitigation Summit be held in approximately 12 months’ time.

Members of the public and interested organisations are encouraged to present a submission addressing the terms of reference. Submissions opened Monday 12 June 2017 and close Sunday 9 July 2017.

The State Government will consider the public submissions along with the matters raised at the Summit in guiding future strategies on bushfire mitigation in Western Australia.