

State Fire Management Council

Fuel Reduction Program - FAQ

What is the fuel reduction program?

The Tasmanian Government has invested \$28.5 million for an Australian-first scientific program of strategically targeted burns, to reduce the amount of potential fuel for a bushfire.

This cross-agency, whole-of-state fuel reduction program will focus on those areas that pose the greatest risk of bushfire. An ongoing commitment to the program will reduce the long-term risk of catastrophic fires.

For the first time, this program includes both public and private land.

Who is responsible for this program?

In response to the Tasmanian bushfires of January 2013 and the Royal Commission into the Victorian bushfires of 2009, the State Fire Management Council (SFMC) released *Bushfire in Tasmania – A new approach to understanding our statewide relative risk*. This report recommended a fuel reduction program that treats land based on risk, rather than who is responsible for its management.

The fuel reduction program is being overseen by the Fuel Reduction Unit within the Tasmania Fire Service. The unit is working with the Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Tasmania, local government, contractors and private land owners to implement the program. Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Tasmania will also be conducting their own burning programs.

A range of activities are being carried out as part of the fuel reduction program. Some of these, such as maintenance of fire breaks, will involve contractors.

Who controls the Fuel Reduction Unit?

The unit sits within the Tasmania Fire Service and reports to the Fuel Reduction Program Steering Committee, which is comprised of:

- Secretary, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and the Environment (Chair)
- Secretary, Department of Premier and Cabinet
- Chief Officer, Tasmania Fire Service
- Chief Executive Officer, Forestry Tasmania
- Chair of State Fire Management Council.

The steering committee reports to the Minister for the Environment, Parks and Heritage.

Why do you want to burn more land?

Although the fuel reduction program will burn more land than has been undertaken in the last decade, this is really about smarter burning. This means concentrating on land that has been assessed as high risk. By applying a scientific approach, the SFMC has identified and prioritised areas for burning regardless of who owns the land.

Are there alternatives to burning?

Mechanical fuel removal, fire prevention, building design, and fire trail and fire break maintenance can all play a part, and will be used when needed. But fuel reduction burns are the most cost-effective solution to treat large areas of land all at once.

How much land will you burn?

As outlined in the budget papers for 2014-15, a target of 27,000 hectares of burning has been set. More importantly for this program however, each year burning will be prioritised on reducing risk to communities first. As the fuel reduction program is ongoing, targets will vary from year to year, based on conditions.

Around 42 per cent of the state has vegetation that is suitable for fuel reduction burning, or approximately 2.5 million hectares. This land falls into several categories:

- 1.05 million hectares of private land
- 0.97 million hectares in reserves managed by Parks and Wildlife Service
- 0.39 million hectares managed by Forestry Tasmania
- 0.08 million hectares on unallocated public land.

What kind of bush are you going to burn?

Only certain types of vegetation are suitable for burning in the fuel reduction program. These include dry eucalypt forests, scrub, heathland and button grass. Rainforest, wet eucalypt forests and alpine vegetation are not suitable.

Agricultural land is not considered suitable for treatment, although this land is vulnerable to bushfire.

How have you determined which areas will be burnt?

The SFMC assessed bushfire risk across Tasmania, using a combination of local knowledge and computer models, to test the effectiveness of different fuel reduction strategies.

High risk locations have been identified by each of Tasmania's 10 Fire Management Area Committees.

Specifically, bushfire risk was analysed using two computer models: the Bushfire Risk Assessment Model (BRAM) developed by the Parks and Wildlife Service; and Phoenix Rapidfire, developed by the University of Melbourne and the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre. The results of this modelling were then applied to fire protection plans prepared by Fire Management Area Committees throughout Tasmania.

Where are the areas of greatest risk?

Bushfire risk will vary from year-to-year, so the fuel reduction program will look at risk across the whole state, on an ongoing basis.

Will this approach prevent bushfires in Tasmania?

