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# Mullins has gone too far

by Stuart Ellis

January 21, 2021

## CEO Opinion (/auxiliary/publications/newsletter/CEO-Opinion)

AFAC, the National Council for fire and emergency services, believes that Greg Mullins' recent commentary around fuel reduction is misleading.

It does not represent current operational good practice and his statements on fuel reduction burning concern state and territory Land Managers, Commissioners and Chief Officers of fire agencies who are constantly advising their governments and communities on bushfire risk and land management. It is not helpful when this advice is contradicted by people commenting outside their area of expertise and out of touch with current operational practice.

AFAC has a high regard for Mullins who was AFAC President for two years and Commissioner of Fire and Rescue NSW for 13 years. He is a consummate media performer, Climate Councillor and has been outspoken about bushfire risk and the impact of climate change. AFAC respects his right to comment.

In an article published by News Limited on 31 December 2020 however, he has gone too far. He has strayed into an area that is not his expertise; not backed by science and appears contrary to recent outcomes from his Climate Council Bushfire Summit.

Current Land Managers, Commissioners and Chiefs of fire agencies are saying 'enough is enough'. They welcome Greg Mullins raising concerns about climate change, but they object to him presenting as the single source of knowledge on bushfire risk, remarking on areas where he has little experience or expertise.

The News Ltd 31 December 2020 article quotes Mullins as saying:

*“Those people who say it’s all about fuel reduction, well I’m sorry but you’re stuck in a time warp from 50 years ago and you don’t understand the issues and you’re not bothering to read or digest what’s happened in the climate, because it has all changed.”*

Ongoing analysis has been undertaken by AFAC member agencies to better understand the impacts of climate change on the environment and the affect it has on bushfires. This is identifying new challenges and informing Land Managers on new ways of implementing fuel reduction in a changing climate. The act of fuel reduction burning is one means by which we can manage the environment for climate change.

Contrary to Mullins’ views, current indications are that climate change will actually necessitate increased prescribed burning in an attempt by Land Managers to counteract the increasing intensity of fires and the changes to the forested landscape which we expect will flow from it.

*“During extreme and catastrophic conditions, fires just jump over areas that are burnt or simply burn through them — they don’t slow the fires down anymore.”*

This reflects a poor expectation and understanding about fuel reduction burning. It is widely acknowledged by AFAC member agencies that fuel reduction has a much-reduced affect in extreme and catastrophic conditions. Aerial firefighting and on the ground firefighting are likewise ineffective under these conditions. Fuel reduction, however, does mitigate fire behaviour on the majority of days in the year that are below ‘severe’ and there are numerous examples over the 2019-20 fire season where fuel reduction has been of significant benefit slowing fire spread and reducing extreme fire behaviour.

Fuel reduction across the landscape aims to achieve a mosaic of fuel ages that will burn at a lower severity during a bushfire. This provides strategic advantages in the fire suppression operations, a degree of safety for fire fighters on the ground and importantly a much-reduced adverse impact to the environment.

*“There are very small periods of the year now where we can safely burn off...”*

There is no doubt that implementation of prescribed burns is more challenging as the climate changes, although current research indicates that burn ‘windows’ may be moving and not necessarily closing. Regardless, limited periods to conduct prescribed burning should increase, not decrease, the priority given to undertaking fuel reduction when it is safe to do so. Some years it will be more successful than others, but fuel management is a long-term strategy. To ignore this critical bushfire mitigation measure would be extremely foolhardy and irresponsible. To suggest it is out of date and lacks relevance reflects a lack of understanding and a bias towards

bushfire response.

Mullins also suggested that fuel reduction burning will exterminate wildlife.

*“Should [we] wipe out another three million species? We are not the only species on the planet and it’s all about balance,” he said. “(Those in favour of hazard reduction) are advocating no balance and it’s quite infuriating when so-called experts say this stuff.”*

This statement is incorrect and indicates that Mullins is out of touch with current-day land management operations. Land managers are tasked with managing the environment for all its values including ecological, water, recreational, timber and fuel management. All actions, including prescribed burning, undertaken on land they manage, are done so with support of up-to-date research and in a way that balances all the values. Hazard reduction, undertaken in controlled conditions and at a time dictated by the Land Manager, is required to achieve a broad scale mosaic of fuel ages required by our varied wildlife species. The risk to animals (and humans) is greatly reduced when we implement low intensity burns to planned areas at a time of our choosing (prescribed burning) rather than when imposed by the extremes of nature during high intensity and indiscriminate bushfires over broad landscapes.

*“Mr Mullins believes Australia is now acting to embrace ‘fast-attack strategies’ that have been used to good effect in places like Canada, France, Spain and parts of the United States.”*

All Australian jurisdictions are aware of the importance of fast attack strategies and it is self-evident that fires kept to a minimal area through early attack cause much less adverse impact. As an example, states such as South Australia have implemented this approach for over 20 years across the high-risk Adelaide Hills.

Response strategies using aircraft regrettably, however, are not the panacea. AFAC compares Australia’s already extensive aerial fleet with that of the State of California in the United States, with a similar bushfire risk but many more times the number of aircraft. As seen in California, an ever-increasing number of aircraft does not equate to a corresponding reduction in bushfire losses, although AFAC agrees with Mullins that ‘fast and heavy’ initial attack is the best approach to mitigating adverse bushfire impact.

We also need to also consider that fast and successful initial attack can be a double-edged sword. The quicker we are at suppression, the more fuel will build up if there is not planned fuel reduction burning. Inevitably, simply seeking to extinguish every bushfire and not introducing fire into Australian landscapes leads to the summer fires we have just experienced. Large proportions of the landscape accumulate fuel loads, setting the scene for the even more destructive bushfires

when fast attack fails.

Natural disasters including bushfires will continue to occur in Australia. No government, emergency service or agitation will prevent them, as they are a multifaceted issue. Changing climate is having an impact on the intensity and duration of bushfires but prescribed burning in specific locations and across landscapes is effective mitigation in all but the most severe fire conditions. To suggest our Forestry together with our Parks and Wildlife Land Managers “don’t understand the issues” is offensive to these science-orientated professionals who spend their working careers managing landscapes.



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