



BUSHFIRE FRONT

mild fires not wild fires

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Duty of Bushfire Care

We All Have a Part to Play

A fundamental responsibility of elected governments (some would say *the* most fundamental) is to protect the State's citizens, community assets and environment from an identified threat. This is sometimes known as the government's Duty of Care. However, the Duty of Care does not rest solely on the shoulders of government. We all have a role to play.

THE BUSHFIRE THREAT

Intense summer bushfires are an annual threat in south-western Australia. There is no surprise element. **We know** they are going to start because ignitions cannot be prevented. **We know** that the bush is highly flammable and accumulates bushfire fuels. **We know** that every summer there will be a synchronicity of weather conditions that make extreme fire behaviour inevitable: drought, strong winds, high temperature and low humidity. **We know** that high intensity bushfires, burning in heavy fuels and under extreme weather conditions, are highly dangerous, extremely damaging, and almost impossible to control.

The threat is real, and it affects nearly everybody.

WHAT IS THREATENED?

Large high intensity bushfires burn down towns, destroy farms and infrastructure, ruin the landscape, decimate wildlife, and kill and injure people. They are not confined to the bush – once a fire gets up a head of steam it will burn right into country towns and city suburbia. Here the fire is fuelled by houses, gardens, urban parks and reserves, vehicles, power lines, shops and churches.



Bushfire burning into suburbia near Wanneroo, WA

WHAT ABOUT THE FIREFIGHTERS?

Of all the people most at risk of being killed or injured by bushfires, WA's firefighters, both career and volunteer, are on top of the list. These are the men and women whose job it is to tackle and try to control high intensity summer bushfires, confronting them at their most dangerous.

The Bushfire Front argues that the responsibility of government, what we call the Duty of Bushfire Care, does not stop at protecting citizens, community assets and environment. It must also extend to our firefighters, including those who volunteer their time and commitment to this essential task. We promote the basic right of every firefighter: to come home safely at the end of every fire.

THE FACTS

Over the last 50-odd years, many firefighters have died in bushfires, and many more have suffered serious injuries. Others have escaped “by the skin of their teeth”. Anyone who has been a firefighter, especially a forest firefighter, knew someone who died fighting a fire, or has mates who were injured at the front.

MAXIMUM DANGER

The most dangerous bushfires are those burning in heavy fuels under windy conditions in rough country. Here firefighters face intense heat, fire tornados, ember storms, burning trees, blocked escape routes, sudden wind changes, “the deadman zone” (caught between two fires) ... all spelling extreme danger.

Firefighters call high intensity forest fires “killer fires”, and for good reason.



Firefighter facing death or injury from a raging bushfire

MINIMUM DANGER

Firefighters also know another scenario, the mild intensity fire that is easy and safe to control. Even under extreme weather conditions, fires burning in light fuels present almost no threat of death or injury to those bringing them under control. Some fires, for example those burning in one-year-old fuel, can be kicked in with the boots. These are the fires that everyone comes home from.

These are the fires that everyone comes home from.



Forestry Frontliner firefighters at work on a mild intensity fire burning in light fuels

WHAT IS THE LEGAL SITUATION?

Western Australia has laws that make it an obligation for employers to provide a safe working environment for their employees, including volunteers.

This legal obligation is magnified when an employer is aware of high risks to employees, as is a government agency which sends firefighters into the bush to suppress a bushfire.

In these situations, the law recognises that the danger cannot be eliminated, but also that mechanisms can be put in place to minimise it. Responsibly applying these mechanisms is the way the government meets its Duty of Bushfire Care responsibilities.

WHAT ABOUT THE COMMUNITY'S DUTY OF BUSHFIRE CARE?

The wider community has a moral, indeed an ethical, obligation to support measures which will minimise risk of injury or death when fellow community members, for example firefighters, are engaged in inherently dangerous work such as protecting the community and its assets from the threat of injury, death or destruction by fire. It is also the responsibility of those living in high risk bushfire areas to prepare their properties, so that if firefighters have to come in, their job will be easier and safer.