No amount of fuel reduction burning will ever prevent bushfires from occurring. We can only reduce the likelihood and potential damage of bushfires, and make it easier and safer for firefighters to control them.

Why can't we just burn off the way we used to?

The previous schedule of controlled burns was based on burning a predetermined amount of land each year. Public land managers such as Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service conducted their own burn programs separately, and private land owners undertook their own fuel reduction burns according to their priorities.

A strategic, coordinated approach is a much smarter way to operate, rather than just burning any land to reach a target.

What does 'tenure-blind' mean?

'Tenure-blind' is a term used by the SFMC, simply meaning that we are approaching fire risk by prioritising areas to burn based on risk assessment, regardless of whether they are owned by the public or by private land owners.

What are private land owners expected to do?

Land owners and occupiers must still take primary responsibility for the safety of their own land and must take their own actions to protect themselves against bushfires.

If any agency needs to enter a property for a fuel reduction burn, it will only be in cooperation with the land owner.

Forestry Tasmania will continue to work with the private land owners who manage 40 per cent of the forest estate.

Any land owner whose property falls within a burn area will be contacted at the earliest possible stage of planning. Initial contact will be with community engagement officers from the Fuel Reduction Unit, followed by formal written advice and mapping of the burn.

Plans for burns are never undertaken in isolation from other land management activities that may already be underway in a given area.

Will there be assistance for land owners?

When the burns are part of those identified through the program, trained fire crews can undertake fuel reduction burns on private land, in consultation with the land owner. This will ensure the safety of the burn and take some of the burden off the land owner.

Each burn has its own characteristics and can be quite complex, and assistance will be provided on a case-by-case basis.

The fuel reduction program does not change the responsibility landowners have for their own properties.

Will landowners be forced to take part?

No one will be forced to take part. Burning will only proceed on a property where the landowner has granted permission and endorsed the burn plan.

Where needed, the TFS will work with individual land owners to achieve the best possible outcomes. The reduction of fire risk depends on everyone understanding the benefits of the fuel reduction program. It is expected that over time, any private land owners who are uncomfortable with the program will come to understand its benefits.

What will be done if a land owner refuses to take part?

Where a dispute arises, the Tasmania Fire Service will seek to resolve matters in a fast, fair, sensitive, transparent and comprehensive manner.

Why does this strategy cost so much?

The question of funding is a matter for the Tasmanian Government's priorities and is not something that agencies can comment on.

Have environmentalists been involved in the planning?

Not specifically, no. However, some local conservation groups are members of their community's Fire Management Area Committees, because they are land owners in that area.

It is widely recognised that fire is a natural part of the Tasmanian environment and is essential for biodiversity and renewal. But if left uncontrolled, its effects can be catastrophic.

What is Forestry Tasmania's role in the program?

Forestry Tasmania sits on the SFMC. This is an appropriate role for some of Tasmania's largest land owners and operators.

Forestry Tasmania will have primary responsibility for undertaking fuel reduction burns on its own land.

The fuel reduction program should not be confused with the forest industry's own program of regeneration burns. These are done to stimulate the regeneration of eucalypt forests or to establish plantations, and are very different to fuel reduction burns.

Won't there be a lot of smoke?

Fuel reduction burns produce far less smoke than bushfires, but though it can be managed and kept to a minimum, smoke is an unavoidable part of burning. The amount of smoke is largely determined by the amount of moisture in the vegetation being burnt, so burning only happens when conditions are right. Wind direction is another factor. Where possible, burns will only be conducted when the wind direction is favourable.

All agencies involved have worked with the Environment Protection Authority to develop the Coordinated Smoke Management System, and the corresponding Smoke Management Guidelines. These guidelines are based on data from the Bureau of Meteorology. When conditions are not suitable and poor smoke dispersal is predicted, restrictions are placed on burns.

Ultimately, we need everyone – from tourist operators to the average person – to understand that fuel reduction burns are essential to mitigate catastrophic fire risk.

Will you be warning the community about the smoke?

