

The 2018 Queensland Bushfires Review Report

Report 2: 2018-19

QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Overview

In November and December 2018, bushfires devastated 35 communities across eight Queensland Local Government Areas, burning 1.4 million hectares of land and impacting primary producers, agriculture and the environment.

These bushfires stand out in Queensland's recent history for the compounding effects of prolonged drought, high winds and heatwave, producing an extended period of fire danger ratings at or above very high and, for the first time in Queensland, the catastrophic fire danger category was triggered. The unprecedented nature of the event subsequently resulted in a fire emergency of a scale and intensity not previously experienced in Queensland.

More than 2,300 fires were attended across the State, with more than 180 fires burning concurrently at the height of the event. Fires were experienced state wide, with most in Central Queensland, particularly around Gladstone, Rockhampton and Mackay. During the event, more than 3,500 Queensland firefighters, emergency management specialists, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) officers and support personnel were joined by more than 1,200 officers drawn from across Australia.

This disaster brought home the serious dangers of bushfires and the courage of those fighting them. The Queensland Government acknowledges Mr George Bird who lost his life in the Rolleston area on 30 November 2018 while working to protect the family property.

The Queensland Government is grateful for the cooperation of the community in very difficult circumstances, the commitment and sacrifice of the paid and volunteer workforce and contributions from interstate colleagues. Much of Queensland relies on volunteer Rural Fire Brigades for fire mitigation and firefighting activities. The exceptional commitment of volunteers was a critical component of the firefighting effort. The volunteer State Emergency Service also provided support to operations, with volunteers undertaking key tasks such as traffic management, re-supply and assisting with evacuations.

Review

On 6 December 2018, the Honourable Craig Crawford MP, Minister for Fire and Emergency Services requested the independent Inspector-General Emergency Management (IGEM) review the effectiveness of the Queensland disaster management system in its preparation and response to the bushfires and the associated heatwave.

As an independent office, with expertise in disaster management, IGEM is best placed to identify the strengths of Queensland's disaster management system and any opportunity for improvement.

IGEM recommendations will guide disaster management stakeholders in how best to respond to future events and strengthen confidence in Queensland's disaster management arrangements.

Queensland's approach to disaster management

Since 2011, Queensland has been impacted by more than 60 significant natural disaster events resulting in loss of life and more than \$14.4 billion in damage to public infrastructure alone.

With a record 10 separate natural disaster events striking the State in 2018-19, we recognise that as our climate changes, so too, will the frequency and intensity of these events.

The Queensland Government remains committed to making Queensland the most disaster resilient State in Australia. We strive to safeguard people, property and the environment from disaster impacts while recognising the importance of empowering and supporting local communities to manage disaster risks, respond to events and be more resilient.

Australia's only permanent disaster recovery organisation, the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, forms an integral part of Queensland's unique approach to disaster management. The Queensland Government has demonstrated a strong commitment to continuous improvement of our disaster management arrangements through robust planning and preparations, and respect for the insights and expertise of IGEM.

We are committed to improving our disaster preparedness, response and recovery to meet the challenges ahead.

Findings and the Queensland Government Response

The Review found that the firefighting response to Queensland's unprecedented bushfires was exceptional. However, the Review noted there is scope for improvements and specifically identified: the need to work together to manage the risk of intense fires; the need to convey the risk, and the best information about it, to the community; and the need for the disaster management system to adapt when the hazard needs the technical capability of a large hazard-specific agency to respond to the disaster. The Review report contains observations, findings and 23 recommendations to guide future actions.

The Queensland Government is committed to community safety and has already allocated \$16 million over four years and \$2.6 million per year ongoing in the 2019-20 State Budget to provide improved capability for bushfire management in QPWS parks and State forests. This initiative is primarily focused on taking practical steps to improve the containment of wildfires on QPWS-managed land in strategic locations across Queensland.

