

DERAN

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FIRE CONTROL IN RURAL AREAS

An accidental fire in a rural area burns until it runs out of dry fuel. The longer it burns, the more difficult it is to control. Roughly, four times as long as the uncontrolled burning time. One hour no control, four hours until it is out. One day no control, four days until it is out, if you are lucky! Time till attempted control is the essential factor.

In W.A. rural areas, when fire control depended on local control, there were very few serious farm fires. Because everyone, in sight, came at once, so 1,000 hectare burns were very rare. The big fires, from National Parks, Undeclared Crown Land and Reserves, started by dry thunder storms, careless campers, etc were, and are, the uncontrolled menace.

Farmers, to protect themselves, are conscientious about fire breaks and their fire equipment always being instantly ready, in the dry periods. Not so the State Government, in the Reserves and National Parks, make very little or no visible effort, to control dead fuel loads and maintain effective fire breaks in the areas they control. Worse still, any effort by local landholders to protect their own property to put out the Wild Fire, is forbidden, as happened in Esperance last year. The same as Yarloop, the State Government took their time, rejected help and many thousands of dollars and lives were lost.

Local experience is a skill that cannot be taught and it takes many fires to gain. Fire control in a forest is a completely different skill to grass and different again to mallee scrub or standing crop.

Fighting a fire is like a war where the soldiers with local knowledge are much more effective than strangers to the environment. This is from personal experience. The officer in charge of each team has to have built up experience, under pressure of the “do and what not to do” in local situations. When and how to put in an effective ‘back burn’ that works!

In the Ravensthorpe Shire over 60% of the Shire area is covered by native bush. Most of this is controlled by Undeclared Crown Land as National Parks and Reserves. Landholders, miners and townspeople do the best they can to protect themselves from Wildfires. In January 2003 a fire started in the Frank Hahn National Park and a team from CALM turned up to put it out and failed. The wildfire, driven by an East wind, approached the Rabbit Proof Fence, so a team of locals started a back-burn from the 50 metre Rabbit Fence firebreak. We got in a five kilometre back-burn but the front was wider! The fire jumped the Rabbit Proof Fence firebreak and the wind turned northerly, stopping the threat to Ravensthorpe. The front ran alongside the Fence and was put out on reaching a farming area by local brigades.

This February I spotted smoke on the coast and reported it to Ravensthorpe Chief B.F.C.O by phone. He said he had three reports of smoke but no definite location, would I go and look. I did and it was on UCL east of the Rabbit Fence and the coast. It was small and with aid I could have put it out. I was ordered to leave it! It was put out four days later by a water bomber.

I was a Bush Fire Control Officer for 26 years.

Before white settlement, the Aborigines practiced 'Fire Stick Farming' to provide grass for the wild life for their food supply. The Aborigines did their burns, in winter, over small selected areas of bush, without the aid of water or equipment, so that the whole area was a mosaic of different aged growths of bush and grass and NO dry fuel build up. This practice had lasted for tens of thousands of years and the native wild life had adapted to the regime. There would have been no over a 100,000 hectare wild fires in summer that periodically devastate vast numbers of the wild life in our National Parks. Now there is threat of species extinction on the South Coast with the dibbler, ground parrot and others.

SUMMARY

In rural areas Bush Fire Control must be entirely in the hands of the local councils. Local units must be allowed instant access to all Crown Land in the event of an 'out of control' fire. On all National Parks, Crown Land and Reserves, of more than 10,000 hectares in area, a Fire Break be made compulsory where the above reserves border on rural land and inhabited town areas. The Fire Break should be at least 30 metres wide, with no vegetation above a metre high (i.e. chained not cultivated). National Parks should be encouraged to start areas of FIRE STICK FARMING in order to protect wild life, encourage tourism and make the Wild Fires in the reserves, under their control, easier to manage.

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