

The K'gari (Fraser Island) Bushfire Review Report

Report 1: 2020-21

QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Overview

On 14 October 2020, a vegetation fire was reported at a campground near Orange Creek on K'gari (Fraser Island). The source of the fire was determined to be an illegally lit campfire that was not properly extinguished.

Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) assumed the role of Incident Controller, managing the fire under challenging conditions on remote inaccessible terrain until 27 November 2020 when it was declared a Level 2 Incident and control was handed over to Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES).

During the two-month response, the bushfire travelled from the north of the island southwards towards Kingfisher Bay. It posed a significant threat to townships including Orchid Beach, Happy Valley, Yidney Rocks and The Oaks, in addition to the QPWS base at Dundubara, significant cultural sites for the Butchulla people, and tourist facilities, including the campgrounds at Cathedrals, and the iconic Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village.

QFES, QPWS and Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) personnel worked together to contain and extinguish the fire, utilising a combination of QFES assets (Rural Fire Service, Fire and Rescue Service and State Emergency Service) to preserve life, protect property, culturally significant sites, historic structures and the natural flora and fauna.

Significant QFES, QPWS and BAC resources responded to the fire, including ground crews/personnel, firefighting appliances, aircraft and heavy plant, with barges utilised for the transport of personnel and equipment to the Island, throughout the operation.

QFES supplemented the firefighting efforts with 30 different types of waterbombing aircraft during the incident dropping over 13.3 million litres of water on the fire. Despite the large amounts of water dropped by aircraft the fire still took several weeks and rain to be fully extinguished.

The fire received international attention, intense media and public interest due to the site's World Heritage status and its unique flora, fauna and ecosystems.

Review

On 2 December 2020, the Premier and Minister for Trade announced the Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management (IGEM) would undertake a review of the K'gari (Fraser Island) bushfire event (the Review).

Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Review and the legislated functions of the Office of the IGEM under Section 16 of the *Disaster Management Act 2003* framed the scope of the Review.

The Review also considered: the cultural and environmental significance of K'gari; recommendations and insights from IGEM's 2018 and 2019 Queensland Bushfires Reviews; recommendations made by the 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements; and was mapped against the relevant Shared Responsibilities of the refreshed Standard for Disaster Management in Queensland (the DM Standard) and informed by the original standard released in 2014.

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

Queensland's approach to fire management

Traditionally, the bushfire season in Queensland commences in the north of the State in August and concludes in December of each year. A number of factors can influence the length and severity of the bushfire season including the timing and nature of the previous wet season and the current climate outlook.

Over the last three fire seasons (2018, 2019 and 2020) Queensland has seen significant bushfires which resulted in three separate IGEM reviews. Climate change has given rise to a changing environment which in turn means a changing risk profile.

Bushfire prevention and preparedness is a shared responsibility in Queensland and is managed through a partnership between QFES, landholders, local governments, HQPlantations (Queensland's largest plantation forest company) and state and federal agencies, particularly QPWS.

Responsibility for hazard reduction (through activities such as prescribed burns or mechanical fuel reduction) primarily rests with land managers. QFES plays a leadership role in coordination of stakeholders, focussing on reducing the impact of fire on communities.

QFES is the hazard specific lead agency for bushfire and QFES' role in coordinating the efforts of land managers to mitigate bushfire risk is driven through the Office of Bushfire Mitigation, supported strategically by the State Bushfire Committee (SBC), and locally by Area Fire Management Groups. Volunteer Rural Fire Brigades and the volunteer Fire Warden network play a significant role in bushfire mitigation at the local level.

Queensland Government is committed to improving prevention, preparedness, response and recovery capability to meet the challenges ahead.

Queensland Government Response

The review found opportunities for QFES and QPWS to better engage with relevant stakeholders, the Butchulla people and the community, to plan and undertake hazard mitigation activities. This was particularly relevant across multiple land tenures with different landowners, which could benefit from further engagement as part of a reinvigorated Locality Specific Area Fire Management Group on K'gari.

IGEM acknowledged the commitment and fortitude of fire management and response agencies, rural fire brigades, the Butchulla people and community associations on the island in responding to this highly complex and challenging bushfire event that tested response agencies.