Additionally, the Queensland Government is prioritising work towards the implementation of the Review recommendations ahead of the bushfire season, including finalisation of the hazard specific Bushfire Plan, identification of additional officers to be trained in fire behaviour analysis, and the development of reference material in relation to the use of suppressants.

Building on this commitment, the Queensland Government accepts or accepts-in-principle, all recommendations of the Review and will work together with our partners in local government, non-government agencies and the Federal Government to address the recommendations for the benefit of Queenslanders.

The Queensland Government response to the Review recommendations is attached. We commend the report and the Queensland Government response to all stakeholders.

Queensland Government Response to:			
<i>The 2018 Queensland Bushfires Review Report 2:2018-2019</i>			
	Recommendation	Response	
	Heatwave		
1	Queensland's plans and arrangements for heatwave should be reviewed to provide for an integrated multi-agency approach to their management. A single agency should lead and oversee this process.	Accepted	A multi-agency approach to heatwave management will be implemented through an updated Heatwave Management Plan and establishment of a Heatwave Committee through the State Disaster Coordination Group.
	Science and Risk		
2	Wherever possible, the antecedents that will lead to catastrophic fire weather conditions existing for a particular area should be identified and documented within fire management plan relevant to the area.	Accepted	Information on potential fire weather will be integrated into fire management planning, supported by enhanced mapping.
3	The future risk of bushfires to Queensland communities should be re-evaluated as part of the 2020 State Risk Assessment in light of recent and emerging science, events and lessons.	Accepted	The risk of bushfires will be re-evaluated as part of the 2020 State Risk Assessment.
	Mitigation - Engagement		
4	A good neighbour policy such as that of the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, setting out clear expectations, be developed to guide all landholders.	Accepted	Elements of the good neighbour policy will be included in enhanced guidance material for landholders.
5	All Area Fire Management Groups should adopt and be guided by a good neighbour policy	Accepted	Enhanced guidance based on elements of the good neighbour policy will be provided to Area Fire Management Groups.
6	Area Fire Management Groups should share seasonal risk information with local groups and actively and appropriately contribute to disaster management planning.	Accepted	Area Fire Management Groups will be more closely aligned to disaster management arrangements with a view to greater sharing of risk and planning information.
	Mitigation – compliance		
7	Legislation at State and local level requiring landholders to reduce fire risk on their property should be actively applied.	Accepted-in-Principle	The circumstances in which it would be appropriate to enact State level risk reduction provisions will be assessed. QFES will examine the application of section 69 of the <i>Fire and Emergency Service Act 1990</i> in a bushfire context; engage with landholders about the use of section 69 and educate QFES staff.
	Mitigation – authorisation process		
8	To make planned burning and land clearing easier to understand and implement for landholders, a single point of contact for all bushfire mitigation inquiries and permits should be established.	Accepted-in-Principle	The Queensland Government will make bushfire mitigation initiatives easier to understand and implement for landholders. A pilot will explore ways to ensure the community's access to information is seamless and tailored to the needs of their community.
	Mitigation – risk and effectiveness		
9	Given an increasing risk of intense fires, the framework of legislation relating to vegetation management, bushfire mitigation and hazard reduction, together with mitigation and preparation priorities should be re-assessed. The re-assessment should aim to enable more appropriate and flexible means at the local level for the reduction of intense fires.	Accepted-in-Principle	The Review acknowledges the Queensland Government has the necessary framework in place for mitigation. QFES, in finalising the State Bushfire Plan is assessing the appropriateness of the bushfire preparedness and prevention framework. The plan will be developed in the context of increasing risk of intense fires and the need for local flexibility.
	Intelligence and technology		
10	Building capacity in fire simulation and predictive capabilities, including the capability of people to read and interpret these products through training, should be investigated and considered.	Accepted	Investment in fire simulation and predictive capabilities will continue and further enhancements will be explored.
11	The outputs of these capabilities should be shared and actively inform the disaster management sector, including response operations and the creation of warnings and public messaging.	Accepted-in-Principle	The most effective way to utilise fire simulation and predictive capabilities within the disaster management sector will be examined.
12	The ability to share, analyse, interrogate and display information from disparate entities should be progressed as a matter of some urgency.	Accepted-in-Principle	Improved information sharing across disaster management stakeholders will be progressed through existing multi-agency initiatives.

