

21 July 2014

The Commissioner
ACT Emergency Services Agency
GPO Box 158
ACT 2601

Subject: Canberra Bushwalking Club: Submission on draft *Strategic Bushfire Management Plan for 2015-2019*

Dear Commissioner

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft *Strategic Bushfire Management Plan for 2015-2019 (SBMP3)*. As a frequent visitor to the ACT's bushland areas, the Canberra Bushwalking Club (CBC) takes the issue of fire safety seriously. The SBMP3 includes many sensible and welcome measures to achieve that outcome.

By way of putting our interest in the SBMP3 into context, CBC members have found the ESA's routine communication of information about fire danger and active fires to be very effective. The Emergency Incidents map is used by our walk leaders to monitor fires in remote areas and has allowed them to take timely preventative action by cancelling or re-locating walks. We also appreciate the declaration of Total Fire Bans. Our Club policy is to cancel all walks, except short walks within urban ACT, on a day of Total Fire Ban. We have found that Total Fire Ban declarations are a convenient and reliable reference point for walk leaders who are wondering whether to cancel a walk.

At the same time, we are concerned that the draft strategy gives insufficient priority to community consultation on bushfire risk mitigation strategies, whether for fuel reduction or access works to undertake bushfire response and management activities. The construction or upgrading of fire trails and helipads, and hazard reduction through prescribed burning and grazing, are activities which affect the areas in which our Club members walk.

While the strategy emphasizes the need to build trust with government and communities, as well as to ensure close collaboration between the Fire Services and community services organisations (CSOs), the role of community members and CSOs is presented as passive. Communities/CSOs are described as the recipients of education on bushfire risk reduction, rather than active contributors to this process. While there is to be close cooperation between the respective ACT government land use and bushfire management agencies (collaborative fire management), as well as with the media, a role is not defined for CSOs - many of which have developed effective social media systems.

The CBC feels that an important opportunity may be lost to engage CSOS, such as our club, in bushfire prevention and mitigation. The knowledge and experience of bushwalking clubs - and some other regular recreational users of fire-sensitive areas of the ACT - of the terrain, ecosystems and fuel conditions can be a source of valuable information when considering access and fuel reduction options.

Additionally, risk minimisation in any field is a question of balance among competing aims: robust community input helps ensure balance. For example, the case study on page 32 of the successful solution to balancing improved fire safety with environmental and social impacts in the Cotter Catchment was largely driven by CSOs, including the CBC, not solely by the preparation of the environmental impact statement by the government.

The CBC would like to see greater recognition in the SBMP3 of the useful role that can be played by CSOs and of the importance of pro-active community participation in the implementation of the SBMP3, especially in bushfire risk reduction. The inclusion of such community-based approaches in strategies that require the involvement and commitment of communities have been proven worldwide to significantly increase the chances of their successful implementation, regardless of the area of work. These approaches also help to increase the transparency and accountability of the activities being undertaken to those whom they are meant to benefit.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to provide our views on the draft strategy. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like any further information or clarification of our comments.

Yours sincerely

Linda Groom
President
Canberra Bushwalkers Club