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 K'gari (Fraser Island) Bushfire Review Report 1:2020-2021</i>			
	Recommendation	Response	
1	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends a set of guiding principles that reflect a unified response to World Heritage listed sites in Queensland be included in the <i>Queensland State Disaster Management Plan</i> and reflected in the <i>Queensland Bushfire Plan</i> .	Support	Queensland Government will update the Queensland State Disaster Management Plan (QSDMP) and the Queensland Bushfire Plan (QBP) to incorporate a link to relevant reference documents relating to World Heritage Principles.
2	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends that the Queensland Government works with the Commonwealth Government to review the <i>Project Agreement for World Heritage Management</i> to ensure Queensland and Australia continue to meet their obligations under the World Heritage Convention to protect, conserve and present our World Heritage properties.	Support	The Minister for the Environment and the Great Barrier Reef and Minister for Science and Youth Affairs will write to the Federal Environment Minister seeking to secure an increased Australian Government commitment to properly resourcing the Queensland World Heritage Estate to ensure Queensland and Australia continue to meet their obligations under the World Heritage Convention.
3	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the <i>Queensland State Disaster Management Plan</i> and the <i>Queensland Bushfire Plan</i> be reviewed to enhance appropriate arrangements for the management of bushfire and disaster events where a threat is posed to significant environmental and cultural heritage sites.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government agencies will collaborate to further clarify the arrangements for when a threat is posed to significant environmental and cultural heritage sites.
4	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services regularly review and evaluate the effectiveness of the <i>Queensland Bushfire Plan</i> with land managers and stakeholders, including disaster management groups. A review should occur in line with any material change to the <i>Queensland State Disaster Management Plan</i> , the <i>Disaster Management Act 2003</i> , the <i>Prevention Preparedness Response and Recovery Guideline</i> , or after major bushfire events, to ensure appropriate alignment and currency.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government will review the QBP over the next 12 months, dependent on operational priorities. .
5	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services facilitate an annual state level exercise of the <i>Queensland Bushfire Plan</i> that includes all relevant stakeholders and land managers. The exercise should focus on roles, responsibilities, interagency arrangements and handover arrangements between agencies and land managers.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government will consider developing an Exercise Framework and consider running a bushfire specific exercise for the State Bushfire Committee (SBC).
6	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Locality Specific Fire Management Group for K'gari meet at least twice per year, in person or virtually.	Support	The K'gari Locality Specific Fire Management Group will meet twice per year as per section 5 of the standard Fire Management Group Terms of Reference, noting that COVID-19 impacted the scheduling of meetings in 2020.
7	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends all Area Fire Management Groups in Queensland make their Bushfire Risk Mitigation Plans, bushfire risk mapping and methodology easily understood and available to the community. All public plans should be dated to ensure currency and incorporate mechanisms for community feedback.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government will write to the Chairpersons of Local Disaster Management Groups asking them to consider publishing Bushfire Risk Mitigation Plans (BRMPs) as a sub-plan to their Local Disaster Management Plans. The methodology which supports the preparation of the BRMPs will be published on the QFES external facing website. Longer term risk mapping is already provided through the Bushfire Prone Area Mapping. This is publicly available through the Queensland Government Open Data Portal (https://www.data.qld.gov.au/dataset/bushfire-prone-area-queensland-series).

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8	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the prescribed burn program for K'gari be developed by the Department of Environment and Science, in collaboration with the Locality Specific Fire Management Group and the Butchulla people, based on the principles of the <i>National Position on Prescribed Burning</i> . This program should incorporate a process for monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and integration of evolving fire management practices.	Support	The K'gari Annual Planned Burn program will continue to be developed in accordance with the <i>National Position on Prescribed Burning</i> and in collaboration with the Locality Specific Fire Management Group and the Butchulla people.
9	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends a collaborative review of firelines, tracks and trails on K'gari be undertaken by the Department of Environment and Science, in collaboration with the Locality Specific Area Fire Management Group and the Butchulla people, to ensure an adequate network is agreed by relevant stakeholders, and roles and responsibilities for maintenance are agreed and documented.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government will consider a review of the 600km of firelines, and tracks and trails on K'gari in collaboration with the Locality Specific Area Fire Management Group and the Butchulla people.
10	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the <i>Interagency Protocol for Fire Management</i> be reviewed by all relevant entities, including representatives of the Butchulla people, and be updated as a matter of priority. Entities responsible for the protocol should implement a process for regular review and evaluation of its effectiveness. This review process should be conducted after a major bushfire event, or to reflect any material change to applicable legislation and policy. It should also consider pre-arranged approvals and a range of agreed fiscal protocols between the agencies.	Support	Queensland Government will update the <i>Interagency Protocol for Fire Management</i> .
11	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science establish pre-determined financial delegations and authority for Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Incident Controllers.	Support	Queensland Government will consider establishing pre-determined financial delegations for Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Incident Controllers.
12	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science review its training framework and minimum mandatory training requirements for Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Incident Controllers to ensure they are appropriately trained to manage significant events.	Support in Principle	Queensland Government is reviewing its fire training framework and minimum mandatory training requirements including for the role of Incident Controller.
13	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science identify opportunities to increase Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service's capability in incident management and multi-agency fire response, through exercising plans and procedures in collaboration with other stakeholders, including disaster and fire management groups at all levels.	Support in Principle	Queensland Government through the Department of Environment and Science (DES) will continue to participate in planned burns and bushfire events annually, ensuring contemporary knowledge and experience of bushfire management. DES will continue to exercise plans and enhance procedures in collaboration with other stakeholders, including disaster and fire management groups.
14	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science review the format and delivery of Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service annual fire refresher training to include a scenario-based exercise.	Support	Queensland Government will review and continue to implement annual fire refresher training and scenario-based exercises.