The Bushfire Front does not believe that firefighters, especially volunteers, should be asked to risk their lives trying to protect a property whose owner has knowingly allowed it to become a potential inferno.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO BEST EXERCISE OUR DUTY OF BUSHFIRE CARE TO FIREFIGHTERS?

Two things are essential:

- First, firefighters (including fire commanders) must be fully trained in fire weather, bushfire behaviour, fire-safe strategies in the bush, and how to look after themselves and their mates; every firefighter must be equipped with the best possible protective gear and fire-safe vehicles. These issues are well understood and need not be elaborated upon here.
- Second, and even more important when it comes to fighting forest fires, potential firegrounds must be managed to reduce the likelihood of a fire becoming a killer fire. Bushfire damage and bushfire danger can be mitigated by responsible management, and this is an absolute key to firefighter safety.



Well-equipped and highly trained Parks and Wildlife Frontliners at work on a fire

HOW CAN WE MAKE FOREST FIREFIGHTING EASIER AND SAFER?

All fires burn fuel. If there is no fuel there will be no fire, and if there is little fuel, there can only be a little fire. Long experience has shown over and over again that minimising fuel levels in the bush is the only reliable way of mitigating the occurrence of large, high intensity “killer” bushfires in forests. Across broad-acre landscapes, the only way to effectively reduce fuels is to burn them under mild conditions. Fuel reduction ensures fires are not only easier and cheaper to control, but massively reduces the risk of death and injury to firefighters ... and also to the wider community.



The worst nightmare: a firetruck trapped in the deadman zone, the firefighters with nowhere to go

“Killer” bushfires are not inevitable. The deliberate burning of the bush under mild conditions every few years (known as “prescribed burning” or sometimes “fuel reduction burning”) does not prevent fires occurring, but it reduces the risk of these being killer fires. If a proportion of the forest is always freshly burned, we are responsibly exercising our Duty of Bushfire Care.

WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR ENSURING THE DUTY OF BUSHFIRE CARE IS EXERCISED?

We elect governments, who appoint Ministers who, in turn, set up agencies with senior bureaucrats in charge, whose job is to manage the bushfire threat and to maximise firefighter safety. If the job is not done properly and disaster strikes, the Minister and their senior bureaucrats are clearly responsible and must be held accountable. This can be done through Coronial Inquiries and the courts.

WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO OPPOSE FIREFIGHTER SAFETY?

There are people in the community, led by some activist academics and environmentalists, who oppose bushfire mitigation prescribed burning in south-west forests. In effect this means they advocate a bushfire management system that maximises the risk of death and injury to firefighters.

THE RESPONSIBLE POSITION IS ALSO THE HUMANE AND ETHICAL ONE

Forest firefighting is one of the most dangerous of all occupations. This is well-known to the Frontliners from Parks and Wildlife, the noble volunteers from the community, and the uniformed fire fighters employed by DFES. They know – as do their families – that they are putting their lives on the line nearly every time they are sent to a fire.

This selfless courage demands to be supported, not undermined, especially not undermined by people who themselves do not fight fires, who stand to lose nothing if a serious fire breaks out and who know that they will never be held to account for unhappy bushfire outcomes.

We commend the Duty of Bushfire Care shown by the current Western Australian government, especially for funding and supporting the fuel reduction burning program in southwest forests. The government's bushfire policy is not just legal, it is humane and ethical. It aims to ensure that every firefighter comes home at the end of the shift.



Fuel reduction burn in the karri forest: the litter and scrub fuels have been removed, leaving an area where the risk of serious bushfires has been minimised for years to come

The Bushfire Front comprises trained and experienced fire scientists and bushfire managers. Our aim is to minimise the damage resulting from large, high-intensity bushfires in Western Australia.



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