



**Minister for Environment; Disability Services; Electoral Affairs
Deputy Leader of the Legislative Council**

Our Ref: 62-22987

Hon Matthew Swinbourn MLC
Chair, Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Legislative Council Committee Office
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Mr Swinbourn *Matthew*

Thank you for your email received in this office on 24 September 2020 regarding Petition No. 161 – prescribed burning practices in Western Australia.

The McGowan Government strongly supports prescribed burning as the primary means of reducing the risk of bushfire faced by our community, industry and the environment. The prescribed burning program undertaken by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) is supported by peer reviewed research.

The McGowan Government has no plans to undertake a review of prescribed burning, particularly considering the recent devastating bushfires experienced on the east coast of Australia where lives were lost. Catastrophic fires such as these reinforce the importance of undertaking effective bushfire mitigation to reduce the impacts of bushfires on the community and the environment.

The WA State Government is committed to engaging with traditional owners to help share (two-way learning), connect and where possible restore Aboriginal peoples' connection to Country. DBCA is also committed to continuing to engage with traditional owners and gaining knowledge of cultural fire practices and how these practices can assist in guiding the use of fire in the context of today's landscapes. While contemporary prescribed burning practices may differ from cultural burning practices, they are complementary and share the common goal to look after people and country.

DBCA uses prescribed burns to develop and maintain a mosaic of recently burnt and long-unburnt areas of vegetation. From a biodiversity perspective, prescribed burning is undertaken to maintain a range of wildlife habitat types. This is achieved through the creation of low-fuel areas in a mosaic of burnt and unburnt patches across the landscape, just as traditional owners have demonstrated for thousands of years. Prescribed burns have been specifically carried out to protect critically endangered species such as the western ground parrot, mainland quokka, and many threatened plant species.

It is important to recognise that in the south-west forests, prescribed burning is undertaken at a landscape scale to manage bushfire risk, protect community, commercial and environmental assets and protect biodiversity values by varying the burn season, fire intensities, and interval between fires. These prescribed burns occur in more favourable conditions than intense summer bushfires, enabling animals more opportunities to safely move into areas of unburnt vegetation and various plant species opportunities to regenerate. Prescribed fires also contribute to reducing the impact of severe bushfires on vegetation, soils and water catchments.

Drier and warmer conditions associated with a drying climate are likely to be associated with an increased likelihood of more frequent, high intensity bushfires. Without areas of low fuel across the landscape to slow the progress and lower the intensity of large bushfires running under extreme weather conditions, the chance of keeping these fires small or arresting the progress of them is negligible even with low fuel buffers immediately adjacent to some of these assets.

There are countless examples where prescribed burns helped stop the spread of bushfires, thereby protecting lives and communities. Recent bushfires in Western Australia's south-west have demonstrated the effectiveness of DBCA's prescribed burn program in minimising the spread and intensity of bushfires. In the Yanchep bushfires last summer, housing estates north of Yanchep National Park were clearly protected by multiple prescribed burns in State forest and surrounds. These burns created low fuel buffers that allowed crews to more effectively contain the fire, and prevent the loss of lives and residential properties.

The best approach to bushfire mitigation is one that sees an appropriate level of mitigation around communities and assets in addition to a broader landscape program. A reprioritisation of mitigation to purely focus around assets and an absence of a landscape scale program will lead to poor outcomes for all, including loss of life, infrastructure, significant impacts on the environment and potentially adverse economic outcomes.

Thank you for raising this matter with me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Stephen Dawson', with a large loop at the start and a long horizontal tail.

Hon Stephen Dawson MLC
MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT
08 OCT 2020