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15	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services consider expanding specialist Remote Area Firefighting Team capability to assist in responding to significant bushfire events which occur in rugged or inaccessible terrain.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government, through Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, will, at the end of the 2021 fire season, review the current trial of the Remote Area Firefighting Team capability to determine the suitability of implementing the program.
16	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the next review of the <i>Queensland State Disaster Management Plan</i> examines and provides guidance in respect to the application of Queensland's disaster management arrangements to support hazard specific events such as bushfire.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government, in consultation with other stakeholders will consider how the QSDMP could be amended to reflect the intersection and trigger points, and the command, control and coordination arrangements between hazard specific agency incident management arrangements and the whole of government disaster management arrangements.
17	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends entities with responsibilities for land and fire management consider the establishment of roles for Traditional Owner and First Nations representatives in incident management structures for significant bushfire or disaster events including those that may impact on cultural heritage in Queensland's World Heritage sites.	Support in-principle	Queensland Government actively supports the principle of working with Traditional Owners and First Nations people in all aspects of fire management. Consideration will be given to when and how engagement with Traditional Owners and First Nations people will occur during significant bushfire or disaster events.
18	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science ensure that all Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service regions develop a Disaster Management Operations Plan based on a standardised format. The plans should include provision for annual review to ensure they remain contemporary, interoperable with relevant disaster management plans and aligned to the <i>Department of Environment and Science Emergency Management Plan</i> .	Support	Queensland Government will standardise and review DES Regional Disaster Management Operations Plans.
19	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science develop and implement a Wildfire Response Plan for Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Coastal and Islands Region, to be included in the region's <i>Disaster Management Operations Plan</i> .	Support	Queensland Government will review the Wildfire Response Plan for the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Coastal and Islands Region.
20	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the arrangements and requirements for situational reporting when an incident is under the control of the Department of Environment and Science be detailed in the <i>Queensland Bushfire Plan</i> . These arrangements should also be outlined in relevant joint entity agreements and operational doctrine.	Support	Queensland Government will consider updating the QBP to provide more clarity for stakeholders on the requirements for situational reporting.
21	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science review the resourcing model to ensure surge capacity is available to support incident management functions during response operations. This includes processes to request assistance from other departments and entities with responsibilities for fire and incident management.	Support	Queensland Government through DES will review its processes to request assistance from other fire and incident departments and entities, particularly with respect to specialist support.
22	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science review its suite of operational doctrine to ensure arrangements for situational reporting and requests for assistance are aligned to recognised multi-agency practices used in disaster management.	Support	Queensland Government through DES has established operational doctrine to ensure arrangements for situational reporting are in place and will review these current templates and procedures to align to recognised multi-agency practices used in disaster management.