	Recommendation	Response	
	Public information and warnings – warnings about catastrophic conditions		
13	The national messages for catastrophic fire danger ratings should be integrated with all existing and new community bushfire safety information.	Accepted	Bushfire safety messaging will be assessed to ensure integration of catastrophic fire danger messaging.
	Public information and warnings - education		
14	Education on bushfires should include information about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the change in climate and resulting higher level of bushfire risk; local bushfire risk, possible consequences, and preventative and preparedness actions for the community; the purpose of bushfire mitigation activities (to reduce, not stop, bushfire); the need, types and purposes for planned burning; intersects between different legislation and their regulations and exemptions; and the importance of a shared approach to bushfire mitigation. All agencies with education material should share it freely. Material should be appropriately authorised for use in Queensland.	Accepted	Bushfire education and engagement material will be reviewed to enhance its efficacy and ensure it is appropriately shared.
	Public information and warnings – roles and responsibilities		
15	Communications protocols about hazard-specific events should be developed to clarify responsibilities and the principles for the release of information and warnings. They should be included in all related hazard-specific plans and published on relevant websites and used during events.	Accepted	Existing good practice will be leveraged to develop communication protocols for hazard specific events.
	Coordination structures and interagency cooperation – hazard specific planning		
16	Hazard-specific and disaster management guidelines and plans should explain the circumstances and process for hazard-specific activation of the disaster management arrangements in support of an incident. They should be relevant to local authorities and local and district groups and used during events.	Accepted	Guidelines and plans will be updated, as necessary, to clarify activation arrangements for hazard specific events, including prioritisation of the hazard specific Bushfire Plan.
17	Hazard-specific plans and guidelines should be published on external websites for access by relevant stakeholders.	Accepted	All relevant plans will be published on external facing agency websites with links located on the Queensland Government disaster management website, including prioritisation of the hazard specific Bushfire Plan.
	Coordination structures and interagency cooperation – coordination		
18	Planning for response to bushfire risk should identify all stakeholders to be engaged in the response phase and their roles and responsibilities should be clearly documented.	Accepted	Response stakeholders will be identified and roles documented in relevant plans.
19	All disaster management groups should run an exercise that has full involvement of a hazard-specific primary agency in the next 12 months and regularly thereafter.	Accepted-in-Principle	Disaster management groups at all levels will be encouraged to implement an appropriate program of exercises, based on risk, and including hazard specific primary agencies.
	Coordination structures and interagency cooperation – liaison officers		
20	All agencies should identify the capacity and appropriate positions for the role of liaison officers, and ensure sufficient numbers are trained.	Accepted	Liaison officer roles will be identified and relevant training provided.
21	Coordinated arrangements for liaison officer deployment should be considered and documented by disaster management groups across the full spectrum of risk identified for their area of responsibility, and not rely on a singular inflexible approach.	Accepted-in-Principle	Liaison officer deployment principles will be developed and made available for the consideration of disaster management groups.
	Coordination structures and interagency cooperation – interstate and commonwealth support		
22	Clear public messaging regarding risks (if any) from the use of suppressants, including to 'organic' producers, should be developed and socialised before the next fire season and be readily available for dissemination when needed.	Accepted	Reference material in relation to the use of suppressants will be made available online.
23	Targeted education about the short- and long-term effects of chemical suppressants should reach those likely to be exposed to them before aerial chemical suppressants are used in Queensland again.	Accepted-in-Principle	Reference material in relation to the use of suppressants will be made available online.