Yes. Everyone involved in the program will work to ensure that people who may be affected adversely by smoke are aware of when the burns are taking place.

Information will be available through the Tasmanian Fire Service website and social media channels. Local media outlets will also be contacted in advance of burns and Fuel Reduction Unit staff will be working directly with affected communities.

The Asthma Foundation of Tasmania also receives burn notifications from all agencies involved, and provides them through its website.

I want to complain about the smoke.

All complaints about smoke can be directed to the Environment Protection Authority on 1800 005 171, or email incidentresponse@environment.tas.gov.au.

Will burns affect water quality?

This will be addressed in the planning stage for each burn. Any activity that might impact on water quality must comply with the relevant legislation and codes of practice (for example, the Forest Practices Code). As such, bushfire fighting foam is not used near bodies of water.

Will burns affect threatened species?

Fire is a natural part of the Tasmanian landscape and ecosystems are adapted to fire. By conducting fuel reduction burns, we are mitigating the impact of catastrophic fire events on native species.

Autumn is the best time of year to schedule fuel reduction burns. Vegetation fuels are usually dry, which means they will produce less smoke and be less disruptive. However, burns can occur throughout the year, any time the conditions are favourable.

Fuel reduction burns do not completely destroy an area. They will typically leave patches of unburnt vegetation in which animals can shelter.

If a threatened species is known to occupy an area designated for burning, this will be identified during planning and expert advice will be sought. Before burning can commence, a permit must be issued under the *Threatened Species Protection Act 1995* and full compliance with the permit's conditions is required.

Will burns affect Aboriginal heritage?

Burning is unlikely to damage most Aboriginal sites, but it may expose them to other forms of disturbance. The use of machinery in preparatory works has the potential to damage Aboriginal sites, but the planning process aims to identify this risk on a case-by-case basis.

What happens if a burn gets out of control?

Fuel reduction burns are managed by trained, professional members of the Tasmania Fire Service, Parks and Wildlife Service and Forestry Tasmania. They are meticulously planned and require significant resources, coordination and communication. In the unlikely event of a fire getting out of control, the full capability of each agency is available, backed by the emergency support of the Tasmania Fire Service.

Volunteer fire fighters and contractors will also be participating in the fuel reduction program. All are trained to the same standard. Many private contractors already participate in emergency response and are experienced in working with Tasmania's fire agencies.

Why burn during a tourist season?

Burns can only be conducted when it is safest and smartest to do so. Unfortunately the conditions required for the safest burns often exist in early/late autumn, at the tail end of our state's peak tourism season.

In autumn, vegetation fuels are usually at their driest, meaning they will produce less smoke than damp fuels.

Our state's highest fire risk is during the peak of the tourist season. Any risk to tourism created by fuel reduction burning is mitigated by the potential harm of a catastrophic fire at the peak of the season, such as the impact on the community and businesses of the Tasman Peninsula in January 2013.

How can we find out when burns are happening and where do we go for more information?

Contact the Tasmania Fire Service's Fuel Reduction Unit.

- Web: www.fire.tas.gov.au
- Email: fru@fire.tas.gov.au
- Phone: 1800 000 699

What is the State Fire Management Council?

The State Fire Management Council (SFMC) was formed in 1979 and is an independent body, with the primary function of developing a State Vegetation Management Policy. This policy is the basis for all fire management planning in Tasmania.

The SFMC also provides advice to the Minister for Police and Emergency Management and to the State Fire Commission about the management of vegetation fires.

The SFMC includes representatives from:

- Tasmania Fire Service
- Parks and Wildlife Service
- Forestry Tasmania
- Local Government Association of Tasmania
- Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association
- Forest Industry Association of Tasmania
- A chairperson appointed by the Minister for Police and Emergency Management.

Is the SFMC just another layer of bureaucracy/red tape?

No. The SFMC sits outside the government and is independent. It exists to bring all the stakeholders together to collaborate at the highest levels, to ensure they are all working together as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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