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23	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services and the Department of Environment and Science review the current description of Level 1, 2, and 3 bushfire incidents and the implied meaning of property in the <i>Queensland Bushfire Plan</i> . This review should identify and agree on clear criteria and decision points for the transfer of control and develop a standard process and templates.	Support in principle	Queensland Government will review the current description of Level 1, 2, and 3 incidents in the QBP, and align to those outlined in the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) to ensure consistency with AIIMS definitions.
24	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Maryborough District Disaster Management Group works with the Fraser Coast Local Disaster Management Group to plan for the evacuation of K'gari due to bushfire. Once developed, the plan should be exercised and regularly reviewed.	Support	Queensland Government, through the Queensland Police Service, will support the Fraser Coast LDMG in the development and practicing of evacuation planning for K'gari.
25	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services examines the use of predictive service capability to inform prevention and preparedness in addition to response activities.	Support	Queensland Government continuously evolves its predictive services capability in line with state and national methodology and technical enhancements. The Advanced Capability Support Unit within QFES has developed and currently supports the Catalyst system that underpins Operation Cool Burn activities. Queensland Government will examine the use of predictive services capability to inform prevention and preparedness and will provide products such as fuel hazard mapping to support mitigation activities.
26	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services engages with land managers and other stakeholders on K'gari to source data to inform Predictive Services products.	Support	Queensland Government through QFES engaged with K'gari's Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation Land and Sea Rangers in March 2021 to inform future predictive services products.
27	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services identifies stakeholders that would benefit from predictive service products. Suitable advice and training should be provided to these stakeholders to assist with using and interpreting the products.	Support in principle	Queensland Government will consider providing awareness training to members of the SBC to assist stakeholders to understand and interpret the information available through the use of predictive services products.
28	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends a public information resource be developed by Queensland Fire and Emergency Services to inform the community and stakeholders about aerial assets utilised in bushfire response.	Support	Queensland Government will develop public resource information about aerial assets which will be made available on the QFES external facing website.
29	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the membership of the K'gari Locality Specific Fire Management Group be expanded to include representatives of the Butchulla people, community associations from each township and tourism and business operators with interests on the island.	Support	Queensland Government will ensure the Butchulla Aboriginal Corporation is invited to join the K'gari Locality Specific Fire Management Group.
30	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Bushfire Risk Mitigation Plan for Fraser Coast Area Fire Management Group include a schedule of planned engagement activities, or a community engagement sub-plan outlining these activities, and be publicly available.	Support in principle	Queensland Government will consider options to expand current practices to more broadly inform the community of planned engagement activities.

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31	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Maryborough District Disaster Management Group works with the Fraser Coast Local Disaster Management Group to prepare and exercise a communications sub-plan with all responsible agencies, to clarify the roles, responsibilities and communication channels used for restricting access to K'gari.	Support	Queensland Government, through the Maryborough DDMG, will support the Fraser Coast LDMG in the development and exercise of a communications sub-plan to be used when restricting access to K'gari during emergency periods.
32	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science examines the utilisation of technology, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, to improve the collection of visitor numbers and movement data. This could include, for example, expanding the use of Automatic Number Plate Recognition technology to K'gari and examining the suitability of mobile phone check-in applications.	Support in principle	Queensland Government will examine the utilisation of technology, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, to improve the collection of visitor numbers and movement data on K'gari.
33	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science implements the proposed treatments for fire identified in the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service <i>K'gari Compliance Strategy</i> .	Support	Queensland Government currently conducts active compliance monitoring and enforcement in relation to illegal campfires and will continue to implement the K'gari Compliance Strategy.
34	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends the Department of Environment and Science undertake a review of campfire locations on K'gari, including all relevant signage on and off the island, maps and visitor permit information, to promote a consistent message about lighting campfires on K'gari.	Support	Queensland Government will review campfire locations on K'gari and will identify the most effective means of communicating messages to visitors.
35	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Department of Environment and Science implement an awareness and engagement strategy aimed at deterring the lighting of campfires to encourage behavioural change amongst visitors.	Support	Queensland Government will review its awareness and engagement strategy to deter visitors from lighting campfires outside of approved locations.
36	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends Queensland Fire and Emergency Services and the Department of Environment and Science monitor the progress of relevant improvement activities resulting from the <i>K'gari (Fraser Island) Bushfire Review</i> , through their respective lessons management programs.	Support	Queensland Government will monitor progress of improvement through agencies' lessons management programs as part of its commitment to continuous improvement.
37	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends should a Queensland Government Action Plan be considered, clarity about the intent of the recommendations be sought from the Inspector-General Emergency Management to assist in informing this process.	Support	Meeting was held on 12 April 2021 to discuss the intent of the recommendations.
38	The Inspector-General Emergency Management recommends this report be returned to the IGEM to monitor, evaluate and report on progress and implementation of the recommendations that are accepted in whole or in part by government.	Support	The Office of the IGEM has implemented a quarterly Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Program. IGEM reports quarterly to the Minister for Police and Corrective Services and Minister for Fire and Emergency Services. Recommendations which have been supported or supported in principle will become part of the established quarterly Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting Program.